

## THE THROWN SHOE



We were invited to plant olive trees as a sign of hope against the darkness of the time. As we traveled through a Palestinian neighborhood we observed a group of boys who looked like they had mischief in mind. Sure enough, as we passed by one of them threw what we first thought was a stone at the bus. (Later we learned it was a shoe.)

We moved on to the planting site. One of our aides decided to walk back toward the boys to see just what was up. As he approached the area where the boys were scattering an old lady spoke in broken English. "Please...Don't hurt. They are boys...Stupid boys!"

A woman happened by who was able to translate. She explained that the mission of the group was to plant olive trees and that "They are Lutherans." Both recognized the good works of the Palestinian Lutheran Church and that brought some calm to the scene.

As we were beginning to plant the trees we were suddenly aware that a group of boys were running over the hill to join us. They were the same boys who had planned the mischief of the thrown shoe as we passed by. Now, there were smiles on their faces and handshakes. They asked our names and helped us plant the trees.



We'll never know if the old woman made them come to atone for their sin or if they came on their own. We'll never know if they mimicked a traditional insult by throwing the shoe or if they were just 'boys being boys.'

I can't imagine the fear of the old woman. I have three boys. Her heart was surely racing as she saw a serious looking man coming from the bus. In a world where violence begets violence she must've panicked inside and worried that these boys would be harmed.

I wonder what the event will mean for the boys. Will they remember a group of 'Westerners' who cared about their land? Will they grow up to plant seeds of hope or will they carry scars of bitterness? Will they search for their way through the narrow gate on the path of peace or will they go the broad and inviting way of continued conflict?

The faces of those boys will remain with me. I pray for them and hope they can go to school, have careers and raise a family of their own. I pray for them that they might live in their land as free people who respect the children of Abraham who call themselves Israelis. I pray for these things and will pray for these things. And in my prayers, I ask God that my own life might be filled with mercy, patience, grace, understanding and peace in my actions toward the sisters and brothers God sends my way.



## THE OLD MAN AND THE WALL

We traveled to see an old man who lived in a humble house surrounded on three sides by 'The Wall.' (Two sides were fencing in this case.) The land had been in his family for 6-7 generations.

As we walked through a gate on the one open side we walked about 100 yards to his front yard. That walkway had about two feet of dirt on each side. In that dirt the old man grew onions, cucumbers, cabbage and several vegetables we didn't recognize. He used every inch of land God gave him to grow things as his fathers had done.

He came out to meet us. Though he was given several chances to say something bitter about his condition he refused. "This land belongs to God...not to me. And God will teach me what I am to do. God is good. I am only a man. God's will for me is to be here now and by God's will I will stay."

This old man's testimony was stunning. He had lost two sons to the violence of the land. His fields had been taken away. He lived every day surrounded by the wall. He had every reason to offer to us nothing but bitterness and hate. He refused. He spoke of following God and trusting in God alone to guide him. Just think what you and I could do with merely a mustard seed of that faith!

## A VOCAL MINORITY

We visited a synagogue of Reformed Jews where the Rabbi and the people were known for advocating peace with Palestine. Their evening prayers every Friday were songs and prayers for peace. It is their way of naming the troubles that beset their land.

As we spoke with members there we were told that their peace movement was tiny and unwelcome even in their families. One lady, whose daughter served in the Israeli military said: "My daughter is doing her duty. I am proud of her. I hope she will be honorable in that service. It makes it hard for me to speak out for peace, especially with what is going on in Gaza."

Another mother told us she organized a 'Parents' Group for Peace.' She reflected: "Some families are divided. One joins our group knowing that the other parent would be angry if he or she would know. Even families are divided in their struggles!"

The point of view that seemed to be expressed most often in this visit by our hosts was: "The path of peace is more important than who wins or loses. We can both live in this land. It will serve us all best if we learn to live in peace."

We were told that the ministry of this synagogue was strong but tiny in the face of current attitude and trends. We asked: "How many Israeli's believe as you do?" the answer was: "More than most think but we cannot say. We are still a tiny minority in the land."

## THE POWERFUL MAJORITY

Our agenda was crafted to include as many perspectives as possible. We met with the Chief Rabbis of Jerusalem, Knesset aides, Israeli government officials and local authorities. (*NOTE: Bishop Hanson, The Presiding Bishop of Canada and a small group met with higher officials as well.*)

Bishop Hanson lauded one of the officials who met with us for working hard to solve the tax issue around Augusta Victoria Hospital. That was and is no small matter. The hospital had been threatened with its tax-exempt status for years. A suitable conclusion to the matter was announced as we were there in Jerusalem. We celebrated this announcement with great joy!



Israelis told us of the missiles that first came from Gaza which caused the incursion reaction in the first place. The Chief Rabbis said that they had seen proof of tunnels that provided arms, arms caches in mosques and bunkers under homes and schools in Gaza.

They pointed out that they are surrounded by enemies on all sides. It seemed to be an explanation as to why their level of violence was justified in Gaza and indeed, anywhere in the land. To them 'The Wall' had brought an end to suicide bombers and threats to their civilian population. It was indeed a 'necessary' thing to allow the two peoples to live safely side by side.

I was saddened by our time with these Israelis. Not because I judged them or judge them now as unrighteous-but because their testimony left little room for peace and a two nation solution. The Gaza war further hardened many hearts. I believe Bishop Hanson was correct when he opined: "*The only winners in this (the Gaza situation) are the extremists on both sides.*"

Amid the rabid cries against Israel I force myself to reflect...

~How would I feel if nearby nations refused to acknowledge our existence?

~How would I feel if a group like Hamas openly campaigned for the destruction of my people?

~How would I feel if I was a Jew whose ancestors died in the Holocaust?

~How would I feel if I was targeted as the 'evil' one in the eyes of many?

~How would I feel if Iran expressed wishes for my annihilation?

~How would I feel if the world watched Lebanon and Gaza (once beautiful neighbor lands) turn into hot-beds of violence without reproach?

As I mentioned, the magnitude and complexities of this struggle humble me beyond words. My feelings are more jumbled than ever. I will stubbornly say that until the Israeli's and Palestinians want peace more than conflict, outside pressures are doomed to fail.

## CHANCE ENCOUNTERS



On our very first day in The Old City of Jerusalem an old Muslim shopkeeper tugged at my sleeve as we passed by and said: “Pray for peace Father. Please, pray for peace.” I sensed no malice or duplicity in his gaze. Like many, his heart was broken over the events in Gaza.

Later that day another older man sidled up to me. He never attached himself to a faction or a concern. He asked why we were there and what we were doing. He wondered what we hoped to accomplish. He offered: “I’m glad you came to be with us. This is a sad time. There are idiots on both sides making things worse. That fool on the television is one of them.” (He was referring to a screed being televised from a spokesman for Hamas.) “Until people with sense come to us as leaders we have no hope.”

I asked him about his sense of things. “It is sad,” he lamented, “This is my land and these are my people. I have never been so sad for the prospects for peace. Pray for us. Please, pray for us.”

A young Palestinian guide was with me on the bus for about an hour. We talked of many things. I asked him: “What did you think of the deal between Arafat, Clinton and Barak that fell through?” I expected him to say that the Palestinians simply got a raw deal. His answer was sadder still, at least for me: “In the end, we simply didn’t trust that Israel would keep its word to us. We do not trust them.”



When I asked an assistant at the Holocaust museum that same question his words were an eerie echo. “We didn’t trust Arafat to keep his word anyway.”

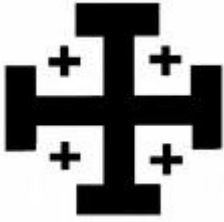
That same young man offered this response to my query about the Gaza situation and what he thought of the world’s opinion on the matter. He sighed and said: “The world didn’t care when 6 million died. I’m not sure that we care what the world thinks now.”

I spoke with a school teacher for about twenty minutes when we toured one of the schools. He was a German teacher. His wife had a ‘Jerusalem Card’ that allowed her total access in and out of the city. He did not. Because of this, their children had cards that listed them as half/half residents. I asked him what that was like.

“Some times I simply cannot go home or even call when the check-points close. Then, I stay with friends here. During the second Intifada I was away from home for 41 days.”

As we watched his 15 year old boys rough-house and the 15 year-old girls cluster for conversation I asked him about his work. “I love to teach. It is why I am here. For these kids. They are our best hope.”

## AN INSIDE VIEW



The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, Pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem, offered an incredibly insightful view on things when we were present at the International Center in Bethlehem. Here are some of his views...

“The 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel is The Holy Land. The 6<sup>th</sup> Gospel is the People. One will never understand the first four Gospels if one does not deal with the last two.”

“The Holy Land is not at the center of things or at the crossroads as many have said. We are on the edge. We have been surrounded by ‘super powers’ for thousands of years. It is never easy to live on the periphery. In every generation you are tramped down by another ‘super power.’”

“We must ask; ‘God, where are you?’ as we address our difficulties. God, in Christ, came to this land to announce the Kingdom. Without God, this is just a battlefield for the ‘super powers.’ God once turned this battlefield into a holy place. We must find a way to honor that and experience that.”

“The 6<sup>th</sup> Gospel I speak of is not a nation or nationalism. It is all the people. Never, ever, has there been a time when only one people dwelt here. It has always been a place of many peoples.”

“We must also ask: ‘Who is my neighbor?’ as we look to the future. Jesus showed us that even ‘the enemy’ is our neighbor. Even Hamas and Fatah have forgotten they are neighbors. The Bible answers this question as no one people or person has ever done or will ever do.”

Commenting on the ministry of Christmas Lutheran Church and The International Center Mitri made clear the direction of their mission in Jesus’ name.

“We seek to be a ministry of pro-activity instead of reactivity.

We are visionaries-not victims.

We are people who are not just surviving but creating. We are moving from: ~peace-talking to peace-making.

~too much politics to care for the city.

~too much religion to spirituality.

~too much disempowering aid to empowering individual communities.

~too much segregation to building bridges for intercultural dialogue.

~despair to hope.

~liturgies of death to the mystery of the Risen Lord of life!”



“With all the aid we have received over the years we could’ve been like Hong Kong. The aid did not empower our communities. We have been given too many fish and have not enough fishermen!”

“Hope is different than optimism. It is bigger! You can be pessimistic as I am about peace while holding on to hope to see you through. To paraphrase Luther: ‘I will still plant olive trees tomorrow’ even if cannot ensure the future that will surround them”

Mitri also felt that it would be difficult to establish a ‘two state solution’ while Hamas and Fatah remain opposed to one another and while Israel fails to see their best hope in a free and vibrantly equal Palestine.

(NOTE: You can check out Mitri’s work at [www.mitriraheb.org](http://www.mitriraheb.org) and his extended ministry at [www.bethlehemchristmaslutheran.org](http://www.bethlehemchristmaslutheran.org))

Bishop Younan’s testimony was powerful as well.

“We hold to 3 keys in our vision for the future:

- #1) Evangelical identity. People in trouble look inward. We must look outward.
- #2) We will educate ourselves and others from our Christian, Lutheran, Palestinian identity.
- #3) We must be leaders more than followers.”

“Justice must come before anything else-before democracy and all other solutions.”

“Violence is the tool of the incompetent. It leads to more injustice.”

“You have helped us face the extremists by coming now. They would have won and diminished us if you had stayed home.”

“I still believe the ‘two state solution’ can work but only if...

- #1) There must be Regional cooperation
- #2) Jerusalem must be shared
- #3) We must be a modern, civil society-not an extreme Jewish or Muslim state. It must be a secular state where all are welcomed under the rule of law. I don’t want Israel to go away or to feel insecure. Security is freedom for all-including Palestinians.
- #4) We must focus on political action instead of military action. Israel must give land back for peace-not just for others-but for themselves. They will be a stronger nation if they do!”



“We need three things from religion...

- #1) Stop dehumanizing the ‘other.’
- #2) ‘Who is my neighbor?’ must be addressed. ‘ALL’ is the answer! We must teach this to everyone and especially to our children.
- #3) Jerusalem must be a shared city.”

“We cannot bring peace to the Middle East-but neither will it come without us!”