

“A Palestinian Christian perspective”, a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on Sunday 6 August 2017. The Bible readings were Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21.

Today is Peace Sunday, the Sunday closest to the date on which the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima.

Today we had readings about the special calling of the people of God and God’s abundant gifts for wide distribution.

Today I am speaking about another aspect of the General Council meeting of the World Communion of Reformed Churches I attended in Leipzig in Germany a month ago.

I bring these three elements together to speak about Palestine.

We have seen images of conflict between Israel and Palestine – fighting on the streets, a wall built by Israel, much more. I want to approach the conflict through the voice of a Palestinian Christian theologian Mitri Raheb who spoke in Leipzig.

People like Mitri are fiercely criticised.

If you google his name, some of the first entries call him an anti-Semite. At the same time, he is highly regarded as a biblical scholar by many churches, including by our own tradition. He has written many books including this one *Faith in the Face of Empire*. So let’s hear a little of his perspective.

“I was 5 years old when Israel occupied Bethlehem in 1967 ... I know what living under occupation means, I can imagine what it have meant for Jesus to be born under occupation, to live his entire life under occupation, and to be crushed on the cross by the empire. There is no way to understand Jesus mission without looking at the context of imperial occupation.”

Mitri speaks about the time of Jesus as a time of occupation, of resisting the empire.

He outlines a succession of occupations - in more recent times by the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Crusaders, the Ottomans, the British, and now Israel.

“Jesus has a word for occupied people:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

Mitri says – “Occupied people are not poor per se, but are made poor. Their resources are exploited by the empire and they are made to perform cheap labour to keep the economy of the empire running and growing. The cost to Palestine of the Israeli occupation is [millions of

dollars] annually ... Occupied people are not poor, they are made poor. Jesus understood that. This is why he is not promising them aid, or food, but good news of social justice.

“When Jesus speaks of freedom for captives, he is talking of captives of the empire - political prisoners who dare to resist the empire ... Since 1967 over 700,000 Palestinian political prisoners have been put in Israeli prisons ... almost one fifth of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Currently, over 6000 Palestinian political prisoners are in Israeli jails waiting for someone to proclaim their freedom and set them free.

“Jesus mission statement is political. But his mission is holistic. This is why we see Jesus opting for the sinners and outcasts of his time.

“Jesus sermon was the unfolding of new vision for social and political transformation, a world with no political prisoners, no landless people, no people exploited and oppressed.

“Imagination is important, but imagination alone is not enough ... Faith is about imagination, but it is more about hope. Imagination is what we see. Hope is what we do. Imagination can be highly deceiving if it is not connected to a well-defined strategy and a plan. Hope is the power to keep focusing on the larger vision while taking and doing the small steps towards that future.

“Hope doesn't wait for vision to come. Hope is vision in action today. Faith that makes people passive, depressive, or illusive is not faith, but opium. Faith is facing the empire with open eyes that analyzes what is happening while, at the same time, developing the ability to see beyond what humans see. Hope is living the reality and yet investing in a different one. Jesus plan has to be implemented “today” in our lives, in our churches, and in our world. Jesus sermon can't be something from “Yesterday”. It is always a call for us today to engage in God's mission.

“People feeling the heat of the empire, its oppression, its occupation, its military power, can't help but pass the question on to Heaven, asking, “God, where are you?”

“Throughout the Bible—with the exception of the Exodus—the God in whom the people of Palestine put their faith appears to be silent. He sees the Assyrians resettling his people and does nothing; He watches the Babylonians desecrate his temple, and He doesn't move an inch; his capital is destroyed by the Romans, and He appears not to care. Even When His only beloved son hangs on the cross, He absconds; he hides.

“This has been the experience of the people of Palestine throughout history regardless of religious affiliation. In 614 CE, When the Persians destroyed over three thousand churches in Palestine and left little save the Church of the Nativity, God did nothing to push the invaders back. When the Crusaders plundered churches in the Holy Land, God did not move a finger. When Palestinians were driven out of their homes in 1948 in what we call the Nakbah, the “catastrophe,” God was silent. When the Church of the Nativity was besieged in 2002, God did not interfere. And as tens of thousands of Christians flee the Middle East for their lives today, neither God nor the so-called Christian world seems to do anything.

“Yet the divine revelation took place in Palestine ... the response to that question, “Where are you, God?”

“... the people of Palestine received a revelation that enabled them to spot God where no one else could see God ... When his people were driven as slaves into Babylon, they witnessed him packing up and accompanying them. When his capital, Jerusalem, was destroyed and his temple plundered, He appeared to them in the ashes. When His people were defeated, He was also present ... God showed solidarity and chose to share their destiny.

“The climax of the New Testament could not have been anything else but God on the cross. Consequently and ultimately, Jesus revealed none other than this God on the Cross, in a situation of terrible agony, and pain, brutally crushed by the empire and hanging like a rebellious freedom fighter. The cross became the ultimate unexpected place for God’s revelation.

“This revelation was and is of utmost importance. For it enabled the people of Palestine to survive all defeats. It made the defeat lose its teeth, death lose its sting, and empire lose its victory. It ensured that empires were incapable of celebrating their victories, because while they crushed the people they occupied, they weren't able to crush their spirit.”

This is what Mitri says.

So what do we do?

It encouraged examination.

The World Communion urged churches to examine investment relationships with Israel and Palestine in the light of the witness of Palestinian Christians.

It encouraged dialogue:

“It is time for Israelis and Palestinians to live alongside each other in peace, security and justice ... Many of us have seen with our eyes and heard with our ears the painful realities of life for Palestinians.”

It encouraged support:

“We can find ways to connect with the present day Christian community in Palestine, to witness their situation and express support for their desire for self-determination.”

One of the voices of hope in our world is Banksy - a graffiti artist who paints art all over the world. On the wall Israel built, Banksy has drawn art as a statement of hope. You can see his images online.

He bought a hotel immediately next to the wall, and he called it the Walled Off Hotel – a play on words – and with the worst hotel view ever.

With Mitri, with Banksy, with Jesus, we hope, we pray, we act justly, alongside people in situations seemingly hopeless.

Blessing

God, the source of life, bless and reform our lives.

Jesus Christ, way, truth, life, bless and enable us to live abundantly.

Holy Spirit, breath of life, empower us to live for others,

So unceasingly we sing the song of life to the glory of God.

Amen.

Mitri Raheb's words are extracted from his address to the General Council of the World Communion of Reformed Churches held in Leipzig in June and July 2017 and from his website. The address is on Mitri's website at: <http://www.mitriraheb.org/>

For further information about the World Communion of Reformed Churches: <http://wcrch.ch/>

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