

## **The Bethlehem Call: Here we stand – Stand with us**

**To the reader:** Read and interpret this text with a Kairos consciousness and gaze of prophetic anger.

### **Preamble**

How long, O God, will they steal our livelihood? Oppress, imprison and humiliate our people? Deprive our children of their childhood? Indeed how long, God, will the multitudes of Christians of the world ignore the anguish of our Palestinian sisters and brothers and all of the oppressed?

“Come and see,” said the Christians of Palestine. “Come and see the olive groves, the bulldozers, the ancient terraces, the segregated cities. The situation is worsening.”

More than 60 participants from 15 countries heeded an urgent call by Kairos Palestine. On 4-10 December 2011; they joined Palestinians in the Kairos for Global Justice Encounter/Conference in Bethlehem.

The aims and objectives of the encounter/conference were to:

- Bring awareness of and share a Kairos consciousness experienced by all groups attending the encounter;
- Strengthen and build ties among Kairos groups to form a committed global network for justice;
- Learn from the Palestinian experience the urgency of Kairos solidarity and to end injustice by implementing concrete actions at the national, regional and global level.

On the road to this encounter/conference, there was the Amman Call in 2007, which ended 60 years without a unified Christian voice speaking against the Israeli occupation of Palestine. The next milestone was the Berne Perspective in 2008, which is illustrated in the statement: “Enough is enough. No more words without deeds, it is time for action.” The cry for justice in Palestine reached a pivotal moment when, in December 2009, Palestinian Christians launched the Kairos Palestine document: “A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering.”

We now say: “Injustice no more. Here we stand. Stand with us”

### **The current context**

Today, the illegal regime and illegal forms of the Israeli occupation of Palestine assumes dimensions of systemic injustice whereby the unthinkable and unimaginable becomes globally accepted, supported and normalized. This is an example of Empire (global domination) at work. It happens in Palestine as it happens in many other contexts around the world. At the same time, Palestine is clearly a global issue. The government of Israel claims to have and indeed enjoys an exceptional status within the international community. Israel regards itself to be above the law and is treated as exempt from international law. This status provides the Israeli government the freedom to occupy Palestine with impunity.

As witnessed with our own eyes, the treacherous conditions imposed by the Israeli occupation on Palestinians and their land have reached a level of almost unimaginable and sophisticated criminality. This includes the slow yet deliberate and systematic ethnic cleansing and the geo-cide of Palestinians and Palestine as well as the strangling of the Palestinian economy. The brutality in the “violence of

silence” internationally provides an almost impenetrable shield for the Israeli government to implement its evil designs in blatant disregard for human rights and international law. Silence is an opinion. Inaction is an action. We witness decidedly spineless cowardice in failure to resist the Israeli government by the majority of governments, political parties, media outlets, businesses, most of organized religion -- including Christianity -- and the silence of prophets worldwide. This makes us accomplices in crimes against humanity, such as the crimes of apartheid and persecution as described in international law.<sup>1</sup>

We witness also the resolve and resilience of Palestinians to match the imbalance of political, economic and military power with unbending steadfastness for their freedom and just peace.

The deligitimization and criminalization of the Israeli government and its local and international support base is gaining unstoppable momentum. The existence of international boycott, divestment and sanctions (BDS) campaigns and other forms of non-violent resistance is an established fact. The government and state of Israel is now regarded as an apartheid regime in terms of international law, with particular reference to the UN Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid and the Rome Statutes of the International Criminal Court. The severity of the Palestinian situation makes comparisons with apartheid in South Africa superfluous and almost irrelevant. The benchmark is international law and not South Africa.

Globally we observe a context of growing fluidity and volatility. In this context, we are deeply concerned to observe how governments and societies in the West, including churches and ecumenical bodies dominated by the West, are becoming more and more exclusive, supremacist and dictatorial in conserving an unjust status quo. Furthermore, the growing economic and political volatility of world powers in North America and Europe creates a context of uncertainty for precise timelines in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian situation. However this fluidity in addition to the Arab Awakening holds potential for hope.

The global South, also complicit in regard to the Israeli-Palestinian crisis, possesses the potential to be an untapped source of hope. This potential holds value not only for Palestinians but also for those societies in the global North where Empire crumbles.

We are also acutely aware of struggles for justice everywhere, including within Israel itself. We have come to ignite, nurture and strengthen a Kairos consciousness for each of these contexts as interconnected and interrelated. We draw inspiration and strength from each other and also from progressive peace activists and human rights groups in Israel.

In the deep pain of the Palestinian people in Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, of Palestinian refugees and of Israeli Arab citizens, we witnessed the tears of God. God keeps the flame of faith alive, as the darkness of despair closes in. God lives and breathes in the lament of those whose future has been stolen. In the cries of the dispossessed we have sensed the passion of God for right to prevail.

God takes sides for justice against injustice. God does not take kindly to injustice and the perpetrators of injustice. *“He has shown the might with His arm. He has scattered the proud in the conceit of their heart.*

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant international laws include the International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of the Crime of Apartheid (adopted in 1973 and enacted in 1976); and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, Article 7 (1)(h) & (j), and Article 2 (g) & (h) of 1998.

*He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted the lowly (Luke 1:46-55). A spirituality that recognizes the face of God in every human being is, therefore, inevitably marked by a bias towards justice for the poor and the oppressed. "One thing God requires of you is only this, to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God," (Micah 6:8). This is the true essence of both Testaments. Christ still weeps over Jerusalem.*

A Kairos is both the recognition of God's will and the urgency of our response. It is in the awareness of a God of the Now, who is deeply involved in the human predicament. God keeps us steadfast in courage, hope and love as we continue to struggle and resist.

We pray and plead for a radical change of hearts, policies and practices of the Israeli government and those governments that support it. If this does not happen, we pray in trembling and hope if it is God's will.... for these governments to fall.

### **Some non-negotiable: Occupation no more**

In the light of the above and with our conviction that Palestine is in an ever deepening crisis, Kairos Palestine urgently calls us to move forward boldly and act radically by speaking out with courage, passion and determination. The time for words and diplomatic niceties, that obscure the reality, are over. We affirm the churches' commitment to and contributions for decisive action since the Amman Call as well as in the creation and impact of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum (PIEF). Nevertheless, we will strengthen and increase our advocacy initiatives.

Therefore, we:

- Reject the silence of the church, lest we be accomplices in crimes against humanity, such as those of apartheid and persecution. It is imperative to speak up and cry with the oppressed in demanding justice.
- Refuse to be coerced into accepting financial assistance from any church or organisation that supports the Occupation.
- Challenge any church which, either directly or indirectly, invests in companies which support the occupation. As congregants of a church, we will be alert towards church policies and challenge unethical financial investment and spending practices.
- Call the Israeli occupation of Palestine a crime and sin. We reject any theological or political justification for the Occupation. We regard such theologies as defying the core of the Gospel.
- Reject any argument aimed at convincing Palestinians and the international community that the problems are caused by Muslims rather than the Occupation.
- Demand that churches take bold and courageous positions for justice against injustice. We are appalled at the spiritual and institutional cowardice that refuses to take an unequivocal stand for justice. Equally, victims and perpetrators cannot be put on equal footing in efforts to create illusions of balance.

- Confirm our obligation to resist the Occupation in faith, hope and love. We reject calls to cease advocating and practising BDS or any other form of non-violent civil resistance that will end the Occupation.
- Resist being party to any church or church-related organisation offering tours to the Holy Lands that do not include an encounter with local Palestinians and express our opposition to such initiatives. Alternative tourism groups are now available that Christians and others can avail themselves of.
- Demand that the Right of Return for all Palestinian refugees be enforced.
- Steadfastly uphold the principle of compassion toward the oppressor. We acknowledge and understand their experiences of oppression, fears and insecurities. Our demands are in the best interests for a better future for all involved.

In love, we rage against injustice and yet refuse to be destroyed by our anger.

#### **Our vision: Call to act now**

A shared vision of peace with justice inspires us to respond with committed action, at this critical moment. This vision must include affirming voices from the Jewish,,Muslim and other faith traditions that express hope for a pluralistic, democratic society here.

The tide is turning. The pain will pass soon if we act now. This calls for a collective willingness to take risks in the cause of justice.

#### **Theology: One voice for justice**

We commit ourselves to develop contextual biblical theologies and practices of resistance and liberation. We will unmask those theologies in our midst that are harbingers of death for Palestinians and the oppressed worldwide and which challenge traditional ways of doing theology.

#### **Dismantling Israeli apartheid**

We support and commit ourselves to the dismantling of Israeli apartheid, insist on the enforcement of international law and ensuring the fulfillment of legitimate demands of Palestinians. These demands include:

- People living side by side in justice and peace within pre-1967 borders;
- A shared Jerusalem including open access to all holy sites;
- The right of return for Palestinian refugees;
- An end to all settlement extensions and dismantling of the settlement system;
- Free access to water and sanitation;
- The breakdown of the apartheid wall.

We should not accept the argument that the fear of civil unrest between Israeli settlers and Palestinians in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is a deterrent to achieving Palestinian freedom.

#### **Prophetic communities that support Palestine**

We commit to:

- Acknowledge that people at the community level are empowered as the primary theologians of a Kairos Consciousness.
- Develop effective south-north and south-south coalitions for prophetic action
- Agree that Kairos Palestine create a core group to facilitate these coalitions

### **Boycott-Divestment-Sanction (BDS): Creative, non-violent resistance now**

- We commit to engage in creative, non-violent resistance in response to the call from our Palestinian sisters and brothers to this end, including BDS.
- We will actively participate in and lend credibility to popular, non-violent resistance in Palestine, Israel and internationally, including giving effect to BDS
- We will oppose with appropriate means the policies of our governments that support the occupation.

### **Holy Lands Tourism and Pilgrimage**

We will:

- Promote and participate in alternative tourism and Kairos pilgrimages in the Holy Lands for the purposes of spiritual nurturing, awareness-raising and advocacy.
- Insist that such tours be organized by or in partnership with Palestinian tour operators
- Utilize those travel agencies that follow “Come and See: A Call from Palestinian Christians for Ethical Tourism”<sup>2</sup>. We will challenge and boycott those that do not.
- Actively seek to enable targeted groups to travel to Israel-Palestine.

### **Conclusion**

The Bethlehem Call for a here-we-stand, stand-with-us journey provides each one of us a joyous blessing and honor, difficult though the journey may be. We seize this opportune, Kairos moment with conviction and hope.

Palestinians and a world community have gathered: here in, breaking barriers between regions and cultures and building bridges of friendship and solidarity because we have a common dream to see a Palestine and a world free of all forms of injustice. We believe that each one of us was called to Bethlehem for a purpose.

“We are the ones we have been waiting for.” (Alice Walker)

### **A Franciscan benediction:**

*May God bless us with discomfort at easy answers, at half truths and superficial relationships so that we may live deeply within our hearts. May God bless us with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation. May God bless us with tears to share for those who suffer in pain, rejection, starvation and war, so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and to turn their pain into joy. And may God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we can make a difference in this world so that we can do what others claim cannot be done. And may the blessing of the God of Abraham and Sarah, and Jesus born in Bethlehem of our sister Mary, and of the Holy Spirit, who broods over the world as a mother over her children, be upon us and remain with us always. Amen.*

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<sup>2</sup> [Come and See: A Call from Palestinian Christians](#)

A journey for peace with Justice

Guidelines for Christians Contemplating a Pilgrimage to the Holy Lan