

Sabeel Christmas Messages
2014 – 2020

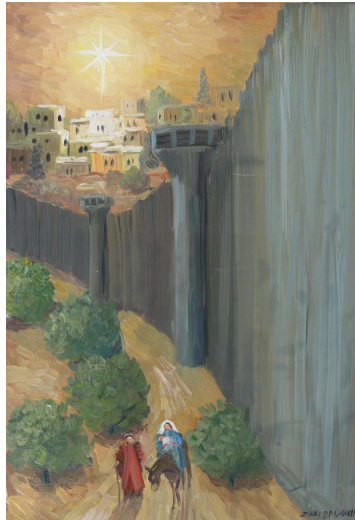
Rev. Dr. Naim Ateek

These seven Christmas messages are examples of what Christmas means for us. Each communicates a thought of the spirit of Christmas which is expressed by Palestinian Christians who have been living, for decades, under the oppressive occupation of the Israeli government.

These messages briefly express the context of injustice which Palestinians experience daily. Yet, they also convey the spirit and resilience of the Christmas season and our people's hope of liberation and freedom.

In spite of the fear, violence, and falsehoods which the illegal Israeli occupation engenders, they communicate the Christmas message of God's love and peace for all as well as the hope and joy that comes to us at Christmas.

Naim Ateek



painting by Zaki Baboun, Bethlehem

Sabeel Christmas Message 2014

“...do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” (Luke 2:10)

From a Palestinian world view, there are certain similarities between the political conditions in Palestine during the times of Jesus’ birth and the political situation in Palestine today. There is a flagrant occupation that dominates and oppresses people, and there are words that describe what people go through: fear, insecurity, instability, suffering, grief, despair, and other negative feelings that a repressive empire and an Israeli rightwing government can produce.

That is why the words of the angel to the shepherds in the Christmas story strike a relevant chord, “Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...” What constituted good news for the shepherds in first century Palestine and what would constitute good news for our Palestinian people today? It is nothing less than liberation and peace because both can produce a life of dignity, security, and stability for all.

In the midst of these difficult times, the implication of the Christmas message to oppressed people is basically clear: God knows and sees the suffering of the oppressed and God is doing something, not through the people of power but through the birth of a baby who ultimately holds in himself the answer to the human condition of injustice and insecurity. Therefore “do not be afraid.”

Furthermore, the angels gave the shepherds the formula for peace on earth: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, goodwill among people” (Luke 2:14). This implies the need for two essential elements: On the one hand, peace on earth is possible

when people, including those in positions of power, are willing to humble themselves before God, love and serve others, and give God the glory and the honor. On the other hand, peace is possible when people cherish goodwill towards one another. Goodwill on all sides is essential for the realization of peace. From the Palestinian perspective, one of the major obstacles to peace has been the lack of goodwill. Throughout the Palestine-Israel conflict, there have been summits, agreements, accords, roadmaps, understandings, etc. but what has been lacking is goodwill on the side of Israel. The Israeli government continuously tries to impose its will on the Palestinians rather than accepting the will of the world community and international law which the Palestinians insist upon. Goodwill means eliminating all barriers that prevent the enhancement of the dignity and the quality of life of the other. Goodwill means negotiating in good faith. Peace and goodwill are possible on earth when people are willing to acknowledge God's overall sovereignty and relish compassion towards their fellow human beings. It is as simple as that. And we believe this has been initiated and proclaimed through the life and work of Jesus Christ, the savior and liberator, and through his teachings about the upside-down kingdom of God, and through his death and resurrection.

But in this broken world where the powers seem to be in control, people are not willing to listen to God's formula for peace. The government of Israel is a case in point; it oppresses and dominates our Palestinian people, steals their land, evicts them from their homes, humiliates them and denies them their most basic human and political rights. And more recently, the proposed Israeli

Nationality Law¹ does not reflect goodwill to the Palestinians. However, the coming of Christ conveys the will of God whose very nature is love, compassion, and justice, and whose longing is to see the realization of peace on earth and goodwill among people. That is why Jesus said, those who work and promote peace are God's children (Matthew 5:9).

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have the responsibility to be peacemakers and to promote this formula of peace and goodwill. We need to do whatever we can to implement it. It is an awesome responsibility, but we can and must do it. This Christmas season emboldens us and gives us a renewed incentive to double our endeavors in working for a just peace in Palestine-Israel.

*“Glory to God in the highest heavens, and on earth peace,
goodwill among people.”*

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

1 The Nation-State Bill or the Nationality Bill, is an Israeli Basic Law which specifies the nature of the State of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people. The law was passed by the Knesset – with 62 in favor, 55 against, and two abstentions – on 19 July 2018.

Sabeel Christmas Message 2015

“Do not be afraid...to you is born...a Savior” (Luke 2:10-11)

“Finally beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things...and the God of peace will be with you.” (Phil 4:8-9)

When we look at the state of our world today and the messy situation in which we find ourselves, it seems ludicrous at this Christmas season to talk about peace on earth, love of neighbor, compassion for others, and joy and goodwill to all.

Tragically, we have been witnessing, on a daily basis, terror vs. terror, military power vs. military power, revenge and counter revenge, a hundred eyes for one eye, and inhuman behavior among people. Jesus Christ seems to have no place in the raging conflicts, and justice does not seem to stand a chance.

Yet it is precisely in the midst of this terrible world predicament, political turmoil, and human devastation that we must proclaim our commitment to the above virtues. As Paul wrote, we need to continue to dwell on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable....” We need to think about these things and act on them and “the God of peace” will be with us.

At this Christmas time, we, therefore, insist that the God in whom we believe and trust is the God of peace and love, and not war and hate. We cling to our faith in a loving and compassionate God

who calls us away from hatred and violence and into justice and reconciliation.

We believe that the birth of Jesus Christ represents God's commitment and personal involvement in the life of our world and its people. Jesus Christ continues to inspire us to re-commit ourselves to the work of justice and peacemaking and to a life of sacrificial service to others, especially the weak and oppressed among us. Christ continues to be our Emanuel. He is with us in our joys and in our sorrows, and we believe that his way is the way of peace and nonviolence. Therefore, we will continue to walk in his footsteps because it is the way of life.

A proper response at this Christmas Season is the need for humility, contrition, and repentance. Some of the western powers have allowed the rise of ISIS, and the world is reaping what has been sown. The Government of Israel has allowed the empowerment of the extremist settlers, and many Palestinians and Israelis have become the victims. The illegal occupation of the Palestinian territories continues unabated; the Israeli lust for land and settlement building is unrelenting; the monopolizing and judaizing of Jerusalem continues unchecked. Such tragic facts cannot be glossed over but must be faced, admitted, and taken into account. All of us have fallen short of the glory of God.

- As people of faith – Christians, Muslims, and Jews – we need to double our endeavors to build a world where justice, truth, and mercy can find a home.
- As people of faith, we need to hold our governments accountable for not doing enough for the poor and the underprivileged in our societies, while massive expenditures are spent on arms that destroy and kill instead

of being used for food, health, and education. The cry against such crimes must be louder and stronger.

- As people of faith, we need to raise the prophetic cry against the Israeli government's continued disregard of Palestinian political and human rights and its infringements on international law which have become subdued and muted. It is the responsibility of our church leaders, imams, and rabbis in Jerusalem and throughout the world to take a stronger and clearer stand against Israeli oppression of the Palestinians.
- As people of faith, we have a responsibility before God to make each of our religions contribute towards building greater religious tolerance, respect and acceptance of others so that people of various religious and ethnic backgrounds can live in harmony and peace.
- As people of faith, we have based our theologies on selected texts from the Bible and Quran that reflect a narrow, exclusive, and fundamentalist understanding. Instead of promoting the love of God and neighbor, our interpretations have encouraged racism and discrimination and the exclusion of the other.

It is time to turn the tide of injustice and oppression into the peaceful waves of justice and peace so that the God of peace, love, and compassion can be glorified, and all our peoples can live in peace and security.

A Peaceful Christmas to all

Sabeel Christmas Message 2016

*“For to you is born ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord”
(Luke 2:11)*

Christmas is a time of joy. Amid the sorrows and hardships of daily life, we need the Christmas spirit, the good news and gladness of Christmas. The birth of Jesus Christ gives us joy and hope: “to you is born ... a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11). Christmas never fails to refresh and renew us so that we can cope with the difficulties of daily life.

Yet the Christmas story is also full of trauma and tragedy. The beauty and innocence of the Christ child is juxtaposed with the selfishness and cruelty of Herod and the callousness of the people of power.

As we reflect on the Christmas story this season, what are some of the relevant lessons that we can learn?

First: The census decreed by Emperor Augustus required people to register in their own towns. The Caesars and emperors always pass laws that disrupt and even ruin people’s lives. Joseph and Mary had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered, a distance of over 100 miles (over 160 km). It was not easy as she was due to give birth.

Many Palestinians, who due to unjust laws and regulations decreed by the government of Israel, have to pay a high price, bear the heavy brunt, and suffer grievous consequences. Those who pass laws against the occupied sit in their comfortable offices and do not care about the consequences of their actions upon the poor

and oppressed. In the conflict over Palestine, it is not only Zionist leaders and Israeli officials who have taken decisions that have negatively affected our Palestinian people. Even more drastically, western Christian leaders have destroyed Palestine and its people through their outrageous and immoral resolutions. The Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, and the unjust 1947 Partition Plan are only a few examples. These decisions were taken by foreigners but turned Palestinians' lives upside-down forever.

Second: “When King Herod heard this, he was frightened” (Matt. 2:3). Seemingly powerful kings, presidents and prime ministers feel threatened by the nonviolent acts of the humble and meek whose only weapons are truth and justice. They are threatened by whatever they perceive as a threat to their power, interest, and ideology. It can lead them to violent and cruel action against others. They can go to extremes in order to do away with the threats. This is the way King Herod behaved. He killed the infants of Bethlehem in order to eliminate the threat. In 1991, the western powers went to war against Iraq and killed millions of people in order to eliminate what they perceived as a threat to themselves and to Israel. Israel's intelligence agency assassinated many Palestinians because it perceived them as threats. This is the way of empire. This is the way people of power behave. They do not see human beings, families and children; they only see obstacles that need to be eliminated.

Third: This is not the way the God of love acts. In the midst of the oppressive military and economic might of empire, God's concern is for the poor and the oppressed. The message of Christmas is always “Good news for all the people.” While the powers make decrees to oppress and dehumanize others, it is God who works for their salvation and liberation. “Do not be afraid,” said the

angel. “God is with us. I am sending you a savior, a liberator.” These words were spoken to people living under occupation and who were longing for freedom and liberation. This message is still relevant to our people today. God works through us to witness for the truth, to take a stand against the evil of occupation and oppression. Our hope is not in the power of the “Herods” and the “Caesars;” it is in the baby who is “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” It is not in the power of military might; it is in the power of love and nonviolence. It is not through the oppression of others and the negation of their rights; it is through giving glory to God and doing justice to our neighbor. This is the recipe for peace and security for all the people of our land.

*Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and goodwill
towards all*

Sabeel wishes you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

Sabeel Christmas Message 2017

*“And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph,
and the babe lying in a manger” (Luke 2:16)*

During this Christmas Season, we pause to give thanks and praise to the gracious and loving God for the coming of Jesus Christ through whom we have come to know God’s true nature of love. In Christ we know that God’s love extends to all people and embraces all. We know that God wills for people to live in justice and peace with one another. This means the liberation of all the Palestinian territories occupied by Israel.

At this Christmas and at the end of another year, it is appropriate to renew our commitment to the work of justice and peace for our Palestinian people by focusing on three essential qualities of our Christian life, namely, faith, hope and love.

*Our life in the world demands faith. Not only our faith in God, but also faith in ourselves and others that together, with determination and diligence, we can persevere in striving for justice and liberation for the Palestinian people. We also need faith to fight despair, apathy, and disappointments. We need faith to realize that we are not struggling alone, but we are laboring with God for the achievement of peace with justice for all the people of our land.

*Our life demands hope. Hope that is not dependent on the ups and downs of the daily changing circumstances, but is anchored in God who, working in us, will ultimately give us the victory over injustice and oppression, and will vindicate the truth over falsehood and deceit.

*Our life demands love. Not the love for the gods we create and

worship but the love for the living God who calls us in love to serve one another and especially our brothers and sisters who are oppressed and suffering from the policies and greed of their fellow human's unjust politics and economics.

Amid life's vexing uncertainties, we come to Christmas seeking refreshment and renewal. There is something about a baby with his mother in a humble setting that stirs within us deep thoughts and feelings of faith, hope, and love. May God's love and peace shown at Christmas sustain us throughout the coming New Year.

Sabeel wishes you a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year

Sabeel Christmas Message 2018

“Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people...” (Luke 2:10)

As we look back on 2018, we see that it has been a very difficult year in Palestine. It has been another year in which refugees have been denied rights, and another year of occupation in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. There has been continued Jewish settler violence, home demolition, arbitrary detention and arrests, deprivation of natural resources, and restriction of movement. While these are not new measures of occupation, the situation has been exacerbated by several political decisions. These include the ratification of the Nation State Law by the Israeli Parliament, the American decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem, and the defunding of UN operations designed to help Palestinian refugees.

And still, we celebrate this Christmas with hope and joy. One source of hope is the mostly nonviolent Palestinian response in spite of the worsening situation. The March of Return has continued since the month of March, with Gazans of all ages demonstrating every Friday after noon prayers, seeking justice and the right to return to their villages. Various villages in Palestine and Israel also continue their regular nonviolent struggle against the harassment and oppression by Israeli forces. The Bedouins of Khan al-Ahmar (in occupied Palestine) and al-'Araqib (in Israel), along with fellow Palestinians, Israeli activists, and international supporters, have been steadfastly withstanding in the face of army forces determined to remove them.

It also gives us hope to see that nonviolent resistance has become

more of a commitment for both the Palestinian political leadership and, more importantly, the indigenous population. We are hopeful, even though the international community continues to fail in the implementation of its resolutions due to obstructionist US policies. We are hopeful because we know God will not allow injustice and oppression to last forever. For this reason, we Palestinians will remain committed to nonviolent direct action. We continue to be steadfast in our land, in our beliefs, and in hope – this is the meaning of *sumud*.

As Palestinian Christians, our hope and our joy stem from the story of Jesus Christ, born in Bethlehem. We know that two groups of people came to visit the Christ child after he was born. First, the shepherds came. These were local people coming from the Bethlehem-Beit Sahur area, and for us they represent the Palestinian people today, many of whom followed Christ and became his disciples.

The second group of visitors were foreigners from faraway lands. These Magi represent for us the many who continue to come to Bethlehem from around the world, to pay homage to the one known as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. In fact, this group includes you, our Sabeel family from around the globe, who continue to hope, to pray, and to take action with us for the sake of God's justice and peace in Palestine and Israel.

Of course, today it's not so easy to visit Bethlehem, whether you are coming from near or far. Bethlehem is under siege. It is an integral part of occupied Palestine. Palestine has been illegally occupied by the Israeli army for over half a century. In violation of international law, Israel has built a wall around the city. It

has mounted checkpoints with Israeli soldiers in control of its entrances and exits which would keep out the Magi if they were attempting to visit Jesus today. And still, after a half century of illegal occupation, we Palestinians continue to cry out in hope for justice, peace, and liberation.

Even when the situation seems to be worsening, and the night seems too dark and too long, we remember that the Christmas story is about God's love for the world. It is a story of a love that is outgoing, outflowing, unconditional, and sacrificial. We see that same love for justice in the nonviolent resilience of the Great March of Return, and in the nonviolent resistance of Khan al-Ahmar. We see that same love in the direct action and prayer of so many of you around the world. We see that same love when countries are bold enough to speak up for Palestine and to administer justice. We know that where love is found, and justice is practiced, liberation and peace are not far behind.

The challenge of this Christmas is:

- For our Palestinian people to continue their nonviolent struggle.
- For the Israeli leadership and all Jews of conscience to hear the cry of the oppressed Palestinians and to work for their liberation on the basis of international law.
- For all our friends and people around the world to become actively engaged in building a just-peace in accordance with international law.

Therefore, as we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, we ask all people of goodwill to rise-up together for justice and through Sabeel's Kumi Now initiative and alongside our Palestinians, Israeli

and international friends to share with others the love and peace, the hope and joy of this Christmas season.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!

Sabeel Christmas Message 2019²

“When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy“ (Matthew 2:10)

According to the Gospel of Luke, the first group of people to hear the message of the first Christmas were shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock by night. The announcement for the birth of Jesus came through angels who foretold the birth of a savior-messiah. The miraculous twist was that the baby was not born at the king’s palace, but inside a cave in a stable with the domestic animals around. This was God’s way of bypassing the political as well as the religious establishments of the time.

According to the Gospel of Matthew, God communicated the birth of Jesus through the appearance of a bright star to a group of Magi in the East. They interpreted this celestial constellation as predicting the birth of a great king. The Magi were attracted to the bright star and decided to follow its guidance, hoping it would bring them to the royal child.

Although the Magi travelled with great enthusiasm and excitement, they were unaware that their search for the newborn could threaten the political status quo in the land of Palestine to which they were heading.

As for the shepherds, it was the status quo that needed to be toppled down. They, as well as all the people of the land, were looking for liberation and justice. They were excited and thrilled about

2 The original message was sent out by Friends of Sabeel North America (FOSNA) as part of their Christmas fundraising drive.

the possibility of the birth of a new liberator-king-messiah as the angels proclaimed to them.

King Herod, however, feared the bright star. He told the Magi to go to Bethlehem where the prophecies indicated and look for the child there. They came to the place, knelt, and offered gifts. Then having been warned in a dream, they did not return to Herod but took a different route home. King Herod was threatened by the prospect of a new king that could replace him. He was anxious and panicky and ordered the killing of all of Bethlehem's children two years and under.

The presence of the bright star signaled both hope and despair. On the one hand, for the poor and oppressed people of the land, like the shepherds, it gave hope that could usher a new world order of economic prosperity and peace. It promised a better life for a better future initiated by the coming of the new messiah.

On the other hand, for Herod and the people of power the presence of the bright star was perceived as a threat to his domination. It could upend the status quo of injustice. When we apply this to the conflict over Palestine, it can put an end to the reign of terror, injustice, and oppression of our people. It can put an end to the illegal occupation of Palestine and usher a period of liberation, justice and peace. It can put an end to life in refugee camps by giving refugees a settled and peaceful life on their own land, living in harmony with their neighbors. It can put an end to economic inequalities and political exploitations.

As anyone in Palestine will tell you, the present order of things is wrong. The status quo of occupation and oppression is untenable. When we see a demolished home or a family made homeless or

farmers stripped forcefully off their land, we are witnessing the unjust order of things that needs to be upended. A demolished home is the result of a world order designed by the “Herods” and rulers of the Israeli government. The order of things is destroying lives and it is our duty to resist it. Many of us lack the ability to stop the injustice, but we can, through nonviolent means, disrupt it so that we can prevent its destructive force on our Palestinian people. It is our duty to oppose those in power who fear the bright star and to encourage all those who possess the courage to critique and confront the unjust order of things. The time has come for nonviolent direct action.

We all hope, work, and pray for a new world order where the authentic movement for justice and peace is implemented on the basis of international law. Such an implementation will bring a message of good news to the poor, needy, and oppressed Palestinians. The people of Palestine can then focus their attention on building their state for all their people.

The “Herods” of this world will do their utmost to keep the order of things as it is today. The Christmas message for this year is to take a stand against the status quo and to follow the bright star without fear or trepidation until we achieve liberation, justice, peace, and well-being for all the oppressed, and especially for the people of Palestine.

May the Joy of Christmas Abide with You Throughout the Coming Year!

Sabeel Christmas Message 2020³

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace,
goodwill among people” (Luke 2:14).*

In order to understand the impact of the words “good news,” we only need to remember when, a few weeks ago, we heard Pfizer’s announcement that its vaccine for the coronavirus was ready for use. We knew that the medical scientists had been working diligently for several months to produce a vaccine, but when the news came, it was indeed “good news to all the people,” notwithstanding the tragic death of hundreds of thousands of people across the world.

At Christmas time, we are reminded of the “good news” which God sent to a group of simple shepherds 2000 years ago, as they were watching their flocks at night near the town of Bethlehem, Palestine, in an isolated corner of the world that was living under the occupation of the Roman Empire. An angel of the Lord said to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people for to you is born this day...a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.... then there was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill among people” (Luke 2:10-14).

As followers of Jesus Christ, we believe that the good news of the heavenly chorus is tantamount to God’s formula for peace. It includes three essential prerequisites that make peace on earth possible:

3 This sermon was presented virtually in December 2020 to Friends of Sabeel-Kairos UK.

1. The heavenly chorus said, "Glory to God in the highest." God's glory is linked to God's power. Giving glory to God means acknowledging that to God alone belongs power and greatness, worship, and majesty. For peace to be established, power is needed. God's power, however, is linked to God's nature, and God's nature is love. Therefore, God's power that is needed for making peace is God's power of love. The question is, however, how do people understand power today?

The two most common sources of power in our world are military power and the power of riches and wealth. Human power is measured by the number of army tanks and fighter planes that can conquer and destroy, or by the wealth and riches which some people use to exploit, control, and dehumanize others. God's power, however, is measured by affecting forgiveness, by restoring wholeness and healing, by comforting and strengthening the broken-hearted and sorrowful, and by transforming structures of domination into structures of peace and justice.

Having said that, we need to admit that even in the Bible we find some confusing words about power. In some Old Testament texts, God is pictured as a male god who goes with his Israelite tribes to war to fight their battles and plunder other people's land and property. There are texts that reflect a god who encouraged his people to steal and rob others, as we read in the book of Exodus (12:36)! There are biblical texts that reflect a violent god who mandated his people to drive out the native indigenous inhabitants of Canaan (Palestine) and even to utterly exterminate them, as we read in the books of Numbers (33:50-53) and Deuteronomy (7:1-2)! God's power in those primitive times was expressed through acts of war, violence, and ethnic cleansing. Such an exclusive picture of God is

repugnant to morality and human decency and is contrary to the picture of God we have seen in Jesus Christ, and thus it cannot be authoritative for us.

It is important to remember, however, that such an exclusive understanding of God was corrected in the Old Testament itself. A higher and a more mature understanding of God portrays God as the God of justice and mercy, the God of steadfast love and loving kindness (*Hesed*), not only to ancient Israel but to other people as well. Unfortunately, however, in some Old Testament texts, the picture of God kept vacillating between an inclusive and an exclusive understanding of God's character.

In the coming of Jesus Christ, we have come to know God as the God of love. And we have come to recognize that God's power is expressed in God's power of love. In order to avoid the confusion with the human understanding of power that primarily includes war, violence, and destruction, the Christmas story points us to look at the baby in the manger. Looking at the baby Jesus in the manger, and what this baby stands for, gives us a revolutionary understanding of power that critiques the human understanding.

In the Christmas story, King Herod the Great epitomizes and exemplifies the worst expressions of people of power in the world, then and now, who use power to exploit, dehumanize, and destroy others. God's power of love, however, is exemplified in the coming of Jesus Christ, and in people of conscience and faith who express their use of power through love and compassion. Looking at the baby Jesus in the manger gives us a new and fresh perspective of God's power which we must not confuse with worldly power. The baby in the manger reflects

God's humanity, humility, and love.

Later on in his life and ministry, Jesus reflected God's power by his identification with the poor, needy, and marginalized. In Jesus Christ, the glory of God was expressed in Christ's sacrificial love through his death on the cross and his resurrection. So, when we say "Glory to God in the highest," we are speaking about God's power of love. God's power is never coercive; it is likened to the unconditional love of parents for their children.

God in Jesus Christ must always be the model and paradigm of true and genuine power, and we humans must imitate and practice God's understanding of power in our relationship with others in the world.

Therefore, the first prerequisite for peace is giving Glory to God which practically means having the power of God working through us in peacemaking. This understanding of power that is founded on giving God the glory can be the force that enables and emboldens us in the work of peace on earth.

2. The second prerequisite is peace itself. As glory to God is linked to God's power, peace on earth is linked to the doing of justice. There is no peace that can endure unless it is based on truth and justice. But what do we mean by peace? Military generals argue that peace can be imposed through war. The army goes in and vanquishes the enemy and drives out a dictator and restores peace. The tolls of wars that we have experienced during our lifetime have been heavy with the death of many innocent people. Nowadays we recognize that peace cannot prevail unless we deal with the underlying injustices and with the systems of domination and corruption whether

economic, political, or religious, that need to be changed and transformed.

Although the biblical injunctions for justice are still important, such as the words of Amos, “Let justice run like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24), or the words of Micah 6:8, “What does Lord require of us, “To do justice and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God,”” I find greater help, and frankly, greater clarity and influence nowadays, when I refer to justice as expressed in international law, especially when the international community enforces it.

When I consider the need for justice, I think of my Palestinian people who have been crying out for justice for over 70 years. I pray and advocate for justice for them in accordance with international law. This means the ending of the Illegal Israeli occupation and the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state alongside the state of Israel. This Palestinian state is to be established on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip with East Jerusalem as its capital. What has been lacking is the will of the international community to implement the demands of justice.

Less than a month ago, the United Nation’s General Assembly’s Third Committee, which deals with human rights and humanitarian affairs, voted overwhelmingly to approve a draft resolution in favor of Palestinian self-determination, the end of the Israeli occupation, and the right for the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. The vote was 163 countries for and 5 against, which included Israel and the United States. For over 70 years, Israel has flouted international law and has been backed by the United States. Such a stance by Israel and the United States makes a mockery of justice.

If I am to speak the truth in love, I say candidly to you, my friends, that the burden for the failure of the implementation of international law regarding Palestine, to a large extent, falls on the shoulders of Britain and the United States that share a special responsibility vis-à-vis Palestine and Israel. Both countries could have led the way for doing justice and achieving peace, but they lacked the will to do it. It is important to remember that the Palestinian tragic Nakba began under the watch of the British Mandatory Government. Britain bears responsibility, and it is time for Britain to take the lead for justice.

In the virtual conference organized by the Balfour Project last October, it was heartening to hear a number of British parliamentarians and members of the House of Lords calling for the recognition of the state of Palestine and speaking about Palestinian rights. It is time to move from words to actions. It is time to move from resolutions to implementation. It is time to do justice for the Palestinians. It is time to stop the illegal confiscation of Palestinian land and the expansion of the illegal Israeli settlements. It is time for the British government and the new American government to lead the way with courage and determination and enforce the resolutions of international law. The daily suffering and oppression of our Palestinian people under the Israeli occupation is unbelievable and cannot be imagined, and the situation is getting worse. Many of you friends have visited Palestine and have seen the oppressive occupation with your own eyes. It needs to stop. The international community is ready. Britain and the United States can do it. How much longer should the oppressed Palestinians wait?

My friends, let us remember that issues of justice and peace

are at the heart of the business of the Church. Our Church leadership must take a more courageous stance on behalf of the oppressed Palestinians who seek liberation and the restoration of their God-given human dignity. The Church has a responsibility before its Lord to speak prophetically against the grave injustice. Let us remember that we are indeed children of God when we are engaged in peacemaking. As Jesus himself said, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

I realize that I am speaking specifically about the Palestinians, but there are many other people of the world who are also crying for justice. For some, it might be economic justice, while for others political, social, racial, environmental, sexual or many other forms. We will also stand with them. Implementing justice on the basis of international law can contribute to the achievement of peace and wellbeing for many people. As Christians, it is essential to emphasize that the doing of justice must always be tempered with mercy and compassion.

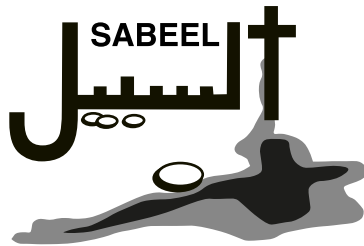
3. The third prerequisite for peace in God’s formula is, “goodwill among people.” Goodwill is linked to love. As glory to God is linked to power, and peace is linked to justice and mercy, goodwill is linked to the love of neighbor. But here again, we need a new understanding of love. The word love has become a very ordinary word. We use it to express everything we like. At a deeper level, however, it must go beyond human emotions to reflect genuine love of others in caring and helping others in need, especially during these days of pandemic when many people have lost their jobs. I have seen this genuine love expressed during the Advent and Christmas season in the generosity of many American churches and NGO’s in giving

food for the hungry and needy. I have watched on TV the long lines of people waiting to receive help. If this is true in the United States, the richest country in the world, how much more is it true in many other countries. Christ teaches us that when we offer help to the needy, we are offering it to Jesus Christ himself. Genuine love is free and inclusive as God's love is free and inclusive. We must be imitators of God's love to the world through Jesus Christ. Goodwill involves loving relationships and respect for others. Goodwill among people can be achieved when genuine love is shared and practiced.

Dear brothers and sisters, Christmas is a time that makes us think of peace on earth, because we believe that Jesus Christ is the prince of peace, and with his coming, God has sent us the formula for peace. It includes giving God the glory as expressed in God's power of love, peace based on justice and compassion, and goodwill expressed in genuine love for others.

As millions of people around the world are being inoculated by the vaccine against Covid19, giving them hope and a healthier life, may we at this Christmas time be injected by the reviving and living Spirit of Christ that renews our hope and strengthens our commitment to the ministry of justice. It is the doing of justice that produces peace and peace that opens the door for goodwill, reconciliation, and healing. Let us continue to walk together and be engaged together in this noble ministry for the sake of our brothers and sisters in Palestine. And may the spirit and peace of Christ at this Christmas time, abide with us throughout the coming new year.

Wishing you joy and peace at Christmas and throughout the coming year!



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