

COR Newsletter – 07 January 2009

Dear all,

Last Sunday in Bucharest

We are still in the midst of the holidays and many of our people are still away in home countries but a collection of hardy souls braved the sub zero temperatures to celebrate the epiphany in church. It was great to see Ela in church again and of course always a pleasure to have the services of John Barker. Whilst at church they heard me make an important announcement which I will repeat here for the benefit of those still away, for those in Sofia, and all our friends around the world who receive this communication.

Announcement

My contract here in Romania comes to an end soon and Alex and I have decided to return to the UK. To this end I can announce that I have been appointed as the Deanery missionary for Barnard Castle deanery and priest in charge of St. Mary's Gainford and St. Andrew's Winston in the Diocese of Durham. However we will still be here until after Easter and will only leave Romania in early May. Until then it is business as usual, so it is not the time for good byes just yet. But do pray for the discernment process of choosing a replacement to carry on the unique witness of Anglicanism in this part of Eastern Europe

Next Sunday in Bucharest

The Baptism of Christ. Holy Communion at 10am.

The BRITANNIA BALL

PLEASE: We **urgently** need good quality auction and raffle prizes to be offered at the ball on the 20th February. If you can offer anything please contact me.

We also need to be **urgently** selling tickets and putting together tables of ten (maximum 12) if we can. Tickets cost 95 Euros per person. All reservations and money via the chaplain please.

To remind ourselves of this pivotal event in the life of the Church of the Resurrection I have attached again an advertising poster for the BRITANNIA BALL to this email. Display it where you can raise awareness and prompt ticket sales, because in these uncertain economic times we cannot just assume that this ball will be an automatic success just because the first one was. Complacency could undo us!!

Thought for the day (Much longer than usual I'm afraid but it's not a subject that can be dealt with quickly or treated lightly)

Is there an authentic Christian position vis a vis the situation in the Middle East?

There are no prizes for guessing what prompted this week's thought for the day. I have heard it said that if there was any justice in this world Israel would have been built over the smouldering ashes of Berlin, or they should have removed all the Germans from Bavaria and given it to the Jewish people. Or perhaps in a magnanimous gesture we should have cleared out Kent and Sussex and half of London and given it to the Jews. There is plenty of space in our Northern cities to re-settle the Kent and Sussex populations isn't there? Preposterous? Perhaps, but

apparently not so preposterous if the people who actually do have to make way are somewhere far away - like the Palestinians.

At present hundreds of Palestinians are being killed by one of the best equipped and trained armies in the world. The Palestinians have no army, no air force and no navy. Fighters armed with small arms and home made missiles made from drainpipes, are trying to fight against the best military technology America has to offer. Of course Israel will win. Of course they will kill thousands more Palestinians without much retaliation. How could they not when the balance is so one sided?

The Jewish imperative "Never again" has apparently become "Yes, again" but this time applied to the Palestinian people instead of the Jewish people, and western populations still wracked by their collective guilt about 2000 years of persecuting the Jews, culminating in the death camps of the Third Reich, wring their hands and look the other way. This evening as I write this piece, 40 people sheltering from this murderous assault on Gaza have been killed while seeking refuge in a UN run school shelled by Israeli tanks - the second UN school to be attacked by Israeli tanks today. The Gazan population can't even run anywhere because they are blockaded. It seems spurious to talk about the Gazan's being made refugees as most of them were already refugees and living in "temporary" camps since 1948. The USA won't even sanction a motion calling for a ceasefire let alone actually do anything.

I have never hidden my affection and support for the Palestinian people gained from two trips to Palestine and at times like this I can barely watch the TV. After allowing my rage against Israel to subside enough to write, I sought to take council from a wiser and more personally involved head to discern an appropriate Christian position towards the entire sorry situation in the so-called Holy land and remembered a book I read a long time ago by a Christian Palestinian Priest called Fr. Naim Stifan Ateek, who at the time of writing the book was the Canon of St. George's Anglican cathedral in Jerusalem and pastor of its Arabic speaking congregation. It is called "Justice and only Justice - a Palestinian theology of liberation".

He, being intimately involved in the Palestinian/ Israel conundrum gives a powerful Christian critique to the situation in Palestine and offers his solution based entirely on Christian principles. It is a book worth reading, but what follows is the central premise;

He calls his homeland a land "cursed" by its holiness. A land claimed by two peoples, Israeli and Palestinian and three religions, Judaism, Islam and Christianity. But Peace, he insists, can *only* come when it becomes clear to *all three* that this land *cannot be claimed by one people only*, which ultimately of course would mean an end to the idea of a "Jewish state". "The path to blessing is to learn how to share it" says Fr. Ateek. You cannot have freedom or redemption at someone else's expense. The critical issue is how do you throw off oppression and empower the formally victimised without making the former slaves into the new slave masters? How do you end violence to one people without creating new violence to another people? (Ex-President Jimmy Carter called Israel an apartheid state)

The motor that drove Zionist ideology was the direct reaction against the Nazi holocaust in Europe - yet their empowerment has been at the expense of the subjugation and displacement of the Palestinian people, just as wrong as their own historic subjugation and just as wrong as it would have been to displace and subjugate Germans from Bavaria or the people from Southern England.

Fr. Ateek knows all about displacement. Before 1948 he lived in a mixed Muslim and Christian Palestinian village called Beisan (I have been there myself coincidentally). One day the Israeli army turned up and deported all the Muslims to the other side of

the Jordan, and all the Christians (including Naim Ateek) were dumped in Nazareth. The mosque and church were bulldozed and replaced with a synagogue. If you go there today you will find no trace that this was once a Palestinian village. Today it is known only by its Jewish name Beth Shean and to all intents and purposes the revised history has blotted out any reference that this was a Palestinian village. This was repeated scores of times all over Palestine.

But crucially, Fr. Ateek's response is *not* to hate the Israelis for what they did to him, his family and his neighbours, both Muslim and Christian. His Christian beliefs lead him to try and *understand* their own suffering instead - to try and understand their scars, their hurts, their need for security, their history of persecution (mostly at the hands of Christians!!), their own fears that drove them to do what they did. Shades of "Forgive then Father, they know not what they do". His message to his Arab brothers and sisters is that they should seek to understand the Israeli's need for security. But for their part the Israeli's must also see and hear the pain of the Palestinian people and stop pretending that the setting up of Israel was pain free and peaceful and that the grievances of the Palestinian people are real.

Justice, tempered by mercy and forgiveness on all sides is the **only** way out of the never ending cycle of violence. It was always the only Christian way. The Christian way of loving not just our neighbours but also our enemies is the only way that can bring peace to Palestine. Each side must recognise the hurt and the fear of the others. At the moment each side only sees its own hurt and its own fear. The alternative to recognising the humanity, fear and hurt of the other side is a never ending and escalating spiral of hate and bloodshed and misery for all concerned.

Israel may well win this bout in Gaza. They may crush Hamas for a while. They will kill hundreds, possibly thousands but that will not be the end of it. They know it, and we all know it. How many hundreds of suicide bombers do you suppose have just been spawned in the Gaza strip, vowing to strike back at some time in the future, as a result of this current carnage? Extreme situations spawn extreme solutions.

Fr. Ateek calls us to question **all** exclusivist claims to land, peoplehood and God - Jewish, Muslim and Christian. Letting go of exclusive claims will be painful.

Concluding that the Holy Land is not Jewish, and neither is it Muslim or Christian will be a bitter pill for many - perhaps most - to swallow and he appeals to the universalist tendencies present but veiled in all three of the Abrahamic faiths to embrace the other. In this way, religion would have the chance to redeem itself and become the solution rather than a part of the problem. His radical solution for Palestine stands also as a paradigm for the whole world. The world does not belong to us, and no little part of it is "ours" either - not Palestine, not anywhere - it belongs to God, and we must stop claiming it as our own against others, and learn to share it. That, together with Justice, mercy and forgiveness is the only authentic Christian way. This can easily be dismissed as "pie in the sky" theology far removed from reality. And if it had emanated from a woolly but well meaning Oxford academic far far away from the hate and bullets I'd be tempted to agree, but it didn't. It comes out of the actual experience of someone who lives there, who has experienced prejudice, subjugation, and fear and is the response of a humble Christian Palestinian priest whose opinions have been moulded by personal experience and actual events in the cauldron that is the middle east.

Proverbs 29: 18. "Where there is no vision, the people perish"

The **prayer for today** by Vienna Cobb Anderson

*We pray to you O God,
the lover of all,
for those we have named our enemies.
Deliver us from the hardness of heart
that keeps us locked in confrontation.
Deliver us from the hatred
that binds us in old ways.
Grant unto all people
the blessing of your love.
And grant unto us
such transformation of our lives
that we may make peace with our enemies,
and that together we might make this world
a safer place for all;
in Christ's name we pray.
Amen.*

Love and peace

Martin