

Pastoral letter on Palestine

Anglican Church of Southern Africa

“I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me.” (Micah 7:7)

Dear People of God

At the annual meeting of the Church's Provincial Standing Committee (the PSC) this year we resolved to:

“Request all parishes... to highlight the plight of the Palestinian people on the Sunday before Advent yearly, in line with the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on 29 November.”

27 November 2022 marks the beginning of Advent, the time in our liturgical year when we mark a period of waiting for the birth of Emmanuel, God with us, the incarnation of love and peace.

The people of Palestine, too, are in a time of waiting. From 1947 to 1949, in what the Palestinians call the Nakba (the Catastrophe), many of their villages were destroyed and they were removed in order to form the new State of Israel. In this way, Palestinians paid the price of a decision by Western leaders in the wake of the Holocaust to form a nation state which Jews could call home. Many Palestinians fled their homes, expecting they would soon return, but 70 years later this has not happened and right now there is no reasonable prospect of that happening.

During this Advent, let us adopt a posture of waiting with them and pray for the day when they no longer have to wait, but can return home. I want to encourage us to reflect not politically or ideologically, but theologically and spiritually.

Let us pray for the Palestinian people and for their faith, hope and love. They are our guardians of holy sites in the Holy Land. Let us pray for the end of injustice and for the time when Palestinians and Israelis will live in security and peace. Let us support all non-violent campaigns to ensure that space remains open for all people of goodwill and that war and violence and hatred should not be seen as the only way forward.

If you have questions about this call, you can read more of the background on printed texts of this Pastoral Letter, or on ACSA's Provincial website.

As we wait in hopeful expectation this Advent, may we carry the Palestinian people in our hearts. I wish you a holy and blessed Advent.

“I wait for God my Saviour; my God will hear me. (Micah 7:7)”

The Most Revd Thabo Makgoba
Archbishop of Cape Town

Background to the Pastoral Letter on Palestine from the Archbishop

Some of us might wonder what this struggle between two nations far away from us has to do with us? In our Province we face numerous social and political ills. Should we perhaps focus on these issues closer to home? However, we might remember that people in other places have, in the past, prayed with us and joined our struggles for freedom even though they had their own huge challenges.

Some Christians believe we must support the State of Israel because it represents God's chosen people of the Bible. However, the ancient Biblical tribe of Israel is not the same as the modern secular state.¹

Some people might say: but Palestinians are mainly Muslims. Why should we be concerned? There are, nevertheless, many Christians in Palestine. But this is not really about religions. It is about whether there is injustice and whether there is a failure to see the Image of God in all people. Palestinians are not free to live the full life that God has given to them. Even their access to food and water is rationed by the State of Israel. Non-violent methods of resistance are being closed down and even journalists reporting on the injustices are targeted.

As Anglicans, we have now passed several resolutions at our Provincial Synods and PSC meetings. You can read the latest resolution, and a statement presented at the 2022 Lambeth Conference, below.

But we need to go beyond this. Diocesan Synods should also consider passing resolutions and Parishes should think about how best to implement these resolutions. One way is simply to use the word "Palestine" in our prayers. The word "Israel" is used so often so it would be important also to use the word "Palestine". Jesus was born in Palestine. Let us say it from our pulpits and in our prayers.

In South Africa, we were taught to work against the system and not against white people. Similarly, we should work against the apartheid system in Israel and Palestine, not against Jewish or Israeli people. There are Israelis and Jewish people across the globe who are taking a firm stand against the policies and practices of Israel. Let us also pray for them and pray that their number may grow so that the humanity of those who think that all criticism of Israel is anti-Semitic, may be restored.

The September 2022 Provincial Standing Committee resolution

The resolution was adopted with no votes against it and two abstentions.

2022 ACSA RESOLUTION ON PALESTINE AND ISRAEL

Acknowledging that:

¹ For those who wish to explore this and similar issues, please see the Bible studies, "Justice for the Palestinian People", available on the ACSA website.

1. all human beings are created in the image of God, and that Christianity does not elevate one group of people over another;
2. Christian and Jewish Zionism are both undergirded by notions of supremacy and are forms of racism which have no place in the Christian faith;
3. the Palestinian people remain victims of attitudes in Europe for which they are not responsible. Their refugee situation is the longest running refugee situation in history;
4. support for Palestinian people and advocacy for their human dignity is in no way synonymous with anti-Semitism;
5. the integrity and authenticity of the Christian faith is in grave danger if we do not stand with those who suffer.

Therefore, this PSC resolves to:

1. request all parishes in ACSA to highlight the plight of the Palestinian people on the Sunday before Advent yearly, in line with the International day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People on 29 November;
2. respectfully request the Archbishop to re-recommend the Bible Study series "The Bible and the Land Called Holy" for study and to commission the preparation and leading of an online study series during Lent 2023;
3. request local parishes in ACSA to co-host Nakba (or Catastrophe) day, yearly, on 15 May with others who host similar events;
4. respectfully request the Archbishop to send strong messages of support to Palestinian Christians and further respectfully requests the Archbishop to consider visiting Palestinian Christians and/or host a group in South Africa;
5. reflect on what the Bishops of Lambeth were able to resolve and to consider the implications of what they decided;
6. encourage engagement with Christians in other parts of the globe, particularly former colonial powers in Europe and USA and urge them to take stronger actions so that Israel is held accountable and that Palestinian rights are upheld.

The 2022 Lambeth Conference received the following statement from The Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East

Sponsor: Archbishop Hosam Naoum

We, the bishops of the worldwide Anglican Communion, called together by the Archbishop of Canterbury for the Lambeth Conference in 2022, affirm the vital historic presence of Christians in the Holy Land, the "Living Stones", where our Saviour Jesus Christ lived, died and was resurrected. In our commitment to the common good of all ethnic and religious communities in Israel, and to those in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, we reiterate our conviction that a two-state solution offers the best hope for a sustainable future for all, where both states live side by side in security peace and dignity of all their citizens.

Jerusalem remains a historic part of that future hope, and the existence and indeed flourishing of the Christian presence within Jerusalem should be respected and guarded. We therefore affirm that:

- Israel is a state that deserves the security and protections of a free state, but is also subject to the demands of international law just like any other state.
- A two-state solution to the aspirations for self-determination of the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza, and the end of the occupation, remains the best hope for a just and peaceful resolution to all peoples in the region.
- Jerusalem is a city that is precious to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Therefore, in accordance with the United Nations, we regard Jerusalem as an intrinsic issue with respect to any future political settlement for Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

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