

## Summary of Sir Vincent Fean's Talk at Living Stones Open Day November 2017

### Introduction

Father Jamal Khader, the Rector of Beit Jala Catholic Seminary, asked "What is the future for Palestinian Christians?" at the Embrace Conference in 2016. As a result of the Balfour Declaration the Jewish population of Palestine went from 84,000 to 500,000, from 11% to 31%. Britain held Palestine in a "sacred trust" from the League of Nations, but the British Mandate led from Ottoman rule to the Nakba, the Catastrophe. In 1948 75% of the Palestinian Christians were forced to leave their homeland. At that time the UK was the "empire on which the sun never sets" but has since been reduced in power. It retains more influence than it cares to acknowledge or exert.

The UK has a historic responsibility for the dispossession of the Palestinians and has yet to recognise the national right of the Palestinian people to self-determination and to a state of its own. This situation continues, despite the presence of numerous organisations/charities in the UK supporting the rights of Palestinians and providing services to the Palestinian people, especially the Christian community. The list includes Embrace the Middle East, Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, Christian Aid, Friends of the Holy Land Trust, Kairos UK and Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust.

We start from the premise that we believe in the Christian values of respect for life, dignity of life and justice, as our God is just and loving. We are all created in the image of God. Palestinian Christians suffer like all other Palestinians, but because of their small numbers, the economic difficulties created by the Occupation and the political instability push Christians towards emigration, and Christian Palestinians are spread around the world. We stand for justice, peace and reconciliation. Working for a just peace in Palestine/Israel is the responsibility of everyone. The occupation must end and international law should be respected. According to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the occupation is "unacceptable and unsustainable". Justice can never be achieved for anyone by creating injustice to other individuals or peoples. Justice can and should be inclusive. The State of Israel has the right to exist - but if we give Israel divine justification, the state becomes above the law. This is a land of two peoples (Israelis and Palestinians) and three religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). All five of these issues need to be reconciled. There needs to be an end to the occupation. The difficulties do not lead to Palestinian Christians leaving the country but lack of hope does. Hope is needed. There is little hope on the ground. To keep hope alive is the work of the Church and all of us. Hope starts here, where we live and act, but only if we act and persuade others to act with us. Pray, pay and play a part.

### Why do Christians in the Holy Land want Britain to recognise the State of Palestine?

#### *a. Church leaders in Jerusalem want us to do so*

The Jerusalem Christian churches' communiqué of 13/9/2011 supported President Abbas's bid for Palestinian statehood at the United Nations. "The Heads of the Churches feel the need to intensify our prayers and diplomatic efforts for peace between Palestinians and Israelis to consider this as the most appropriate time for such an opportunity". They agreed that -

1. A Two-State Solution serves the cause of peace and justice
2. Israelis and Palestinians must live each in their own independent states with peace and justice, respecting human rights according to international law.

3. Negotiations are the best way to resolve all outstanding problems between the two sides
4. Palestinians and Israelis should exercise restraint, whatever the outcome of the UN vote
5. Jerusalem should be a city in which all people can live in peace and tranquillity, a city to be shared by the two peoples and the three faiths.

They called upon decision-makers and people of good will “ to do their utmost to achieve the long-awaited justice, peace and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians so that the prophecy of David is lived again “Love and faithfulness meet together, righteousness and peace kiss each other” from Psalm 85 verse 10.

This communiqué was signed by Patriarch Michel Sabbah, Bishop Munib Younan and Bishop Theodosius of Sebastya. The late Father Michael Prior of the Vincentian Congregation and the Rev Naim Ateek have also written about this.

The Vatican did recognise Palestine in 2012. There is a role for church leaders to emulate the Vatican action and also to call for states to do so. We must work with others to uphold the Two-State Solution and penalise those opposed to it.

*b. Why should we do this?*

This is a long-standing and bitter conflict. There are two conflicting narratives, both deeply and sincerely held. There is no point in backing one story above the other - better to look beyond the two narratives to the relative well-being of the two peoples. By any yardstick, the Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories are far worse off than the Israeli neighbours across the Green Line, or in the settlements proliferating in East Jerusalem and the West Bank. 10% of the Israeli electorate are settlers – in the wrong place, and not in Israel.

The most blatant discrepancy in rights is in Gaza where 1.8 million people live in a space the size of the Isle of Wight. David Cameron said years ago “the situation in Gaza has to change. Humanitarian goods and people must flow in both directions. Gaza cannot and must not be allowed to remain a prison camp”. In the House of Commons he referred to Gaza as “a giant open prison” That was in 2010! Since then we have seen two more Gaza conflicts in 2012 and 2014. In 2012 the American Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton, said the situation in Gaza was unsustainable. True then and true now; worse now, since the 2014 conflict and Egypt’s almost permanent closure of the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt.

*c. What would a just peace look like?*

Crucially, Israel’s security would need to be as good as now - preferably better. Israelis have the right to say that a just peace means no rocket fire into Israel from Gaza. Currently there is a fragile cease-fire between Israeli and Hamas. It needs consolidating. The British Government would say (and I would agree) that a just peace entails mutual recognition on the basis of the June 1967 lines with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both States, a contiguous Palestinian State in East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. This would include freedom of worship for all three mono-theistic religions in the Old City and a bilateral agreement on the 1948 and 1967 refugees (offering them a Palestinian passport and new choices).

Today we are very far from that vision of a just peace. We are accelerating further away e.g. settle expansion, systematic prevention of Palestinian new buildings, ten years of closure of Gaza, accelerating drift towards one state in the Holy Land (demonstrated by what the Israeli government is doing but not saying) and effective apartheid with Israelis and Palestinians living separate and unequal lives. Former US Secretary of State Kerry was right to say that Israeli statehood is not in question. There will be a State of Israel for as far ahead as I can see. What will it look like? What will it stand for? Will it look like a state based on the rule of law? It can't be Jewish, democratic and absorb the territories and people occupied in 1967. Will it prosper at the expense of the rights of its Palestinian neighbours? That is not true prosperity, not true security for Israel, not a just peace for the two peoples. Right now that is what is on the cards, the status quo is moving rapidly in that bad direction.

*d. Does it matter to us in the UK?*

We could also ask this question about the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. Objectively it matters to our values of equity and international humanitarian law. It matters to our interests. UK security is best served by dispelling the impression of Israeli impunity and UK double standards. It matters subjectively and politically as things get in the way. U.K. policy decisions on Gaza, on settlements, are uncomfortable so they are not taken.

*e. What can we do to help bring about a just peace?*

There are quite a lot of things we should NOT do:

Do no harm

Don't leave it to others (the USA is necessary but not sufficient)

Don't leave it to the two parties

Don't buy the "no partner for peace" argument

Don't expect litigation to do the trick

Don't regard the Palestinians as saintly, the Fatah/Hamas split is sordid, venal and damaging

Don't underestimate the impact of 50 years of occupation on the occupied. It is debilitating. They need a sign of hope (such as Mohammed Assaf the singer and Arab Idol)

*What can we do?*

1. If you are able, go and see the situation for yourself
2. Make a noise . This conflict is moving rapidly in one direction, towards the one-state solution. We shall miss the two-state solution when it is gone, let's not let it go!
3. Advocate immediate recognition of the State of Palestine on the basis of the 1967 lines and equal rights in the two states, with like-minded European states. This would be more than a gesture. It would be a change in our mindset towards the conflict..

4. Support the UN Security Council against settlement expansion beyond rhetorical condemnation
5. Encourage President Obama to have the courage of his convictions
6. British fingerprints are all over this conflict and the world knows this. Let us act accordingly by having a policy of our own, not just waiting for the 7<sup>th</sup> cavalry to arrive, they are not imminent!
7. Speak truth to power and act in the long term interests of both peoples and ourselves
8. Act to preserve the two-state solution which is the only possible just peace
9. Support the Balfour Centenary Declaration, which asks the British Government to
  - a. Recognise immediately the State of Palestine alongside the State of Israel on the basis of the pre-June 1967 borders, as two-thirds of UN members have done
  - b. Uphold rigorously the Geneva Conventions which Britain co-wrote and ratified after World War II
  - c. Give practical effect to the relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, the Arab Peace Initiative and the Quartet Roadmap which Britain has endorsed
  - d. Require genuine freedom of worship without hindrance for all believers- Jewish, Muslim and Christian – at the holy sites in Jerusalem
  - e. Encourage West Bank/Gaza reunification on the basis of PLO agreements
  - f. Work with like-minded partners, including France, Germany, Sweden, Belgium and Ireland, to respect and safeguard the rights of both Palestinians and Israelis; with due and proportionate consequences for breaches of those rights, alongside incentives for those seeking to uphold them.

We British have a history, a responsibility and influence. We need to acknowledge our past, assess the present situation objectively, and advocate a better future for both peoples. For me, that better future comes in two sovereign states enjoying equal rights, with the U.K. recognising both states in the Holy Land. That's worth working for.