



Two years ago, I had the opportunity to visit Palestine and Israel. I had been there before, in 1999. At that time, Palestinians and Israelis, Jews and Arabs, Christians and Muslims were living a fragile peace that had been forged in Oslo, Norway

between Yasser Arafat and Yitzhak Rabin. I saw Arabs and Jews of European descent working and talking together. They probably wouldn't have considered themselves friends, but they were living lives together.

When I returned in 2019, I was appalled at the changes I saw. The Israeli government had, in fact, built an apartheid wall between the Palestinians and the Israelis. Where there weren't walls, there were signs warning Israelis not to enter areas under the authority of the Palestinians, because it would be "dangerous to your lives." The intermingling between the groups had been curtailed. Even Semitic Jews – those indigenous to the area – spoke to us about their mistreatment by new settlers, who judged them based on their skin color and native Arabic language.

We met with former Israeli Defense Force soldiers who shared the stories of human rights violations committed by the military and by Jewish settlers. They explained to us that it was the military's responsibility to protect all Israelis and no Palestinians. So, if a settler attacked a Palestinian, or entered their home, or stole the produce from their farm, the Palestinian had no protection. In fact, if they tried to defend their home or farm or family, then the military would come and arrest them. Soldier after soldier told us that the average Israeli doesn't know about these goings on, because they aren't allowed to interact with Palestinians any more. The international press is kept away. When settlers attack Palestinians, there is no recrimination. But, when the Palestinians try to stop the abuse, there is an immediate crackdown. This information was being given to us by Israeli Defense Forces!

It seemed incredible. And yet, when we went to Hebron and met the Palestinians there. We saw netting hanging over many of the market stalls. We saw broken glass and cups in the netting. They explained that the market stalls were owned by the citizens of Hebron (Palestinian), but Israeli settlers lived in the apartments above. Frequently, the settler children would drop full cups of soda and juice and even glass and other projectiles off the balconies. It was a game to them to see if they could hit a Palestinian. When we were walking through the town, we witnessed a settler woman yelling at our Palestinian tour guide. She screamed to a nearby soldier, who came and asked us to leave that street.

We also visited the Augusta Victoria hospital, which is owned and operated by the Lutheran World Federation. It is the only hospital that treats Palestinian children with cancer or kidney disease. However, for Palestinians to travel to the hospital, they must obtain a permit from the Israeli government. At the time of our visit, the Israeli government was only granting permits to the children – not their parents. So, LWR had a staff of international transporters to pick up and travel with the children for their treatments. To this day, it still brings tears to my eyes thinking of small children having to go to the hospital without their parents. God gave us all parents to be our caretakers. Those kids are robbed of that in their most vulnerable moments.

Having seen what I've seen, it would be easy for me to paint Israelis as bad and Palestinians as good, but I know that isn't true. Both sides have committed shocking atrocities. Both sides are created in the Image of God. Both sides have *nowhere else to go*. The only hope is for them to learn to live together with respect and dignity. Many people are already doing that. As your pastor, I encourage you to pray for their work toward reconciliation. This prayer is a good place to start:

A prayer for peace in the Holy Land from Christian Aid

Pray not for Arab or Jew, for Palestinian or Israeli,
but pray rather for ourselves, that we might not divide them in our prayers
but keep them both together in our hearts.

When races fight, peace be amongst us. When neighbours argue
peace be amongst us. When nations disagree peace be amongst us.

Where people struggle for justice let justice prevail.
Where Christ's disciples follow let peace be our way.

Amen.

*If you are interested in learning more about this very complicated conflict, I recommend the following books:

Light Force by Brother Andrew

I am a Palestinian Christian by Mitri Raheb

Blood Brothers by Elias Chacour

Bethlehem by Nicholas Blincoe

Chosen: Reading the Bible Amid the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict by Walter Brueggeman