

Statement from the House of Bishops on the war in Gaza

31/10/2023

An appeal for Peace

"They shall not learn war any more" (Isaiah 2.4)

Isaiah's vision of peace was spoken to a nation in confusion and social discord, divided and fearful. It was a vision of a peace that, though not yet realised, was always to be sought in faith through living in obedient righteousness and generous community in society. It is repeated numerous times in both the Old Testament and in the New as the ultimate destiny of creation, a state of peace, righteousness and harmony. As Christians we believe that the fulfilment of this vision and the gift of peace, individually and collectively, is found in Jesus Christ.

The War in Israel and Gaza

As Bishops of the Church of England we condemn the terrorist actions of Hamas on 7th October. Hamas has killed civilians without mercy, defiled their bodies, treated the most vulnerable brutally and taken hostages. Its continued indiscriminate rocket attacks against Israeli targets puts civilian structures and individuals at risk. All this is built on its denial of the right of Israel to exist. Hamas has oppressed the people it was originally elected to serve and has put them in harm's way by using them as human shields. Its actions are a violation of international law.

We must also reflect on the actions that Israel has taken in response. We affirm absolutely Israel's right to self-defence. We wholly support the duty of the Government of Israel to protect its citizens. We echo the concerns raised by President Biden about understandable anger and deep trauma not determining strategy and actions. Israel's right to self-defence needs to be exercised in adherence to the key principles of international humanitarian law.

The huge number of civilians killed in three weeks of bombardment, principally in Gaza City, and the immense suffering of a people herded south with no escape, are a humanitarian catastrophe. Even defined evacuation routes have been hit. Places of sanctuary and gathering have been bombed. Aid workers have been killed and wounded in large numbers. Critical services like healthcare, water, and electricity have been cut, while the military siege of Gaza has meant that no adequate humanitarian response has been possible.

Also gravely concerning are the reports of rising numbers of Palestinians killed in the West Bank by inhabitants of settlements which are illegal under international law. In mixed communities in Israel, where people have generally lived peacefully side by side, Israeli Arabs now find themselves subject to abuse, harassment and discrimination.

The United Kingdom, Islamophobia and antisemitism

In this country we have seen heightened tensions and threats to social cohesion. We are grateful for and stand with all those faith and community leaders who have made efforts at local and national level to maintain friendships and relationships across some of the sharpening political divides. We also condemn the rise in antisemitic and Islamophobic attacks.

Appeals by the Bishops of the Church of England

In the UK we call for intercommunity groups to maintain the closest possible contact. We pledge ourselves to pray for and take public actions in support of our fellow citizens of Jewish or Islamic faith. We recognise that within the church, too, we must acknowledge our own differences on this matter with care and generosity. The way individuals and communities act here and now could shape and influence what happens next. So, while we must condemn utterly those who foster fear and hatred in our communities, we must also galvanise and support those who are modelling something different and seeking the way of peace.

Recognising the troubled history, we nevertheless cling to the longstanding vision of a peaceful region where the peoples of Israel

and Palestine can live in security, justice, peace and harmony in their own lands, we therefore appeal:

- For Hamas to release all hostages unconditionally and unharmed.
- For immediate humanitarian pauses that will enable the wounded and the most vulnerable to be evacuated under ICRC or UN supervision, holding out hope for a ceasefire in the longer term.
- For safe areas to be established across Gaza with communications, food, water and medical support, under international supervision.
- For the Israeli Government to protect the population of the Occupied Territories and arrest anyone threatening them, without fear or favour.
- For all parties to this conflict to adhere to international humanitarian law and to take all necessary steps to minimise harm to civilians and civilian infrastructure.

We unite ourselves with the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem, Hosam Naoum, and Christian leaders in the Holy Land in calling for sustained and faithful prayer by all Christians for peace and justice.