

## OUT OF BETHLEHEM – A CRY.

*'We are not only invisible to the world; we are invisible in our own land'*

I have been haunted by those words ever since I heard them, uttered by Rifat Kassis a Palestinian Christian leader, who is Director of Kairos Palestine. I tried to imagine what it feels like - to be insignificant, irrelevant, ignored, unseen, unheard..not an accident but the ugly outcome of a deliberate strategy by those who govern you and your people...a strategy to silence the persistent cries of those long denied justice and basic human rights..a twisted Kafkaesque strategy which shames the world, flouting international law with impunity.

But this is a resilient people who refuse to die; whose voice will not be silenced. In July, Kairos Palestine with Global Kairos for justice launched a letter, addressed to the world Christian Community entitled, a Cry for Hope, subtitled: 'We cannot serve God and support the continuing oppression of the Palestinian people'. Already endorsed by 200 church leaders on five continents the cry now goes out to national/ local churches and to individual Christians to identify with the urgent call to decisive action set out in the letter, from those who are facing a threat to their very existence. If this sounds melodramatic or far-fetched, carefully consider the sober words of a group of Christian clergy from Bethlehem:

*In practice, annexation could be the final straw when it comes to a Christian presence in Palestine, as well as the national aspirations to live in freedom, independence, dignity and equality in our homeland in accordance with international law..we call on the world community to stop this severe injustice.*

On December 15<sup>th</sup> with the active support of the Dean, Lichfield Cathedral held a 2-hour vigil entitled 'Out of Bethlehem – a Cry'. Using the whole cathedral space, there were 'stations' for reflection and symbolic action; a 20-minute film from Bethlehem in the chapter house featuring the Tent of Nations and other examples of 'beautiful resistance'; at the icon of the weeping Madonna who 'breaks down walls', the opportunity to light beeswax candles from Bethlehem; a series of large boards in the north aisle with photographs depicting life behind the separation wall which surrounds the city and its people, alongside written extracts from Cry for Hope. The combination of word, music, symbol and art was very powerful. At the end of the 'pilgrimage' there was an opportunity to sign the letter. Over two-thirds of the 90 people present signed and were given a link to the on-line petition which will be

presented for approval to the WCC General Assembly in 2021. As the vigil came to an end, Fiona Haworth's stirring words in an Advent sermon were read with passion by the Dean;

*Imagine the land where Jesus walked, emptied of its Christian presence; the churches, silent monuments to a once living faith community; only pilgrims and tourists passing through. Imagine not being able to travel the short distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, to work, to study, to access healthcare, visit relatives – because you can't get a permit to cross the checkpoints. Imagine soldiers stopping you from farming your land; watching the olive trees your family has tended for generations being wantonly destroyed.*

*'We feel invisible in our own land'.* I'm still haunted by those words. Can we play our part this year in ensuring that Cry for Hope is heard and heeded, not only within the Community but in the congregations to which we belong?

View the three-page leaflet for the Vigil, and a the program for the event.

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\*The petition can be found on the sabeel-kairos website:

[www.sabeel-kairos.org.uk](http://www.sabeel-kairos.org.uk) Click on 'Taking Action' which will take you to 'Campaigns', the first of which is Cry for Hope with a link to the petition.

Warren Bardsley January 1<sup>st</sup> 2021