



Justice and Peace in Palestine and Israel

01/12/2025 | Stephen Cottrell

Reflecting on his recent visit to the region, the Archbishop of York delivered this speech at Lambeth Palace on Nov.18, 2025, at a gathering of ecumenical Church leaders and Christian agencies.

Sisters and brothers, it is a great honour and a privilege to be with you and to share these thoughts this morning from a visit that was both horrifying, harrowing but actually deeply beautiful as well. When Hamas attacked Israel, killing people and taking hostages, the whole world was outraged. This was a barbaric and hideous attack on innocent life.

Those of us who for many years have had huge sympathy and support for the plight of Palestinians and the terrible privations and injustices they have experienced cannot and will not condone such barbarism and our hearts go out to those who suffered. We acknowledge the fear and trauma this brings to Jewish people in Israel and across the world and we deplore the rise in antisemitism that has followed from it.

We also know that one horror cannot be undone by another. What is happening to Palestinians, Muslim and Christian, in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem is also barbaric and horrific and completely unacceptable by any humane reading of what has happened. Too much innocent blood has been spilled, and for no apparent purpose except growing fear, growing isolation, and mounting tension and despair.

Although I am sure all of us are relieved that there is some sort of ceasefire in Gaza, it is still a very long way from the peace that is needed, one that can only be made when there is justice for all people in Israel and Palestine. Jeremiah rightly warns that we should be wary of saying 'Peace, peace, when there is no peace' (see Jeremiah 6. 14).

As so many of you will know, better than me, from your own work in supporting the people of Gaza, the situation there is beyond imagining. Nearly two million people have been forced from their homes, the majority of which have been damaged or destroyed. Huge parts of Gaza are a wasteland – annihilated by two years of relentless bombing and wanton destruction. The Anglican-run Hospital in Gaza has three intensive care beds – three – to serve a surrounding population of one million people. And still the State of Israel is imposing restrictions on food and other aid getting into Gaza: a breach of international law that has become shockingly normalised over the past two years. Gaza remains, as I have said before, a stain on the conscience of the world.

Last week, as a guest of my dear friend and brother Archbishop Hosam, the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem, I visited the Holy Land on a pilgrimage of prayer and solidarity with the Christian Church in Palestine and Israel and to see and experience for myself what is it like for people living in the West Bank. Other Bishops have done similar visits over the last 2 years – most notably the bishops of Chelmsford, Norwich, Southwark and Gloucester, and I'm grateful to them for their efforts. Much of what I will say today only builds on what they have said, and echoes their own conclusions.

After visiting Bethlehem, and accompanied by representatives of the YMCA who do amazing work with traumatised people in the area, we visited Palestinian Bedouin communities in the South

Hebron Hills. I saw for myself the aggressive and intimidating impact of settler encroachment on Palestinian homes, and settler violence against Palestinian people, all done in violation of the law, both Israeli law and international law, and yet carried out with impunity.

I met a wonderfully gracious man whose brother was shot to death by an Israeli settler a few weeks ago. The killer - there is no doubt as to his identity, the murder was videoed - was arrested and then shortly afterwards released without charge. In this village, now cut in two by settler encroachment - which has been declared illegal but the local community cannot get that order enforced - instead their own homes are subject to a demolition order. So, the reality is of large mobile settler homes parked literally right up against the boundary of Palestinian homes, surrounded by razor wire, policed by young men in balaclavas and military uniforms, holding what looked to me like automatic weapons - a local and unaccountable militia aggressively policing the land they have just stolen.

When we visited the other part of the village, we were told that the army had been called for and it was best we leave.

Returning to our van on a Saturday afternoon, an army armoured vehicle had arrived alongside the militia and soldiers with guns were waiting for us and blocking our path.

We moved on. It was for me, who hadn't experienced anything like this before, a bit real. Deeply intimidating, very frightening. We moved on.

Driving a few miles further into the South Hebron Hills we were due to visit the home of one of the young women who works as a counsellor with the YMCA. Her parents, who themselves had recently been victims of settler violence, welcomed us into their home. As we sat down to eat, we got another message that the police, and what I can only call the local militia, had turned out again, perhaps following us, and again we must leave.

It was a painfully poignant moment. We were just about to sit down and eat with a family. The mother's right arm was badly bruised, perhaps broken from the violence meted upon her in the dark of one night recently when settlers had come to intimidate and frighten her and her husband. She had made some beautiful bread and cakes for us with her left hand. But she was denied the simple kindness of breaking bread with us; and we were denied the gift of her hospitality.

We returned to our van.

The Police told us it wasn't safe for us to be there, we should go. When we asked why, the Police Officer himself admitted that what made the area unsafe was not our visit but the violence settlers resorted to.

We moved on again.

As I said in my sermon in St. Andrew's, Ramallah, the following day, it was as if just as Jesus sat down to break bread with Cleopas and his companion at Emmaus, the police had turned up and moved him on.

What we experienced that afternoon, frightening and intimidating though it was, however, is just a tiny, tiny example of what Palestinian people in the occupied West Bank are experiencing every day.

They are being forced out of their homes and off their land. All basic human dignity and freedoms are being stripped away. Their freedom of movement is becoming more and more constrained. There are checkpoints everywhere, and as settlers build their homes, so they build their fences

and barricades around them, requiring those whose land they have taken to get their permission to travel through it. Indeed in recent months Palestinian villages have been enclosed with fences and gates put up that are used by the Israelis to control access. This is the reality of Area C.

It is truly horrific. It is a deliberate and unacceptable denial of human dignity and human rights. It is happening today and it is accelerating.

On the Sunday evening, we met with two members of the organisation, two amazing people, Rabbis for Human Rights. They bear witness to the fact that, of course, both in Israel and around the world, Jewish people are as horrified as everyone else about this situation. They were also clear that change can only come if there is justice for everyone who lives in Palestine and Israel. They are of course right – this isn't about taking sides but standing up for the human dignity of everyone and ensuring that everyone regardless of religion, ethnicity or gender can live in peace and security. And this must always be our aim.

While talking with them, we asked what language they would use to describe what is happening. They used very strong terms. First, they described the experience of all Palestinian people living in the occupied Palestinian territory as being like apartheid. Secondly, they said that what had happened in parts of Gaza through the most horrific violence, and what was happening in parts of the occupied West Bank, especially Area C through the forced displacement of Palestinian communities, was ethnic cleansing.

This is, indeed, strong language. It is not language to be used lightly. It is language that can easily be misunderstood or, worse, weaponised against Jewish people who are not to blame for this, especially Jewish communities here. But, like my fellow bishops who have travelled before me, having seen what is happening, and heard the testimony of Jewish, Christian and Muslim people, sisters and brothers, I have no other words.

If you are a Palestinian living in the West Bank, you are denied basic human rights and freedoms. You live in a deeply discriminatory political regime that intentionally and clearly prioritises the political, legal and social rights of Israeli settlers over Palestinians living in the same territory. You experience that humiliating, violent and systemic discrimination on the basis of your racial and national identity. What else can you call that but something like apartheid?

Just to be clear, I'm not saying that the West Bank is as South Africa once was. Apartheid South Africa was apartheid South Africa and the West Bank is the West Bank. The situations are different. What I am suggesting is, as Rabbis for Human Rights and many other Human Rights groups have concluded, that the situation I experienced in the West Bank meets the definition of apartheid as set out in the 1976 International Convention on the Suppression and Punishment of Crimes of Apartheid. I am not saying that Israel is an apartheid state, but I am saying that Israel's system of occupation constitutes apartheid.

And if the impact and effect of settler encroachment and violence forces you from your home, and forces you from your land and wipes the memory of your presence from the land, and if the Israeli government places demolition orders on your home, and if the law does nothing to protect you and, worse, defends those who oppress you, then what else can we call that, but ethnic cleansing?

Again, let me be clear I don't use this language lightly, but the International Criminal Court has clear and precise definitions of what constitutes ethnic cleansing which I think have been met both in parts of Gaza, especially the buffer zone, and parts of the West Bank, especially Area C.

And if, in Gaza, the violence meted out is indiscriminate and sustained; if restrictions on food and medical supplies are imposed for months on end; if snipers target children and starving people queuing for food; if the healthcare system is systematically brought to the brink of destruction; and

if homes, places of worship, museums and the whole fabric of a society is destroyed, then these are genocidal acts as defined by the 1948 Genocide Convention. And that was the conclusion of a United Nations Commission of Inquiry in September this year.

I know this language will be contested, but I think we do no one any favours by pretending it is something else. Let me be absolutely clear – we have a profound responsibility to combat antisemitism and discrimination against Jewish people so it is imperative that we all say - again and again - that it is the Israeli Government that is to blame and not Judaism or the Jewish people and this distinction is really important – these are political decisions, political matters and we have to choose different paths.

On Sunday afternoon, I met with a number of representatives from the Christian community in Ramallah. They all told the same story of humiliation, diminishment, trauma, and fear. At the Eucharist in the morning, I shared in the blessing of a newborn baby – Dina. These things are always very beautiful, it was very beautiful. What can be more beautiful but also more vulnerable, than a newborn child.

What hope is there for that child? What future for that little girl?

The women from this community gave me a letter, a cry from their heart that they would not be forgotten, that their voices would be heard and their plight would be known. They spoke with astonishing grace and dignity.

They do feel let down and forgotten by the rest of the world, and, as Palestinian Christians, by the churches of the world, that here in the land of the Holy One, those who follow him are being squeezed out of existence and forced from their homes. I promised those women I would tell their story and enable their voices to be heard. This is what they said...

“Since the time of our Lord Jesus Christ, we - Palestinian women - have lived under empire and oppression. Like the women of the New Testament, our ancestors endured Roman occupation, poverty, and marginalisation, yet remained steadfast in faith. For over two millennia, we have survived foreign rule and injustice, sustained by the words of Matthew 10.28 ‘Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.’ We know that, as before we shall endure and remain faithful despite death and destruction around us.

“We are reliving the stories of our grandmothers, rewriting our own through the Holy Spirit. Like the Saints who suffered before us, our pain sanctifies not only us, but also the world through divine revelation.”

The letter then goes on to list how these astonishing women are sanctified when they have to flee their homes like the Virgin Mary and the Holy Family fled to Egypt; when their husbands and sons are humiliated at checkpoints like the labourers in the scripture waiting for work; when they are denied medical treatment and have to wait like the paralysed man at the pool of Bethesda; and when they endure punishment just for being Palestinian, like the blind man of John 9 of whom Jesus said, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned, but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him.’”

And their letter continues -

“If the works of God are to be displayed through our suffering, we accept his will with faith. Yet we urge the Church to recognise its responsibility in enabling the injustice brought upon us... and we ask that you and the Church confront this truth - not symbolically, but through concrete repentance and action.... We faithful women of Palestine continue to pray and to give, like the widow who offered her last coin, trusting that if God is with us, who can be against us? Our endurance and

faith are not only acts of survival but of witness - to teach the world what steadfast love looks like.”

And then they spoke directly to me -

“May your Grace carry our cry to the heart of the Church: that faith without justice is hollow, and prayer without courage is silence. Let our voices, joined in Spirit, echo the Gospel’s eternal truth – ‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.’”

Which is what I am trying to do now.

Later that afternoon I met with Lulu and Sammy, whose daughter Layan – her story is quite well known in the west – is imprisoned without trial and without any real charge; her so-called crime, membership of an environmental group while she was at university, which has now been retrospectively branded a terrorist group. Against all the norms of international law, she is incarcerated away from her homeland, and no one is allowed to visit her.

What can and should we do about all of this? How do we respond to the heart cry of these courageous Christians sisters?

First, we must continue together to raise our voices in support of the Palestinian people and urge our government and the governments of the world, and especially, I think, the governments in Europe, to unite and to move beyond a ceasefire in Gaza to a proper plan for peace, giving self-determination and self-government to Palestine, something like a two state solution. This is not in Gaza a real estate opportunity, merely replacing one kind of subjugation with another; the people of Palestine must have their own land protected and then be enabled to flourish.

And this must be true for the people of Israel. A secure Israel is also vital for peace. A place where Jewish people can live safely, but honouring the borders and self-determination of others.

Therefore, as Christians here in the UK, we must strain every sinew to ensure that we work for peace and justice in this holy land. We should continue to press our Governments to use their power effectively and boldly. Sanctions on settlement-related enterprises, banning food from settlements, and including territorial clauses in trade agreement are all steps that can and should be taken.

Our own Government has taken some important steps in this direction over the last year as a result of our efforts but it must go further. And I accept that our pleas will have greater weight if Churches better aligned their own investment strategies with the calling to be peace builders. I look forward to the Church of England’s General Synod on the Diocese of Carlisle motion and for us to have the conversation we need about how to achieve this.

Jerusalem itself must be protected as a place of sanctuary, safety and flourishing for each of the three Abrahamic faiths; free to worship and free to live alongside each other, even daring to hope that peace and peaceful coexistence in Jerusalem might be a model not just for Israel and Palestine, but for the whole world. Could the leaders of the three Abrahamic faiths here in the UK make such a statement of intent?

But there is a broader danger that spins out of the Israel/Palestine situation. As the bishops of Gloucester, Chelmsford, Southwark and Norwich noted in their joint response to the ceasefire deal, for too long the international community has been complicit in the neglect of international law and the protection of basic human rights in the region. If we tolerate this here then where will we tolerate it next? So, where international law has been broken and rights denied, those responsible must be held accountable, even after the war’s end.

And right now, where next for Palestinian people? Where next for the slow death of the Christian community in the Holy Land? The post-war consensus is under threat as never before and Israel-Palestine throws this into sharp relief.

And if we allow the ideologies of hatred and separation, and the dehumanising of one set of people, then what will this do to our own humanity, and who might we choose to turn on, and who will turn on us? The tectonic plates are shifting, and there is a real danger that the values, standards and rights we have cherished will be eroded and overridden to our shame and detriment.

In each of the holy sites I visited, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and of course at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, I was received with joyful and gracious hospitality, by Orthodox and Roman Catholic sisters and brothers alike.

This is the spiritual and theological foundation upon which our vision for peace must be built: for as Christians, as we come closer to Christ, we also come closer to each other. We see the face of Christ in each other. Or if we find that too hard, see the face of others reflected in the eyes of Christ, who looks on each of us with the same steadfast, tender and compassionate gaze of love. For it is Jesus Christ himself who makes the hero of some of his most famous stories people of another faith: a good Samaritan, a Syro-Phoenician woman, a Roman centurion, and the one leper who comes back and says thank you is a Samaritan too. We must also, therefore, see and honour the image of God in our sisters and brothers of other faith communities.

It is this theological vision which is what our world needs and is the greatest bulwark against the erosion of human rights and human dignity, which is the image of God and the face of Christ in every human person. This is the Christian vision, and the recovery of that vision in our social and political discourse can enable us, as those great women in Ramallah asked us, to hunger and search for justice and build peace in the land of the Holy One - and in our own neighbourhoods as well, where we see an increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia and where we are less and less trusting of each other, and this threatens to tear us apart.

I know our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters will have themes in their own traditions that seek to bring us together, not in a way that dissolves our difference of belief, but that recognises we all need to flourish.

This is a big challenge. As the Bishop of Gloucester reflected following her visit last year, the collective trauma of centuries that has been visited upon the Jewish people, the trauma of all people who live in Israel-Palestine, holds a stupefying power and grip. This is an enormously painful and complex conflict there - no easy answers. But I know that what is happening today, what I saw and heard and what I experienced means that what the people of this region are enduring is not going to lead to peace. It is what my fellow bishops concluded following their own visits and I would urge you all, if possible, to visit and see for yourself the reality today. Things must change, and this will take moral clarity and moral courage from everyone. We need both a renewed call for prayer and a call for action, which may emerge from this important meeting today.

The peace of Jerusalem, peace in Israel and Palestine, must mean peace and justice for everyone – be they Christian, Muslim or Jewish. And we in the west, and in the church of this nation, we must be bold and clear in proclaiming God's judgement and God's truth.

[*please see also:* [Statement on comments made by the Archbishop of York](#)]

Stephen Cottrell, since 2020 Archbishop of York. For further biographical details, please [see here](#).

Source: [The Archbishop of York](#).