

All Saints, Tilford . Sunday, August 31 2025

The problem of Israel/Palestine.

A quick burst of history...

In 63 BC the Romans took over Palestine, and, one century later, when the Jews revolted against their occupation, between AD66 and AD70 the Romans smashed Jerusalem, razed the Temple to the ground, deported and enslaved thousands of Jews, and the Promised Land was to all intents and purposes deprived of its Jewish population. For the next 1,800 years the Jews did not have a country to call their own. And although Christianity had become the major religion in Palestine following the Jewish dispersal, the Arab Muslim Invasion of the 7th century ensured that Islam became the dominant religious and cultural force for the next 1300 years. And then in the last decades of the 19th century, because of the rise in anti-semitism, a political movement called 'Zionism' developed amongst European Jews. Its chief political aim was to restore Jews to the Promised Land. But in Palestine, other people had already been living there for centuries. The population was 88% Muslim and 9% Christian.

Then in the early years of the 20th century, because of the pogroms in Russia, over 30,000 Russian Jews emigrated to what was then called Palestine. Then, as the Ottoman Empire teetered on the edge of collapse, in 1917, Arthur Balfour, the British Foreign Secretary, having come under considerable pressure from a Jewish lobby, and out of personal conviction, drafted a document which bore his name. The Balfour Declaration stated that the British Government supported the creation of a 'homeland for the Jewish people' in Palestine. It didn't define what its territorial boundaries should be, it did not call the homeland a state, nor did it say what the rights of the Palestinian Arabs were. It was intentionally vague... and was a recipe for confusion.

More and more Jews began to emigrate to Palestine and by the 1930s there was an Arab revolt against the incomers. And, of course, following the Holocaust of World War II, the demand for a safe homeland for Jews received greater international moral support. Meanwhile, civil war between the Palestinians and the Jews broke out. In 1947 Britain ceded control of the Palestinian territories to the UN, and the UN stated that there should be a two-state solution: there should be a Palestinian State and a Jewish State. The State of Israel was created in 1948, but no Palestinian State was formed because the Arab states in the UN voted against it. Seven Arab states then declared war against the nascent state of Israel, but were defeated, and about 50% of the Palestinian population became refugees.

Since then there have been over 20 wars and military operations between Israelis and Palestinians and their proxies. The State of Israel has taken, or allowed, more and more land to come under Israeli control, and has unified Jerusalem.

Now that is an **incredibly oversimplified account** of two thousand years of history. In essence it is about a piece of land about the size of Wales, over which two groups are in conflict with each other, each side backed by its political and military allies.

There is, of course a religious element to this: religious Jews regard the land as having been given to them by God; the Muslim Arabs see the Jews as infidel incomers who have taken their land and threaten the existence of their holy places. They believe, with some of their powerful allies, that Israel should be wiped off the map of the Middle East.

It's important to recognize that not all Jews in Israel are religious, and even those that are, divide into different factions; the ultra-Orthodox, the Haredi, for example, are excused military service but other religious Jews are not excused. And the secular Jews believe, given the millennia of Jewish persecution, that they have a political and moral right to live in safety in their own land. Both elements in Israel, the religious and the secular, make much of the fact that Israel is a democracy and has a Free Press, whereas that cannot be said of any of the Muslim nations which surround them..

Which brings us to where we are today. And by the way, those Palestinians who are Christians are now a tiny minority within Palestine, many of them having fled to South America, and Chile, in particular, the USA, and Canada. In the West Bank and Jerusalem there are about 50,000 Christians, and in Gaza only about 1,300. The Anglican Archbishop is a Palestinian. Compare those numbers with the roughly 5 million Muslim Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank.

So, as we know, the situation today is a terrible mess and there's terrible suffering...

And what can we do?

Obviously, we can educate ourselves about the geo-political situation...and that will enhance our ability to counter misinformation and propaganda. Truth matters.

Obviously, we can and should pray. It's not that by praying we are expecting to change God's mind, what we are doing as we pray is aligning ourselves with the reconciling love of God as we see it revealed in Jesus Christ; through prayer we are expressing solidarity with God and with our fellow human beings... whoever they are and whatever their beliefs..

And thirdly, we can contribute to the cause of peace and reconciliation by becoming peacemakers locally, whether that be within our own families, with our neighbours, or wherever anger and disaffection rear their ugly heads. Reconciliation is part of our Christian DNA...as Jesus proclaimed:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God