

PRAY AND REFLECT: PRAYERS FOR PEACE IN THE HOLY LAND

In his Easter Message (Urbi et Orbi) Pope Francis said: “My thoughts go to the victims of the many conflicts worldwide, beginning with those in Israel and Palestine”. He continued: “May the risen Christ open a path of peace for the war-torn peoples of those regions”.



Anne O'Connor reports: As our parish response to the conflict in the Holy Land, the Pray and Reflect Group at St Vincent's Altrincham held a candlelit service on Tuesday 30 April to pray for lasting peace and reconciliation in that troubled region.

The liturgy followed the format of recent services in the parish which offer a time of stillness and peace inspired by the story in 1 Kings 19:11–13. God speaks to the prophet Elijah but his voice is not to be found in the power of the hurricane, the roar of the earthquake or the heat of the fire. Instead, God reveals Himself in the gentle whisper of the breeze. Here, in the quiet, Elijah hears God speak in a small still voice.

In these services of prayer and reflection we too can listen to the gentle whisper of God's voice and speak to Him in the silence of our hearts.

Our service opened with an extract from a homily by Rev Dr Munther Isaac, pastor of the Lutheran Christmas Church Bethlehem, given on 23 December 2023 and entitled 'Christ in the Rubble.' The back page of our service booklet featured a photo of the moving image of 'The Cross in the Rubble' from that church.



Rev Isaac said: “If Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza. When we glorify pride and richness, Jesus is under the rubble... When we rely on power, might and weapons, Jesus is under the rubble... When we justify the bombing of children, Jesus is under the rubble...

... He is at home with the marginalized, the suffering, the oppressed and displaced. This child is our hope and inspiration. We look and see him in every child killed and pulled from under the rubble.

... Our message to the world is simply this: the genocide must stop NOW.”



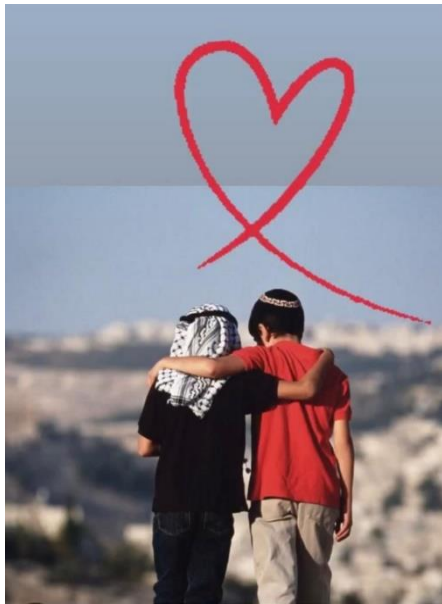
As we prayed and reflected on these words a heart-rending lament echoed through the church sound system. ('Traditional Palestinian Lament' from Garth Hewitt's album 'Stealing Jesus Back')

Rev Isaac's theme was continued in Jan Sutch Pickard's prayer 'Among the Rubble': "... that peace with justice will prevail in the land that we call holy." (Pax Christi)

Our next words came from Ann Farr, Chair Pax Christi England and Wales: “We watch the haunting images and the news reports and for most of us there are no words left to describe the endless pain, suffering, violence, humiliation and death. We see the occupied and the occupier; the military might and the helpless; the appeals for the return of the captives; the appeals for water, the mocking by the soldiers, the wailing of the bereaved, mothers holding their dead children, the burials and those left in the rubble.

We don't know what to say any more to our friends there, except that we pray and stand with them.”

The central part of the service was adapted from 'A Service for Peace in The Holy Land: The Light of God Shines in the Darkness' compiled by Rev Lisa Degrenia a United Methodist Minister and resource provider based in Florida. There was a short scripture reading from John's Gospel 1:1-5. After this, a candle was lit at the altar steps, followed by the Taizé refrain 'Bless the Lord, my soul,' a prayer and a line or two from a psalm. This pattern was repeated a further three times, ending with the Taizé refrain.



An extract from Pope Francis' Urbi et Orbi Message for Easter 2024 concluded with the words: "Peace is never made with arms, but with outstretched hands and open hearts".

The photo opposite, which was on the front cover of the service booklet, complements Pope Francis' prayer. Afterwards many of those present said how much they like this image as a sign of hope.

Our next piece of music was a recording of John Rutter's choral composition 'A Ukrainian Prayer' sung by the Cambridge Singers and written in 2022 as his response to the war in Ukraine. This poignant melody fitted well with the idea of 'lament' and was first used three years ago in our Good Friday Evening Prayers around the Cross which now occur annually in the parish.

A beautiful prayer by Rabbi Hanan Schlesinger followed. Rabbi Schlesinger is one of the founders of Roots, a group which nurtures understanding, non-violence, and transformation between Israelis and Palestinians.

This is part of his prayer: "Our Father in heaven, Creator of all humanity, whose mercies are upon all His creatures and whose love is withheld from none, who has sanctified the Holy Land and placed here both Palestinians and Jews, Christians, and Muslims, let our unique and particular covenants with You never blind us to Your love of all Your creatures.

... May our love of You, of our nation and of the land never prevent us from loving the other peoples of this land of Yours, and may it never prevent us from honouring their love of this land.

... Help us to heal our suspicions, fears, and hatreds and to aspire towards harmony and brotherhood.

.... Help us to remember that our fates are intertwined and that our destiny is to live together; that one people's pain, suffering, loss, or restriction will only bring the same for the other; and that the welfare and the happiness of one depends on the welfare and the happiness of the other."

We closed by praying together a CAFOD prayer for peace in Israel and Gaza, followed by one from St Augustine:

Watch now, dear Lord,
with those who wake or watch or weep tonight;
and give your angels charge over those who sleep.

Tend your wounded ones, O Christ; rest your weary ones,
bless your dying ones, soothe your suffering ones,
shield your joyous ones and all for your love's sake.
Amen.

The final blessing was from Rev Lisa Degrenia, 'In the Light of God's Love':

Go now in peace, to love and to serve.
Go, with the blessing and power of our great and glorious Creator
to share light and make peace.
Amen.



Participants always remark how powerful our Pray and Reflect sessions are for helping them listen to God in the silence and this was no exception.