

Three Women in Palestine - Eleonor, Lina & Sara¹

(Presentation for Footscray Baptist Church on March 3rd, 2024)

Palestine, the land of Jesus birth. The place he lives, carries out his ministry, calls his disciples, is betrayed, denied, sentenced and dies. It is where he cleanses the temple in our reading today.

We have heard a lot about Palestine and Palestinians recently, especially in the last five months during the war in Gaza.

Palestine lies at the crossroads of the continents of Asia, Africa and Europe on land that for over 3,000 years has been significant to Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

At the time of Jesus, it was part of the Roman empire and then was ruled by Muslims, the Crusaders, Egyptians, Mongols and the Ottomans. In May 1948 the state of Israel was created and after a few skirmishes, in 1967 the Palestinians claimed independence of 22% of the land they had prior to 1948. This is mainly what we know as the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. This area is less than 10% of the size of Tasmania. About 5 million Palestinians live in Palestine and Israel.

This weekend we have just heard that about 30,000 Palestinians have died in the current conflict, many of them children.

Jesus cleaned out those in the temple who were exploiting the little people, standing up for those who could not stand up for themselves.

The reading we have from Ephesians was chosen by the Palestinian women who have prepared most of the prayers we have used today. Their message to us is:

We call on you, sisters and brothers in every part of the world, to bear with us in love. We call upon you to unite your prayers with ours for a just and peaceful solution that would bring an end to human suffering. We call upon you to stand in solidarity with us to achieve security and peace for all people around the world.

The artwork they have shared with us is by Halima Aziz and depicts three Palestinian women who are praying together in a peaceful place in nature. The olive tree behind them is a sign of everlasting and abundant life because these trees can live for thousands of years. The women are wearing traditional Palestinian dress—the tatreez embroidered dress and the white scarf. The golden roots show that Palestinians will always exist and as they exist, they will work for their rights and freedom. Poppy flowers remind Palestinians of loved ones who have died for their country. The key hung around the neck represents the hope of return to Palestine.

The olive tree is very common in Palestine, and almost half the land is used to grow olives. Olive trees can live for thousands of years.

In a moment we will hear the stories of three Palestinian women and the effect the current war is having on their people, in their own words. Listen for references to the olive trees in their stories.

¹ Please note the stories of the three women have been taken from ‘*I Beg You... Bear With One Another in Love*’ World Day of Prayer, Prepared by the WDP Committee of Palestine for March 1st, 2024. Copyright © 2008-2023 World Day of Prayer International Committee, Inc.



My name is Eleonor.

I am a Palestinian Christian – a member of the Greek Orthodox Church in the Holy Land. I come from a deeply rooted old Jerusalem family. My skin is wrinkled like the trunk of an olive tree.

Like the olive trees, I have witnessed wars and violence.

In the early 19th century, my great grandfather established St. George's Orthodox Church, which enabled Christians living outside the city walls to have a place to worship.

That church remained in existence until the Catastrophe, or
Nakba, of 1948, when 750,00 Palestinians were forced to flee, disperse and become refugees. My family included. Due to heavy shelling and bombardment, my parents ran for their lives.

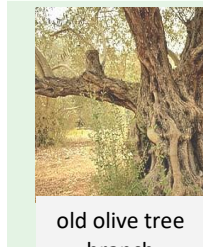
They took shelter at my mother's cousin's home, hoping to return soon to their original home and St. George's Church. That never happened. Today, my parents' home and St. George's Church have become Confederation House, an Israeli cultural centre.

Prior to fleeing, my parents' Jewish neighbours offered to store the treasures of the church, including icons and precious communion cups. They promised to safeguard my parents' property and belongings until the family's return.

As my brothers and I were growing up, my parents remembered their neighbours graciously as they waited for the big day of return. They imagined themselves collecting these sacred items and thanking these neighbours for keeping their promise. Sadly, my parents have passed away without realizing this dream. And yet, I vividly remember that, despite their pain and suffering over all they had lost, my parents were always thankful and spoke kindly about these Jewish neighbours. My parents taught me how to bear with others in love, always remembering to be grateful for those who do good.

As I have gone through life as a Palestinian Christian, I have chosen to be fully engaged with all members of the community at local and global levels. I learned from my parents' example how important it is to stay together with others, even when life is harsh and difficult.

I have designed and implemented humanitarian aid and development programs, as well as social and community projects. These served all people, regardless of religion or ethnicity, gender, status or need. I could have left the country of my roots, but I made the choice to stay and live out Jesus' commandment to love others as he loved me.



My name is Lina.

On May 11 2022, I lost my Aunt Shireen, a famous journalist who was killed in Jenin. For me, Aunt Shireen was like the branch of an olive tree, resisting the strong winds that threatened to erase the truth of Palestinian experience.

When Aunt Shireen died, Palestine lost an icon, a legend, and a famous Al Jazeera journalist.

And yet, Shireen was more; she was also my aunt, my godmother at baptism and my best friend. Shireen had been my role model for as long as I can remember.

She was also a role model to many young Palestinian women.

For 25 years, Aunt Shireen dedicated her life to telling the stories of Palestinian experience, and to being the voice of truth. She entered every house in Palestine and the Arab world through the TV screen.

Many people did not know that my aunt was a Palestinian Christian. Shireen's faith led her to bear with all in love, despite differences in faith traditions. She stood with all who were being harmed. She struggled for both Muslims and Christians to have access to the holy sites in Jerusalem. Her truth telling was also a way of bearing with the occupiers in love.

My name is Sara.

Sometimes I feel like the leaf on an old olive tree, connected down to the roots.

I was born and raised in Jerusalem as a Lutheran Christian. Life as a Palestinian woman surely has been, and still is challenging.

My grandparents used to live in Jaffa. They grew up there before 1948, living alongside other Christians, Muslims and Jews.

When the state of Israel was created in 1948, the Israeli forces came to my grandparents' home and forced them to leave. My grandparents became refugees in Jordan.

Many years later, my grandparents came for a visit to Jerusalem and my parents took me on a trip to Jaffa. They were excited to show me the home they used to live in. Everything had changed except for the trees, which helped us to identify the place. Sadly, the people currently living in the house were hostile towards us. I was quite young, but I remember them shouting. My grandpa was trying to explain to them that this used to be his house. However, they refused to hear any part of it and chased us away.

Later in time, when I visited my grandparents in Jordan, my grandma showed me the door keys that her mum had kept when leaving their house. She kept the keys with the hope that one day they would be able to return to their home. Sadly, this is the case for many.

Even today, people are still being put out of their homes.

Many have kept their keys with the hope of returning, a hope that is passed on through the generations.

I know that the tree from where I came is strong and resilient.

I can bear with others in love. My grandparents showed me the way.

I hope hearing from these women gives some awareness to what is happening in Palestine at the moment and might lead us to do as Jesus did and stand up for the 'little people'.

A concluding prayer:

God of all the world, we give thanks for Eleonor's story of bearing with others in humble love, expressing that love in commitment to community.

Loving Jesus, we give thanks for Lina's story about her aunt who was able to bear with all people and tell their truths in love because of her Christian faith.

Holy Spirit, we give thanks for Sara's story of bearing with others in love as her grandparents taught her to do.