



We proclaim a crucified Christ

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1 June 2024

Feast of St Justin Martyr

To the Clergy and Laity of the Archdiocese of Melbourne

Dear friends in Christ,

My greetings to you, in Christ Jesus, Prince of Peace.

You may be aware that I was overseas for the better part of the past two weeks, though I had been silent on where I was heading prior to leaving. Now that I am home, I would like to let you know that I have been in the Holy Lands of Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon on a pilgrimage of solidarity, first with Rabbi Yaakov Glasman AM, Senior Rabbi of the St Kilda Shule (in Israel) and then Bishop Antoine-Charbel Tarabay OLM, Maronite Bishop of Australia (in Lebanon). There was a need to keep quiet about this before going, as there were security issues to attend to, and public knowledge of travel between the two countries would likely have prevented entry into either country.

The pilgrimage allowed for significant opportunities in prayer, engagement and learning through that part of the world where, in the past, Christ walked and ministered, and where, today, the great Abrahamic religions and historical cultures live side-by-side, in very complex, and presently tragic ways.

It was particularly powerful for me to stand with my friend, Rabbi Yaakov, at the Western Wall of the Temple in Jerusalem, and to pray together Psalm 150 and Isaiah 2.1-5. Likewise, it was a moment of profound blessing to be in prayer with Bishop Antoine before the great Lebanese holy men and women, especially St Charbel and St Rafqa.

I had the honour of meeting with both the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pizzaballa OFM, and the Maronite Patriarch of Antioch, Cardinal al-Rahi OMM. These were both spiritual encounters and moments of insight. These men of God, and the Churches they lead, deserve our prayer and support.

You cannot go to the Holy Lands today without facing into the complex and tragic realities that are currently playing out. For example, it was (obviously) impossible to travel into Gaza. It also proved too difficult to spend any significant time in the West Bank. Nonetheless, opportunities did emerge to engage with people who live in these wounded locations, as well as the suffering of Israel and the beleaguered of Lebanon.

A chance meeting in Jerusalem with two religious sisters who had only just come from the Holy Family Parish compound in Gaza City, having been living there through the first 6 months of the war, was humbling and revealing. The difficulty of living in the compound was harrowing to hear, yet the level of hope that they continue to hold was telling. Similarly, speaking with a victim of the devastating explosion in the Port of Beirut of 2020 opened up the difficulty of coming to the truth of what occurred, so as to find justice for those effected. (I carried home with me a simple wooden cross made from the debris of the explosion, given to our local Church by the Archbishop of Beirut.)

Amid what might seem a complete breakdown in society, based on ancient hatreds, there are hidden jewels of goodness and rightness, and signs of reconciliation. In Jerusalem, we met with a group of senior clinicians and medical administrators who have established a program of palliative care – the only common endeavour in Israel – jointly led by a mixed group of Jewish, Muslim and Christian leaders. This program, the Rozana Project, is available to any person – no matter their religious or cultural background – in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories. It seeks to build peace through healthcare by building bridges between people. In Lebanon, the local Caritas agency has developed programs of education and jobs training that aids anyone in need in a society beset by economic crisis and political impasse.

There are many other stories to be told of these past few days, and I will look to write a more significant piece on my experience in the Holy Lands of Israel, the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon. At this immediate moment, I simply wish to bring an initial impression to you of this pilgrimage of solidarity. But I do wish to offer one final impression now. My time away on pilgrimage was a blessing. In all the tragic complexity of what is occurring politically, and the wounds that are festering consequently, there are nonetheless signs of hope, actions of goodness and people of welcome and hospitality – of us, and of each other.

It can be so easy to reduce what is currently unfolding in these lands to sound bites on social media, usually tinged by ideology and political manipulation. The hostages must be released; a ceasefire must be found – these are the first things needed. But then, there is a need for peacebuilding and truth-telling. Among the people I met on the pilgrim road, there are active agents for finding pathways to dialogue, reconciliation and the bridging of divides.

As I celebrated Mass in a small chapel in Galilee on the Feast of Our Lady Help of Christians, Patroness of Australia, I prayed in gratitude for the many blessings of good will and justice that we are graced to live with, and work for, here in this country, and I prayed in petition that we avoid turning away from truthfulness and moral uprightness. Might I ask therefore, in your own Christian charity, that you keep all who are suffering, displaced, and persecuted in the lands where Jesus walked close in your prayers and considered in your understanding. Each person we met expressed their belief in a hope-filled future.

May the strength of the Holy Spirit bring comfort, courage and determination for conversion of hearts and transformation of societies to these dark situations; may the Prince of Peace be the guiding light before all. May the call of our Blessed Mother, true Lady of Israel, of Palestine and of Lebanon, ring out: *“He casts the mighty from their thrones and raises the lowly... in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, of his mercy to Abraham and his descendants for ever.”* (Lk 1.52,54-55)

With every grace and blessing, I remain,

Yours sincerely in Christ Jesus,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized initial 'P' followed by a surname that appears to be 'Comensoli'. There is a small cross symbol to the left of the signature.

Most Rev Peter A Comensoli
Archbishop of Melbourne