



WE CAME TO JERUSALEM

Archbishop Eames reflects on his pastoral visit to Israel and Palestine

As a response to an urgent message from the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Bishop Riah Hanna Abu El-Assal, the Archbishop of Canterbury invited me to accompany him on a brief pastoral visit to Israel and Palestine from 27 July to 30 July last. The purpose of this special visit was to support and encourage the Anglican and other communities which are under increasing pressure as tension mounts in the Middle East. During a packed programme of visits the atmosphere of fear, uncertainty and division was almost over-powering. The suspicion emanating from violence and terrorism, the obvious hatreds between Jews and Arabs and the doomsday predictions of all-out conflict between Israel and Palestine dominated conversations and reactions. Within this highly-charged situation the Anglican communities cried out for one message : *'you are not forgotten by the Anglican Communion and the Church beyond your shores.'*

That message we were privileged to bring by our presence and our words. We met the leaders of Israel and the Palestinian people of Gaza as well as religious leaders of all the traditions. We prayed with them. We listened to the heartfelt stories of the victims of man's inhumanity to man in their ruined homes and churches, in hospital wards and rehabilitation centers and in each case the human need for reassurance was paramount. Pain and hurt knew no bounds of nationality or creed.

We began the visit by driving under armed escort to Beit Jala, the Christian community outside Bethlehem which had recently been bombarded by Israeli tanks. Ruined buildings and broken limbs bore testimony to the ferocity of the attacks. At the Bethlehem Rehabilitation

Centre in the settlement we met members of the St George's Fellowship who are continuing to minister in practical ways to the survivors, many of whom have suffered desperate injuries. At the Ahli Arab Hospital in Gaza, run by the diocese of Jerusalem, the scene was similar. In the Princess Basma Centre for Disabled Children, a Bible Lands project under the umbrella of the Jerusalem Diocese, despairing parents waited at bedsides and crowded the corridors. Words seemed utterly irrelevant in such situations – perhaps the familiar words '*when they forget what you said, they will remember you were there*' was the only comfort we could bring.

The Manger Square at Bethlehem, usually congested by tourists, stood empty. No tour operator wanted to venture to Bethlehem. In the Peace Centre we saw the cribs which had been produced from around the world, including one presented by the Mothers' Union in Armagh diocese. At Tantur Ecumenical Institute outside Jerusalem we met students from various Churches who found themselves strangely isolated between the frontier of Jew and Arab.

While the pastoral nature of our visit concentrated on the situations of people '*on the ground*' the most publicized part of our agenda concentrated on visits to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, President Yasser Arafat, Rabbi Michael Melchior, deputy Foreign Minister of Israel and the leaders of the ecumenical community. Those conversations were remarkably frank and courteous and while it was agreed they would remain confidential both Dr Carey and I emphasized the need to build upon the recent Mitchell proposals and the need to establish an atmosphere of calm on the streets so that genuine dialogue could continue. In all those meetings we stressed the fears of the Christian communities, hostages within the cauldron of fear and violence. We maintained that approach in conversations with Rabbis David Rosen and the Chief Rabbi of Israel, Meir Lau.

As we left Tel Aviv for London news broke of more attacks and riots in Jerusalem. Like Northern Ireland the road to peace in the Holy Land remains long and tedious. We sought to bring reassurance and encouragement and received a warm welcome throughout our visit. Time will tell what lies ahead of this troubled region. In all our prayers let us continue to remember the people who continue to live on the soil once trod by Christ, the Prince of Peace.