



22 December 2023

Greetings as we again prepare for the most important day of the year for this little town of Bethlehem even in the midst of the war in Gaza and the attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank! I hope and pray this finds you safe and well and making your own preparations to remember Christmas.

The celebration of the Golden Jubilee of Bethlehem University at the beginning of October 2023, was a major event for us and we were so pleased with the gatherings we had. The dedication of the new Georgette Salameh Visitors and Fitness Center was the highlight of the celebrations. The gathering of some of the 20,000 graduates was a very affirming experience. Those who came were so positive about their memories of being here at Bethlehem University. We are very proud of them and it is satisfying to come across graduates in all sorts of situations in various parts of the world who really treasure the experience they had here at Bethlehem University. I take comfort from such engagements because I think it indicates to me that we are doing something worthwhile here and that is what keeps hope alive! So many of these graduates are contributing back to the Palestinian society since those first 112 students walked onto the campus to begin Bethlehem University on 1 October 1973.

The calendar year that is ending has been a disrupted one. With the attacks on Palestinians in the West Bank a regular occurrence, it meant that when someone was killed in the Bethlehem Governate or a major incident in the West Bank, there was a strike in protest, which meant sometimes we would go several weeks without a full week of classes. The current semester has been even further disrupted because of the war in Gaza and the slaughter of almost 20,000 Palestinians there, 70% of whom were women and children, and over 51,000 injured. This has been a traumatic time for so many people here because many students, faculty, and staff have relatives and friends in Gaza. Hearing about what is happening there and not being able to communicate with their relatives and friends is making it very difficult for them.

The war in Gaza has put extra pressure on the organization of the University. The Israelis closed all the checkpoints around Bethlehem when the war began and so the 40% of the students from Jerusalem as well as students from Hebron and surrounding villages have not been able to get to campus. This led us very early on to move teaching to online, with all the complication resulting from such a sudden decision. The easy availability and access students have to AI has become a challenge for faculty! There are moves afoot to bring Bethlehem students and those around Bethlehem who can get to campus to attend and have a hybrid arrangement with those who are unable to come. That is being explored for the new semester.

The tragedy of the situation here is that the first casualty of the war is truth! It is very difficult to find out what is actually happening in detail and the means of finding out is severely restricted. However, we do know that the middle and southern sections of Gaza are hosting almost two million internally displaced people. In addition, the health authorities recently documented 360,000 cases of infectious diseases in shelters, including diarrhoea, influenza, meningitis, hygiene related conditions such as lice, and 1,500 cases of intestinal disease are reported daily due to food shortages. There are around 600 people sheltering in the Catholic Holy Family Parish church and school in Gaza. On the 16 December, two Christian women, Nahida Anton and her daughter Samar Anton, were walking in the compound when Nahida was shot by a sniper. When Samar went to assist her mother, she too was shot. Both died while others were wounded. In addition, an Israeli tank fired a rocket at the Convent of the Sisters of Mother Teresa and severely damaged the building thus displacing 54 disabled people who were housed there.

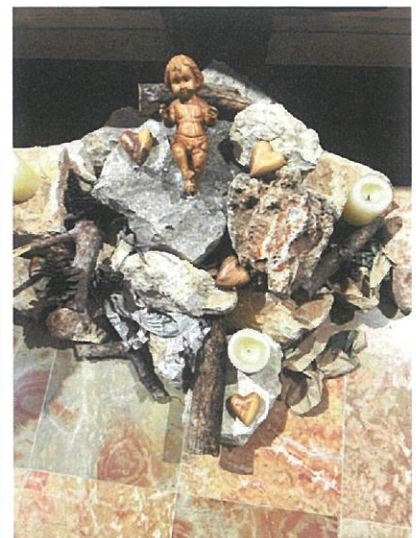
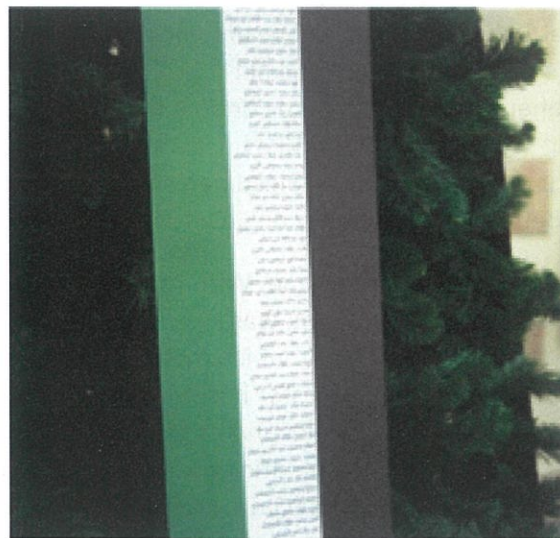
The focus of attention is on Gaza, but it needs to be remembered that the military and settlers are taking advantage of that focus to expand their control of the West Bank. Since the beginning of the war in Gaza on 7 October, there have been almost 280 Palestinians, including some 70 children, who have been killed on the West Bank while almost 3500 Palestinians have been injured by Israeli forces and settlers. In addition, over 4500 Palestinians have been arrested since 7 October.

It is against such a backdrop that Bethlehem University is seeking to operate. There is a pervading uncertainty about what the future holds for Palestinians in the West Banks as well as Gaza, because it is impossible to go back to how things were on 6 October! What the alternative will be is far from clear.

Given that backdrop, it is difficult to welcome the Christ child with joy! As a result, all festivities in Bethlehem have been cancelled and our remembering Christmas on campus is very subdued. Instead of the festive lighting of the Christmas tree, we had a somber remembrance of the children who have been killed in Gaza. There were four panels on the tree with some 5000 names of the children who are known to have died. We also had a different Christmas scene in the Chapel of the Divine Child reflecting this reality.



The tree in the corridor of De La Salle Hall with the names of over 5000 children who were killed in Gaza.



Jesus in the Chapel of the Divine Child, Bethlehem University

As we remember the birth of Jesus here in Bethlehem I am reminded yet again that what we are remembering is the birth of the Prince of Peace! It is far from a place of peace at present. Yet my engagement with Palestinians here at Bethlehem University and their response to what is offered, shows me that what we are doing is worthwhile and that is the source of hope! In the midst of the anxiety and fear I see God's Spirit at work. In the resistance among the people holed up in Gaza, I see God's Spirit at work. In the determination of people here to carry out our mission to serve the young people entrusted to us, I see God's Spirit at work. We are seeking to respond to that Spirit and create here an environment where people can move towards living life to the full, despite the occupation, the oppression, the restrictions, and the challenges they face. To live life to the full was central to Jesus' message and I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to help make that possible, here where Jesus was born!

My time as Vice Chancellor ends on 31 December 2023. These fifteen years have been a blessed and deeply enriching time for me and for that I am deeply grateful. So, from this little town of Bethlehem, for the last time, I send you Christmas greetings and best wishes as you remember the birth of Jesus and hopefully experience a growing sense of peace in your own life. Please keep us in your prayers!

Best wishes and thanks for your interest in and support of our mission here over these past fifteen years.

Br Peter

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