



# Entering Jerusalem

WEEK 6: PALESTINE

For our final week, we highlight the Christians of Palestine whose origins can be traced back to the time of Christ. Christians here continue to live under difficult conditions due to the dispute between Israel and the Palestinians.



When the American novelist Herman Melville visited Jerusalem in 1857 he was struck by the number of stones that were scattered around and he commented in his diary how he from then onwards understood why stones play such an important role in the Bible. In the midst of the desert wilderness, God provides water from the rock. A stone served as a pillar for Jacob. And a rolled away stone would announce that Christ had risen from the grave.

Jerusalem is a very different city today than the one that Melville visited – it is much bigger, and despite its contested holiness, in many ways resembles many other cities. However it is still the case that people come to Jerusalem in search of ancient places built of stone; a chance to walk the way that Christ himself trod in that most momentous of weeks, which Palm Sunday heralds.

But the Jerusalem of Jesus' time has many resonances with the Jerusalem of today. A place of occupation, with differing views as to how best to overcome this. A place of conflict and yet a place revered as holy. Today's Jerusalem is synonymous with the differing claims of three religions, what the late Bishop Kenneth Cragg described as 'competitively loved': any visitor to Jerusalem will know all too well how close to one another are the Western (Wailing) Wall, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the Dome of the Rock. Yet what is often overlooked is

**'The same stone which  
the builders rejected  
has become the  
chief corner-stone'  
(Ps.118.22)**

the Christian community which has had a continuous presence in Jerusalem since the early church.

Mark's account of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem refers to immediately entering into the Temple and 'looking around' as though he were just another religious pilgrim. Yet he knows – and we know – that Jesus's arrival in Jerusalem will be disruptive (a day later he would over-turn the tables of the money changers in the Temple), a place of betrayal, desertion, condemnation, torture and death.

As we arrive in Jerusalem with Jesus, we remember too that today the 'living stones', the Christians of Palestine, who live under occupation are not so much rejected stones but forgotten ones. And as we approach this most holiest of weeks in the Christian year we remember the special poignancy that the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ will have for all the people of the Middle East.

## Who are the Christians of Palestine?

Tracing their origins back to the time of Christ, the Christians of historic Palestine (which today includes both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories) are mostly from Greek Orthodox or Catholic backgrounds, although there is also a small number of Christians from Protestant and other Orthodox traditions. In Ottoman times and up to the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Christians accounted for between ten and twenty per cent of the total population of Palestine and were a significant part of Palestinian national identity, but that figure has fallen to less than two per cent today, mainly as a result of emigration driven by the continued political instability in the region. It is said that twice as many Palestinian Christians from the West Bank town of Ramallah now live in Dearborn, Michigan, than in

Lamps in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem



Jerusalem from Mount Olive

Ramallah. Some people fear that the Palestinian Christian population could disappear entirely within a few generations.

## What's it like being a Christian in Palestine today?

Life is not easy for Palestinian Christians today. Despite a deep physical and spiritual attachment to the Holy Land, they have had to cope like all Palestinians with the severe consequences of the continued dispute between Israel and the Palestinians, including violence (provoked by both sides), occupation, checkpoints, land seizures and sometimes even the denial of the most basic rights.

The issue of rights is best illustrated by a true story involving a Palestinian woman called Mary from Nazareth. The Nazarene Mary we know and love from the Bible was a young Palestinian Jewish girl, but this modern-day Mary is a Palestinian Christian living in Galilee, where most of Israel's 150,000 Christians live. A few years ago she fell in love with another Palestinian Christian called Ra'ed. Ra'ed is passionate about disability, and he is director of a home for severely disabled children near Bethlehem, on the other side of the Israeli separation barrier in the occupied West Bank.

Because the Palestinian Christian community is now so small, it is quite common for engagements to involve couples from both sides of the separation barrier. But this romantic match faced an immediate problem: how could they get engaged? It is a tradition in Palestinian Arab culture for the bridegroom to visit his potential bride's family to ask for her hand in marriage. But Ra'ed, being Palestinian, could not get an Israeli permit to visit his bride's family in Nazareth. So they had to do things differently.

Surely all would be sorted once they were married? Rae'd could then join his wife in Nazareth? Sadly not. Despite



being an Israeli citizen, albeit from a Palestinian Arab background, Mary has no right to bring a Palestinian husband into Israel. This is because an Israeli law called the 2003 Citizenship and Entry into Israel Law specifically blocks Palestinian spouses from entry into and residence rights in Israel. Just because they are Palestinian! No wonder many people even in Israel regard the Law as discriminatory. However, several challenges to the Law in Israel's High and Supreme Courts have failed.

The irony is that if Ra'ed were Jewish, he would have an automatic right to live in Israel, as it is a Jewish state which recognises a 'right of return' for Jewish people only. Ra'ed could have lived in New York or Florida or London all his life and have absolutely no family or other connection with Israel, but he could still as a Jew 'make Aliyah' to Israel and live there permanently.

As a result of this law, the only choice was for Mary to go and live with Ra'ed in Bethlehem after they were married. But worse than that: when they went on honeymoon, travel restrictions meant that Mary had to fly via Tel Aviv while Ra'ed had to travel via Amman in Jordan. Romance for Palestinian Christians is not as straightforward as it is for the rest of us!

Being nowadays a very small community, Palestinian Christians on both sides of the separation barrier have borne the brunt of discrimination, occupation and political instability. Other challenges include having their land seized or houses demolished, travel restrictions (including military checkpoints) and having restricted (or even denied) access to the Holy Places in Jerusalem. This is why so many Palestinian Christians have emigrated. Our prayer must be that the Christians of Palestine remain in their homeland and continue to be an active presence in their communities, and a real witness to Jesus.

#### Outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem



#### *Questions for discussion*

1. How do you respond to the present situation faced by Palestinian Christians?
2. Is it possible for Jerusalem to be honoured as a holy city by three faiths without there being conflict?
3. If there ceased to be a viable Christian community in Jerusalem and the Palestinian Territories, what impact would that have on Christianity?

#### *Prayer*

Redeeming God,  
 as we approach Jerusalem with Jesus  
 May we be ever mindful  
 Of the continuing trials and sufferings of your church  
 in the land that we often call 'holy'.  
 Hear their cries, we pray  
 and hasten the day when the nations will stream to your  
 Holy City  
 and all will live in peace.  
 This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.  
 Amen.