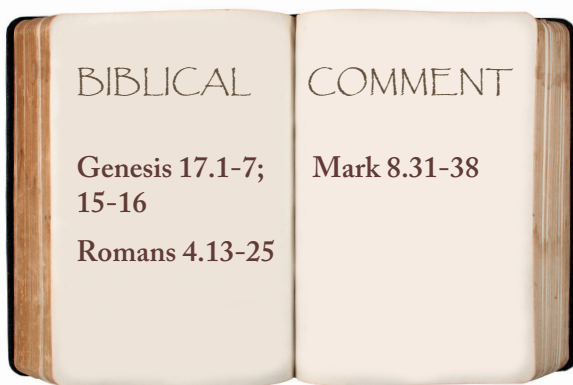




WEEK 2: ISRAEL

Covenant with Abraham, Sarah and us

This week we walk and pray with the Christian communities from the State of Israel, particularly focusing on Arab Christians who are both Palestinian and citizens of the State of Israel. We will focus on Palestinian Christians of the West Bank separately in Week 6.



Abraham is the central figure this week. But his importance goes far beyond one Sunday, one place in history, even one faith. The promise given to Abraham and Sarah is of a secured future where they will not be alone. It is a promise of an unbreakable covenant from a faithful God. 'You shall be the ancestor of many nations' reflects how much Abraham is revered in more than one faith, one nation, one culture.

The advanced age of Abraham and the barrenness of Sarah might ordinarily suggest that new possibilities were a thing of the past, the end was in sight, the task done. Not surprisingly Sarah later laughs when she overhears the news that she will bear a son.

In the context of the present conflict in the Middle East, many are perplexed as to how to interpret the promise to the Land in the present context. Yet the only occasion in the Bible when Abraham is referred to as actually 'owning' land is when he seeks a plot of land in which to bury Sarah – here we find him insisting that he should pay a fair price even though the Hittite offers him

the land for free (see Genesis 23.20). Abraham's deep commitment to justice is also evidenced in the earlier incident when he pleads for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Thus the Land of Promise is also a land where justice must flow.

St. Paul's own commentary on Abraham focuses upon Abraham's faith which was 'reckoned to him as righteousness', a reminder that the covenant with Abraham and Sarah is one where justice is taken as a given.

This week we are focusing upon the Christians of Israel (we will turn to the Christians of the Palestinian Territories in Week 6 when we reflect upon Jesus' own entry into Jerusalem). Throughout this Lenten journey we remind ourselves that Christians in the Holy Land are often mistakenly taken to be recent converts from Islam or Judaism rather than a community tracing its roots back to New Testament times. Riah Abu El-Assal, former Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, challenges us with these words:

‘As a Christian I look to the Old and New Testaments for the origins of my faith...Muslim and Christian Arabs look on themselves as heirs to the original covenant through Abraham’s first born son Ishmael, who is looked on as the forefather of all the Arabs (which is why we refer to the Jews as our cousins). So you see, for both Jews and Christians, the Bible is not only our spiritual guide, but a record of our history and proof of our roots in the land. We have always lived side by side. How can my presence here now stand in the way of the fulfilment of the Scriptures? And as a Palestinian Christian am I not also an heir to the covenant through Jesus Christ, my Saviour? Is there really no room for me here?’¹

Who are the Christians of Israel?

The modern state of Israel is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a large Jewish majority. Alongside Palestine it forms what many Christians refer to as the Holy Land. Despite its historical significance to Christianity, Israel is home to around 150,000 Christians, just 2% of the country’s population.

The vast majority of Christians in Israel are Palestinian Arabs residing mainly in the northern Galilee region, who trace their roots back to the days of Jesus and the early church. Around one in five Christians in Israel are more likely to be integrated with Jewish society and culture, as migrants from the former Soviet Union or as Jewish believers in Christ.

In addition to permanent residents, there are as many as 150,000 extra Christian migrants at any one time, made up of foreign workers and asylum seekers from countries like the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Eritrea.

Around half of all Christians in Israel are Catholic, two thirds of whom follow Eastern Church traditions and liturgies, while a third are Roman Catholics; around a third of all Christians are Greek Orthodox; the remainder are mostly Protestants and Evangelicals, including Messianic Jews who number between 10,000-15,000.

What’s it like being a Christian in that context?

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the presence of holy sites significant to three Abrahamic faiths can be a cause of tension between religious communities. Palestinian Christians in Israel suffer from the same inequalities as the wider Arab population, with higher



Greek Orthodox church of Capernaum

rates of unemployment, alleged discrimination in social policy, and higher rates of infant mortality compared to Jewish citizens.

Meanwhile, Christians integrated into Jewish Israeli culture also experience discrimination, mostly at the hands of ultra-Orthodox Jews who often regard Christians as a threat to Jewish society. For example, Messianic congregations face difficulties finding places to worship, with landlords unwilling to rent or sell properties to Christians. Places of worship are often vandalised or desecrated with hateful graffiti, and Christians do not always find the police or courts willing to investigate or prosecute culprits.

In spite of the challenges that come from living as a minority in a highly religious society, Christians are active in working for peace and justice in the Holy Land. There are local ministries promoting reconciliation between Palestinian and Israeli Christians, although there are numerous theological and cultural challenges to this as long as a broader political solution remains elusive. Christians are also working as peacemakers between their Jewish and Muslim neighbours, and many people consider the presence of Christians to be a necessary factor in achieving and sustaining a future peace.

Despite Israel’s appearance as a wealthy developed nation, like its counterparts in Europe and North America, this image often hides significant inequalities and deprivation. Hidden from wider Israeli society, let alone from foreign tourists and pilgrims, are pockets

¹Riah Abu el-Assal, *Caught Between: The Extraordinary Story of an Arab Palestinian Christian Israeli*. SPCK 1999, p.57-58

of significant poverty and exclusion. Homelessness, prostitution, and addiction prevail in certain areas. Asylum seekers and refugees are often stranded without support and fall prey to racist gangs or exploitation. Organised crime is a dangerous and persistent menace for many people living in coastal cities.

Tel Aviv is one city witnessing such phenomena. Just yards from the high rises that symbolise the country's economic progress is one of the poorest neighbourhoods in Israel. The area is home to those who have fallen through the cracks of society, living in slum-like conditions amid ruined buildings and disused bus shelters. Max was one of these people and, if it wasn't for the ministry of Israeli Christians, his life may have ended there too.

Max moved from the Ukraine to Israel with his parents when he was still a teenager. Released from the shackles of a post-Soviet society, Max indulged his new found freedoms in the hedonistic Tel Aviv party scene. What started as recreational drug use quickly descended into a vicious heroin addiction. Max resorted to crime to fund his addiction, racking up debts and descending into delinquency and depression. Despite numerous attempts he couldn't get clean and eventually considered suicide as the only way out.

Just as he reached his lowest point, he met a couple of Christians in the street who invited him to a nearby drop-in centre they ran. Max went along and began attending regularly, striking up a friendship with the Christians and learning more about their faith. Eventually he took the decision to leave drugs and turn to Christ.

'That was the beginning of a new life', Max says. 'I turned to God and He miraculously set me free! He opened my eyes and changed my values, releasing me from the slavery of addiction. Today I know for sure that my miserable past is not a part of me anymore. God restored everything that was ruined.' Today, Max is married with a young son. He now manages the very same drop-in centre which reached out to him, so that he can help others in the same situation.

There are many other stories of hope like Max's, thanks to the ministry and witness of the local church. Despite the challenges facing Christians in Israel, their presence in the land is a source of hope for the peace, justice, and transformation that is so badly needed. Pray for Christians like Max who have a vision and commitment to the poor and lost.

Questions for discussion

1. What is your reaction to the story from a Christian in Israel? Was it what you were expecting to read?
2. Have you visited Israel? If so, did you meet any of the Christians from that country? What was your impression of the country?
3. How does life as an Israeli Christian compare with your experience of being a Christian in your country?

Prayer

God of the Covenant,
 We pray for all people who live in the State of Israel:
 For young and old, rich and poor, the powerful
 and powerless,
 For the homeless, the refugee and the outcast.
 As you called Abraham and Sarah to the parents
 of a nation
 That would be a blessing to all nations
 We pray that Israel may respond to that call today:
 To strive to be a society that is just,
 To offer justice to its own citizens,
 And do all that is right
 That a Palestinian state, alongside Israel,
 might be a reality.
 We offer this prayer through Jesus Christ, our Lord,
 Amen.