



BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY

جامعة بيت لحم

Office of the
Vice Chancellor

مكتب نائب الرئيس الأعلى

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Greetings again from this holy city of Jerusalem as we celebrate the great mysteries of Easter, here in the city where it all happened!

I have the opportunity again to spend Easter in Jerusalem and I treasure this. To walk these streets and reflect on the events that happened here over 2000 years ago is a great privilege. There were things happening at that time that are very similar to what is happening here now. Then Jesus was living under the occupation by the Roman Empire. Now the Palestinians are living under the occupation by the Israeli state.

When I was walking in the procession for Palm Sunday last weekend I was reminded of this occupation in a very real way. There is always a significant presence of the Israeli military with their rifles along the way and I saw a number of Palestinian young people waving the Palestinian flag as they were walking along in the procession. The procession is remembering the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem and it may not have been appropriate to bring such a political aspect to the procession, but it is very difficult to make a complete separation in this land. Anyhow, at one stage a group of Israeli soldiers moved into the crowd and began aggressively snatching these flags from the young people to prevent them from highlighting the fact that they were in East Jerusalem, which is supposed to be part of Palestine! It was yet another example of the oppression the Palestinians live with constantly.

That oppression has taken on more detailed features in the last year and particularly in the last few months, after President Trump announced he was moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Since 1947 the international community has agreed that Jerusalem is a special situation and, therefore, should be kept as an international city until an agreed upon solution can be reached between the Palestinians and the Israelis. This agreement has been honoured by all countries except Israel, who continually ignore International Law. Now President Trump is saying that it is not important to follow International Law and is encouraging the flouting of such law by what he is proposing. This is a dangerous step because if we do not have International Law as a base from which countries can engage with each other the alternative is "might is right" and anarchy. The decision by President Trump is the cause of considerable concern to Palestinians because it demonstrates to them that the USA is definitely on the side of Israel in any attempt to find a solution here. It in fact really takes the USA out of any objective role in finding that solution.

What is a concern for me is the impact this decision can have on our students. As I have mentioned many times before, one of our major challenges is to keep hope alive. The constant pressure on our students is a cause of concern, but what still amazes me is the resilience of our students in the midst of all they suffer. The decision by President Trump is yet another blow to the Palestinians on what seems to be an endless succession of sufferings. It seems to me that the ability of the Palestinians to bear this suffering in a wise and calm way while at the same time being incredibly generous in their engagement with others, including people from outside Palestine, is at the centre of the challenge they have to keep hope alive. This determination, combined with their awareness that there are people outside of the situation who have made the effort to find out more about what is happening and are prepared to stand in solidarity with them, enables these wonderful people to keep their hope alive. Thank you for being one of those people who are prepared to stand in solidarity with them.

One of the incredible blessings I receive arises from the opportunity I have to spend time with students and to interview some of them about their experience of living here in Palestine. One interview, which I used in my presentations in New Zealand and Australia earlier this year and which I intend to use in my presentations in the USA and Central America in the next month, is with Raghad who graduated in May of last year. She is a young Muslim woman from down near Hebron who speaks so eloquently about what it has meant for her to be at Bethlehem University where she says she was born anew. At one point, she mentions that when she came to Bethlehem University her world was one colour – her colour, with narrow and shallow horizons! However, her experience at Bethlehem University opened her to so many different ideas and attitudes. She said it trained her heart on peace and turned her into a living conscience so that now she feels a deep responsibility to learn about and improve this world! It is engaging with such students that makes being here such a privilege!

What Raghad is doing and what Bethlehem University is helping students deal with, is the pain they experience. If they become trapped inside their suffering they become distant from reality, from themselves and from God. What we are seeking to do is to provide a sense of meaning in the pain they experience and to help them see they are not alone, that others are connected to their pain. In addition, as I said in my speech to the Pope, I want them to know that their God is suffering with them. I think what Rosan was saying to me when she mentioned that all the restrictions from the Israeli military were very real, but they were not eating away at her. They were there and she had to deal with them, but she was determined to live life as fully as she possibly could, despite those restrictions. It is the freedom they have from that bitterness, hatred and despair that is the experience of the Good News we are seeking to create.

One of our aims is to provide the best possible opportunities for our students. At the beginning of April, the construction of the new Nursing facility will begin and then later in April the conversion of the abandoned hospital into a teaching hotel and teaching restaurant will start. We are hoping that both of these will be completed during the course of 2020. These facilities will provide much better opportunities for our students to gain from their experience at Bethlehem University.

In all that we are doing at Bethlehem University we are seeking to create an environment, develop an atmosphere and provide an opportunity for our students to gain the knowledge, develop the skills and acquire the virtues and attitudes that will enable them to live life to the full in the midst of the challenges they face. As an unashamedly Catholic University we are helping students to see that the Christian mystery we are celebrating this weekend is inherently about dying and rising. I see that what so many of them are enduring is the cross of Jesus, even though so many of them would not talk about it that way, but the determination and resilience they display as they carry that cross is a great support to others and a source of constant inspiration to me as I stumble along beside them.

As we have the privilege to celebrate this great feast of Easter in this ancient, holy city, I pray that you may experience God's peace as you celebrate and that you will grow in an ever-deepening awareness of God's amazing love for each of us. May the experience of this peace lead you to find practical ways to live as a peaceful and life-giving person. Please keep us in your prayers as we seek to respond to God's call to serve the Palestinian people through education in our little corner of Bethlehem.

He is risen!

Best wishes

Br Peter Bray

Brother Peter Bray FSC, EdD
Vice Chancellor