



BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY

جامعة بيت لحم

Office of the
Vice Chancellor

مكتب نائب الرئيس الأعلى

25th December 2019

Greetings from this beautiful, holy place as we yet again celebrate the coming of Jesus into this world, here in Bethlehem in Palestine where it happened over 2000 years ago!

My first Christmas in Bethlehem was in December 2007. I can't believe I'm still fortunate enough to be in Bethlehem for Christmas 2019! I am so blessed and am grateful that I am so blessed! To be here in Bethlehem and to join with locals and pilgrims to celebrate Christmas is something really special and a great joy to me. There are six different denominations celebrating in this holy place, some at different times, but there is a renewed spirit of hope in the midst of every celebration of Jesus' birth. I am gradually getting used to celebrating Christmas in the middle of winter after growing up in New Zealand where we celebrate in the middle of summer!

However, it has also been a great blessing for me to be here at Bethlehem University and to see the way so many of our students take advantage of what is offered here. We welcomed some 907 new students to Bethlehem University back at the end of August for the start of this academic year. They were straight out of secondary school and that was obvious. However, in the previous June we graduated some 800 students who had completed their time with us. I have reflected many times on the change that took place in those students over the years they were with us and the amazing qualities so many of those graduates took into the community as confident, articulate, knowledgeable and mature young people. It is so encouraging and inspiring to see so many students taking advantage of the opportunities here and really growing into such fine young people. Christians and Muslims join together to celebrate Christmas and show it is possible to play and pray together as mature Palestinians.

As a result, people here in Bethlehem consider Bethlehem University as the second star of Bethlehem! The first is, of course, the star over the grotto where Jesus was born. However, drawing faith from the Nativity and with knowledge gained here at Bethlehem University we present a combination of values that can inspire the Palestinian youth who are entrusted to our care. This ties into what I speak about so often: that Bethlehem University seeks to create an oasis of peace, to be a beacon of hope, and a provider of quality higher education. Being the second star of Bethlehem here inspires our students, despite the challenges they face.

The challenges are certainly there for them. The unpredictable situation in which we exist is disturbing and so the reality of our lives here makes it so important that we don't trivialise the celebration of Christmas and see it being sentimentally about a cute little

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baby in a manger! It is the adult Christ whom we are imploring when we pray "Come, Lord Jesus." When I see the suffering and oppression of the Palestinian people I cannot settle for an infantile Jesus or a sweet, pious Gospel! It is not easy to be a Christian in this land and if the Palestinian Christians are going to stay here and stand as a witness to Jesus in this place where he wandered, they will need to be brave and determined with a deep faith that God is present here with them, suffering with them and calling them to live life to the full. To do that they need to find support from one another and from outside as they live their faith, rather than just believing in it and talking about it. We here at Bethlehem University are helping to provide that support, helping to build a society where the immediate causes of poverty and injustice are removed, where the downtrodden and oppressed are freed from the limits that prevent them from developing themselves freely and with dignity, and where people work to free themselves from selfishness and greed and build relationships with one another and with God.

The challenge for us to be a Catholic University working under occupation is to find new ways to live out the Gospel while being confronted by the injustice that emerges from the Occupation. We have an obligation to stand with our students, staff and faculty and so we are seeking to create an environment where peaceful resistance to injustice is promoted while at the same time seeking to avoid returning what is experienced. In this way, it is possible for us at Bethlehem University to choose to stop some of the hatred, racism, bitterness, callousness and brutality by not engaging in those attitudes ourselves as we explore ways to resist the Occupation. This is not a passive helplessness, but a non-violent resistance moving towards faith, hope and love in an effort to overcome the darkness and hatred. It takes strength and courage to bear the suffering and hardship the Palestinians experience and it is inspiring to see them do this with characteristic resilience. So please keep us in your prayers as we deal with this increasingly unpredictable context and the unknown future, but we believe we should never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God!

In the midst of all this, Bethlehem University is progressively developing in the academic, spiritual, sporting and facilities areas. There are three major projects underway to provide better facilities and a review of the core curriculum is in progress so we can better respond to the needs of the young people entrusted to us.

I pray that as you celebrate this great mystery of God coming amongst us here in Bethlehem, who grew to call us to freedom, love and peace, that you are conscious of how blessed you are and that you will be grateful for those blessings. In that awareness I pray that you experience something of the peace and joy that Jesus brought.

Best wishes and thanks for your interest in and support for Bethlehem University.

Br Peter Bray

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