

Homily for Mass in Gidea Park Church 15th January 2023

Just three weeks ago we celebrated Christmas, the coming among us of God's Incarnate Word as a new-born baby, lovingly cared for by his young mother Mary and protected by the strong, manly Joseph. Shepherds, who at that time were considered rough uneducated men sleeping with their animals, heard the voice of angels and went to find this special child, probably bringing him lambs as gifts, that was all they had and was their livelihood. These human scenes touch our hearts and emotions. We can easily visualise and relate to them. Then the wise men came from the East with gifts that are precious, but that hint at the divine nature of the baby in the manger and of what his future holds. Already we are being led towards the realisation that the baby of Bethlehem is a special messenger of God. The feast of the Baptism of the Lord that we celebrated last Sunday brings us to meet the adult Jesus by the Jordan river where he is baptised by John and the Spirit of God descends upon him, and a voice speaks from Heaven: "This is my Son the Beloved my favour rests on Him." In these short three weeks the Church has taken us, through the liturgy, from the intimate family scene of mother, father and new-born baby, to today's Gospel scene where John the Baptist, seeing Jesus coming towards him says to the people "Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world the One who will baptise with the Holy Spirit, the Chosen one of God." The Gospels take us from the crib scene to the adult Christ taking away the sins of the world, that we know will lead him to the cross.

Like Jesus the Word of God in human form, we live between birth and death, between the crib and the cross, and as committed Christians we do our best to live honest and good lives according to the vocation and way of life to which we are called, whether that be married, single, ordained priest, professed religious, widowed, rich or poor, healthy or sick, and most of us will experience more than one of these states during our lifetime.

I'm here today at the kind invitation of Fr Adrian, to share with you some of my experience as a Franciscan missionary sister, in particular of my recent years serving the Palestinian people in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip, and how your kind contributions have supported my mission. I've lived for almost 30 years in the Middle East between Jordan and Palestine, not continuously but interspersed with time in the UK. My first mission assignment as a young sister was to Jordan, a few years after the 1967 war, and the suffering and poverty that I saw then shaped my future life to some extent. I heard first-hand the experience of the Palestinians expelled from their homes and land, and I saw the conditions in which they lived. Later I read the history of Palestine and the newly established State of Israel. Many years later I served as Vice Rector of the Tantur Ecumenical Institute near Jerusalem where I befriended Jewish lecturers, tour guides and peace activists and heard their side of the story of Holy Land, not always a unanimous Jewish voice.

In 2014, as yet another war on Gaza was raging, I was coming to the end of a congregational assignment in the UK and I asked my religious superior if I could offer my services as a volunteer in Gaza. I knew the region and the language, I had a background in nursing and I thought I could help in simple ways. With the blessing and support of my sisters I went to Gaza in the autumn of 2014 to see if I could help, and I returned to live there in early January

2015 working with Caritas Jerusalem. Very soon the General Director of Caritas asked me to be responsible for all Caritas work in Gaza which I did for 3 years. Then the Latin Patriarch, Archbishop Pizzaballa, asked me to take over as Secretary General of the organisation. There was not much consultation, rather he said “We need a new Secretary General, You could do it!” How could one refuse a Patriarch! So I took over as Secretary General in January 2015 and served in that capacity until the end of August 2022. During that time, supported by the Patriarch, together with committed and professional staff, we undertook a full organisational restructuring and development of the organisation, we lived through Covid-19 lockdown, two more wars on Gaza and the ongoing blockade. We got more project funding and expanded our humanitarian and medical services. It was here that your parish donations were such a help. It is not easy to raise funds for the elderly. Most donor organisations look for development while the elderly need love and care. Your funds went towards supporting them through and after the Covid lockdown. Those were difficult years but the commitment and hard work of the staff, Muslims and Christians, made it not only possible for me, but also rewarding.

I love the people of the Holy Land, the Palestinians whom I know best and the Israeli Jews who are divided among themselves and suffering in other ways. When a former rector of the Notre Dame Centre in Jerusalem, the German Monsignor Mathes, left in the early 2000s, he is remembered to have said, ‘When I first came to Jerusalem, my sympathies were with the Jews of Israel and I was angry with the Palestinians. The more I worked in Jerusalem and the more I saw in the land, my sympathies shifted to the Palestinians and I was angry with the Jews. When I left, my heart wept for both of them.’ As time passes and the more I see, the more I empathise with him.

Let me now return to a more recent event. I had some fairly good up to date theology books that I no longer needed. I send a list to the Carthusian Monks in Parkminster, a strict order that do not use the internet so they need real books. They said they would take them all so I sent them with a short letter to the Prior saying that I had been working in Palestine including Gaza and that I will soon return there. Since I do not need the books I’m delighted that they will be of use to the monks. He replied:

I will entrust to the prayers of the community your precious but difficult mission in the Holy Land. This most sacred land where was born the One who alone gives us true Peace and Joy, is also a place where hearts are pierced by a sword. The Crib and the Cross are made of the same wood.

Fr Adrian and you, his parishioners, are part of this precious but difficult mission in the Holy Land. Together, in our different vocations, we live in faith in union with Christ in our life’s journey from the Crib to the Cross, looking forward in Christian hope to the joy of Resurrection.

May God bless you all.

Bridget Tighe FMDM