

Homily, Ecumenical Centre, Geneva, 31 May 2010

Rev. John Calhoun, Convener of World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace, in the name of God our Father, God the Son Jesus Christ, and God the Holy Spirit.

We have gathered, here at the Ecumenical Centre early on this rather dreary Monday morning, to join together as a community of faith, one body, one small manifestation of “Corpus Christi” here on this earth.

I know that it is not easy to start a work day, or a work week, in prayer, to forego all the other temptations—the coffee cup, the pile of email in the inbox—that would keep us from this sacred space. But it is good that we are here. For to begin the work week with a time of prayer and devotion, to start the day in worship, is proper. As it is told to us in the preface to the traditional liturgy of the eucharist: “Give thanks to the Lord our God; it is good and right so to do.”

As many of you know, all day today here at the Ecumenical Centre, we are marking World Week for Peace in Palestine Israel. World Week for Peace is an initiative of the Palestine Israel Ecumenical Forum of the World Council of Churches; it is designed to encourage and equip congregations and people of faith around the world to pray and worship, to be educated and educate others, and to perform acts of advocacy in support of a just peace for all peoples in Palestine and Israel.

Here at the Ecumenical Centre, our worship service this morning will be followed by a day-long exhibition of Palestinian arts and crafts, as well as a display of media that portray the conflict in that region from a variety of perspectives. At lunchtime, in the cafeteria, we will hold an open conversation about the issues that continue to prevent the peace process from moving forward. Then later this afternoon we will be hosting a round table discussion on the issues of occupation and dispossession, featuring speakers, as well as representatives of the civil society community here in Geneva. You are most welcome to participate in any and all of these activities throughout the day.

So today, and this week, our focus is on the conflict in Palestine and Israel, and what we can do in support of those who are striving for a just peace for all in the region. We are uniting our voices with others, to speak with one voice against the injustices being suffered by the Palestinian people living under occupation for now more than 43 years: the continuing illegal settlement activity in East Jerusalem and the West Bank; the growth of the separation wall that is claiming more Palestinian land and dividing more communities; and the recent rise in forcible transfers of Palestinians from their homes and families. This conflict has caused too much suffering, too much injustice. It is time for this conflict to end.

And yet we know that this ongoing conflict in Palestine is not the only point of tension in our world today. We know that those who suffer from the stranglehold of occupation and the menace of militarization are not the only innocents who suffer in our world.

We think of the millions of men and women and children living in abject poverty in the slums of Africa’s bulging cities...the millions of lower-class Dalits in South Asia who have been outcast as untouchables by their fellow countrymen...the millions of laborers in Western Europe and North America and around the world who have lost work, or are trying to hang on to their jobs and provide for their families in this fragile economy.

And yet, people like these, those who suffer themselves, are praying for peace in Palestine and Israel. Yesterday, more than 200 believers packed into Word Fellowship Centre, a Christian congregation in the heart of Kibera, the largest slum in Nairobi, to pray for peace in Palestine and Israel. Yesterday, Dalit Christians in India prayed for peace in Palestine and Israel. Yesterday, Christian believers came together in churches in northern England and southern Europe and in the Philippines and across Australia, Brazil and throughout the heartland of the United States and in hundreds of communities like this all around the world to pray for peace in Palestine and Israel. People with their own concerns, their own worries, their own struggles, prayed for strangers in a distant land, simply because they knew that those strangers were suffering.

And, they prayed because they believe that God answers prayers, that God is merciful, that God desires that all people might live in peace, that God offers deliverance to those who are oppressed, and that God wants his people to seek justice in the world.

The same can be said for each of you. By your presence here this morning, you too are demonstrating your concern for the people of Palestine and Israel, that they all might live in peace and with justice. But each of one you here today is also committed to other causes that are just as important and as worthy as the one we are focusing on today. You are joining with others in a campaign to rid the world of nuclear weapons. You are leading coalitions aimed at eliminating poverty around the world. You are collaborating with scientists and world leaders to tackle climate change. You are pressing for meaningful and fruitful dialogue and cooperation among members of the world's most divergent faith communities.

Each one of these challenges is as great and as worthy as ending the conflict in Palestine. Every success along the way is undoubtedly countered by frustrations and setbacks. But you persist in your efforts—towards justice, towards equality, towards peace—because you believe that God is on the side of the peacemakers, that God provides for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, that God enhances the work of the merciful by showing mercy.

No single one of us, by our own efforts, can restore justice to the oppressed, or bring peace to the beleaguered. But at the heart of our Christian faith is the belief—the conviction—that God can use us, in concert with others, to witness the love of Christ to our world; and in our witness, lives can be graced, and comfort given, and hope renewed, and indeed, justice achieved

Like the Psalmist in today's lesson, we believe in a God of deliverance. "I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears." I believe that God is using you—each one of you—to bring God's justice to the oppressed, God's hope to the hopeless, God's deliverance to the fearful.

I pray today for those suffering occupation, injustice and oppression in Palestine, , and for all the justice-seekers and justice-makers in that land, that they may truly know peace. But I also pray for each one of you here today, and for those with whom and on whose behalf you labor. When you grow weary in your peacemaking, remember that Jesus has promised that his blessings will be upon you. When your hunger and thirst for righteousness leaves you faint, know that God is with you. When your soul feels poor and weak, cry out to the Lord, and let the Lord our God save you and empower you. When you feel fearful, seek the Lord, and ask him to deliver you from your fears.

And as you receive God's salvation and deliverance and strength, go and be an instrument of God's peace in this world, so that all who live in fear, or oppression, or injustice, may truly come to know the love and mercy and goodness and freedom of God. Amen.