

The People of God in the Holy Land Today

Colleagues,

Tom Getman works in the Jerusalem office of "World Vision." World Vision is one of the superstars in today's world-wide Christian mercy ministries. Tom passed this on to some of us yesterday. Even so, Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Date: al Naqba Day – May 15, 2001

[Ed's note: al Naqba, "the catastrophe" in Arabic, is the name Palestinians use for the founding of Israel, 53 years ago on May 15, 1948.] Dear Family and Friends:

Please use your imagination with me again to enter into the reality here. Think about going to a dinner at the home of favorite friends...

Last week on Saturday evening Karen and I along with visiting colleagues from Vienna and Melbourne experienced a most enjoyable evening with our Operations Manager and his pregnant wife in their new home in the Beit Jala (a suburb of Bethlehem)...a typical hospitable time with gracious Palestinian hosts. As we were watching the beautiful sunset out their picture windows we were richly blessed by their lavish entertaining and their enthusiasm for their life together.

At 8AM the next morning as Karen and I were enjoying our wake-up coffee and preparing for church my emergency walky-talky

radio beeped. It was Nassim. He and Saheer were alerting us to the fact that they and their neighborhood of all brand new homes were suffering heavy bombardment from Israeli tanks and machine guns. I could hear the awful "voices of the bullets" as we engaged in the surreal conversation and my heart cried out in a prayer that our friends would be spared. They were huddled in their stair well where they would remain for 6 hours as several houses in their vicinity suffered direct hits. One was occupied by a family who had moved in only the week before as their previous house had been destroyed by shell fire. A five-year-old little boy up the block had his arm blown off by shell shrapnel and a little girl lost an eye.

Nassim and Saheer have moved out of their shrapnel-damaged home to the relatively more safe house of Nassim's father who is suffering heart disease. And the mindless shooting from lightly armed Palestinian renegades, some of whom have been found to be collaborators, and the heavy return fire from the fifth largest army in the world continues as you have seen on your TV screens. The result in this one neighborhood is that four homes are completely demolished and most of the thirty families have left to live with families in safer places. This has been repeated scores of times throughout the occupied territories.

A senior foreign diplomat met with a World Vision delegation of visiting executives on Monday in his Ramallah, West Bank, office. This occurred while the frightening soul-shaking Israeli tank bombardment of nearby civilian areas interrupted the funeral procession for the five Palestinian police murdered by Israeli soldiers last Sunday night. Here are his words:

"The world diplomatic community has let us down terribly. We who are involved in humanitarian activities have been denied access to international treaties such as the Geneva Conventions. Our rights as people delivering development

assistance have been constantly violated and Israel has almost completely escaped censure. If we cannot protest violations against the international community what about the violations of Palestinian rights?"

Indeed. When Swedish diplomats were fired on by Israeli soldiers the other day on the Ramallah – Jerusalem road the foreign service officer put at risk issued an immediate protest to the soldier in charge. His response was, "Oh don't worry...we were not targeting you. We were only shooting at the children"!

VIOLENCE CANNOT BRING PEACE

As the crisis deepens here I have experienced what so many of our journalist friends have who try to explain this situation to disbelieving or theologically confused readers in the West. Even though I have made abundantly clear over more than 4 years that there is no way violence from either side in this conflict will bring a just peace, I now have been charged with rationalizing the Palestinian's resistance to occupation as fanning the flames of war when they are attempting only to defend their already fragile infrastructure, homes, farm land and family members. The heartbreaking truth is that the limited weaponry Palestinians use brings only more pain upon them. Many innocent Palestinians are mowed down like clay pigeons in a "sportsmens' club" by soldiers who should not even be where they are in Palestinian territory. I understand in their desperation why Palestinians seek to stand up in defiance...but as one fighting to save lives and the spirits of those who take life I cannot encourage the use of military force. It only brings more grief... especially when it is used as an immoral pretext for the dominant power here to intimidate and devastate a maligned and peace-seeking people.

I keep being told by those comfortably situated in front of TV

sets in the US or Europe (or even Tel Aviv) that the situation in the partially holy land is too complicated to understand. No! It is not too complicated to comprehend. It is very simple...injustice and oppression by the very strong over the exceedingly weak can finally bring only grief to both the oppressed and the oppressor. It is immoral and will destroy or bring down as it always has the occupying power whether Roman, Assyrian, Crusader, Ottoman Turk, British or Israeli. The occupation should end and the settlements be vacated.

One of our visitors called home in North American last night to assure his family members that he was safe after being in the shelling shown on the TV news. As he was talking to his 8-year-old son seeking to explain what he was witnessing, the boy interrupted him to say, "It's easy Dad, why don't they just give the land back to the Palestinians".

RESISTANCE BRINGS HOPE

That is what the Mitchell Commission pointed out in a more diplomatic way last week, as the cancerous settlement issue was raised to a cause celebre. It is long past time for the international community to rise up as one to say "we must protect the weak and defenseless in this dirty ethnic war." And as one of our brave World Vision staff people said the other day after risking his life again to be with his project partners in the villages under siege near Bethlehem,

"I am part of the resistance against the occupation by giving desperate people hope...I have a vision of Israelis and Palestinians living together sharing the resources equally." And one of our visitors observed in paying tribute to our staff this morning, "Don't despair. You don't work in vain when you work for justice".

And lest anyone be confused, the Israel of the Bible is the

“holy people of God” who love Him and their neighbors as themselves. It is not an ethnic group or a nationalistic power. Biblical Israel is not based on genetics or a particular past suffering. It is not the group with the most powerful weapons or allies. It is not that which gives the “right of return” to some and forbids it to others. It is rather made up of those whose hearts are inclined toward the poor and oppressed, the naked, the widowed, the orphan, the stranger...God’s favored. And from what I have been able to witness there are these kinds of “Israelis” in all the religious and ethnic communities here. And there are many who call themselves such who are not at all!

And the God incarnate that we see in the faces of the still-trusting children and the patient suffering poor, and some of the humble powerful as well, accompanies those who reach out to comfort at each destroyed home, hospital bed, brutalizing checkpoint or gaping grave surrounded by desperate and grieving family members and friends...This God enters Jerusalem with us to shape a life of real grace together, Jew, Muslim and Christian. May we not let each other down!

*For the peace of the New Jerusalem and all its people,
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