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## Realizing God's dream for the Holy Land

By Desmond Tutu | October 26, 2007

WHENEVER I am asked if I am optimistic about an end to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, I say that I am not. Optimism requires clear signs that things are changing - meaningful words and unambiguous actions that point to real progress. I do not yet hear enough meaningful words, nor do I yet see enough unambiguous deeds to justify optimism.

However, that does not mean I am without hope. I am a Christian. I am constrained by my faith to hope against hope, placing my trust in things as yet unseen. Hope persists in the face of evidence to the contrary, undeterred by setbacks and disappointment. Hoping against hope, then, I do believe that a resolution will be found. It will not be perfect, but it can be just; and if it is just, it will usher in a future of peace.

My hope for peace is not amorphous. It has a shape. It is not the shape of a particular political solution, although there are some political solutions that I believe to be more just than others.

Neither does my hope take the shape of a particular people, although I have pleaded tirelessly for international attention to be paid to the misery of Palestinians, and I have roundly condemned the injustices of certain Israeli policies that compound that misery. Thus I am often accused of siding with Palestinians against Israeli Jews, naively exonerating the one and unfairly demonizing the other.

Nevertheless, I insist that the hope in which I persist is not reducible to politics or identified with a people. It has a more encompassing shape. I like to call it "God's dream."

God has a dream for all his children. It is about a day when all people enjoy fundamental security and live free of fear. It is about a day when all people have a hospitable land in which to establish a future. More than anything else, God's dream is about a day when all people are accorded equal dignity because they are human beings. In God's beautiful dream, no other reason is required.

God's dream begins when we begin to know each other differently, as bearers of a common humanity, not as statistics to be counted, problems to be solved, enemies to be vanquished or animals to be caged. God's dream begins the moment one adversary looks another in the eye and sees himself reflected there.

All things become possible when hearts fixed in mutual contempt begin to grasp a transforming truth; namely, that this person I fear and despise is not an alien, something less than human. This person is very much like me, and enjoys and suffers, loves and fears, wonders, worries, and hopes. Just as I do, this person longs for well-being in a world of peace.

God's dream begins with this mutual recognition - we are not strangers, we are kin. It culminates in the defeat of oppression perpetrated in the name of security, and of violence inflicted in the name of liberation. God's dream routs the cynicism and despair that once cleared the path for hate to have its corrosive way with us, and for ravenous violence to devour everything in sight.

God's dream comes to flower when everyone who claims to be wholly innocent relinquishes that illusion, when everyone who places absolute blame on another renounces that lie, and when differing stories are told at last as one shared story of human aspiration. God's dream ends in healing and reconciliation. Its finest fruit is human wholeness flourishing in a moral universe.

In the meanwhile, between the root of human solidarity and the fruit of human wholeness, there is the hard work of telling the truth.

From my experience in South Africa I know that truth-telling is hard. It has grave consequences for one's life and reputation. It stretches one's faith, tests one's capacity to love, and pushes hope to the limit. At times, the difficulty of this work can make you wonder if people are right about you, that you are a fool.

No one takes up this work on a do-gooder's whim. It is not a choice. One feels compelled into it. Neither is it work for a little while, but rather for a lifetime - and for more than a lifetime. It is a project bigger than any one life. This long view is a source of encouragement and perseverance. The knowledge that the work preceded us and will go on after us is a fountain of deep gladness that no circumstance can alter.

Nothing, however, diminishes the fear and trembling that accompany speaking the truth to power in love. An acute awareness of fallibility is a constant companion in this task, but because nothing is more important in the current situation than to speak as truthfully as one can, there can be no shrinking from testifying to what one sees and hears.

What do I see and hear in the Holy Land? Some people cannot move freely from one place to another. A wall separates them from their families and from their incomes. They cannot tend to their gardens at home or to their lessons at school. They are arbitrarily demeaned at checkpoints and unnecessarily beleaguered by capricious applications of bureaucratic red tape. I grieve for the damage being done daily to people's souls and bodies. I have to tell the truth: I am reminded of the yoke of oppression that was once our burden in South Africa.

I see and hear that ancient olive trees are uprooted. Flocks are cut off from their pastures and shepherds. The homes of some people are bulldozed even as new homes for others are illegally constructed on other people's land. I grieve for the land that suffers such violence, the marring of its beauty, the loss of its comforts, the despoiling of its yield. I have to tell the truth: I am reminded of the bitter days of uprooting and despoiling in my own country.

I see and hear that young people believe that it is heroic and pious to kill others by killing themselves. They strap bombs to their torsos to achieve liberation. They do not know that liberation achieved by brutality will defraud in the end. I grieve the waste of their lives and of the lives they take, the loss of personal and communal security they cause, and the lust for revenge that follows their crimes, crowding out all reason and restraint. I have to tell the truth: I am reminded of the explosive anger that inflamed South Africa, too.

Some people are enraged by comparisons between the Israeli/Palestinian conflict and what happened in South Africa. There are differences between the two situations, but a comparison need not be exact in every feature to yield clarity about what is going on. Moreover, for those of us who lived through the dehumanizing horrors of the apartheid era, the comparison seems not only apt, it is also necessary. It is necessary if we are to persevere in our hope that things can change.

Indeed, because of what I experienced in South Africa, I harbor a vast, unreasoning hope for Israel and the Palestinian territories. South Africans, after all, had no reason to suppose that the evil system and the cycles of violence that were sapping the soul of our nation would ever change. There was nothing special or different about South Africans to deserve the appearance of the very thing for which we prayed and worked and suffered so long.

Most South Africans did not believe they would live to see a day of liberation. They did not believe that their children's children would see it. They did not believe that such a day even existed, except in fantasy. But we have seen it. We are living now in the day we longed for.

It is not a cloudless day. The divine arc that bends toward a truly just and whole society has not yet stretched fully across my country's sky like a rainbow of peace. It is not finished, it does not always live up to its promise, it is not perfect - but it is new. A brand new thing, like a dream of God, has come about to replace the old story of mutual hatred and oppression.

I have seen it and heard it, and so to this truth, too, I am compelled to testify - if it can happen in South Africa, it can happen with the Israelis and Palestinians. There is not much reason to be optimistic, but there is every reason to hope.

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