

## **Friends of SABEEL – Conference - Boston 27<sup>th</sup> October 2007**

### **PALESTINE AND APARTHEID**

#### Preamble

Dear Friends, it is a great privilege to be with you again since 2002. As you know, my address then has recently been in the news because on the basis of a distortion of what I said, President Dease of St Thomas University decided I shouldn't visit his campus. It is good that he has since reversed his decision. I commend him for his courage in admitting publicly that he was wrong. It is never easy to do that. I hope that he will reinstate Professor Cris Toffolo. I have received the President's invitation in which he makes a very handsome apology which I have accepted. I am happy to accept his invitation provided it can be fitted into my schedule and if Professor Toffolo is reinstated with no adverse comment in her academic file arising from this unfortunate episode.

I thank God for my Hebrew antecedents. I thank God that I too am a descendant of Abraham. I give thanks to God for the gift of the Holy Scriptures made up substantially of the Hebrew Scriptures forming what we conventionally refer to as our Old Testament. Even our New Testament which would be distinctively Christian, is incomprehensible without taking its Jewish setting seriously. For instance Jesus is the Greek for Joshua who led God's people into the Promised Land and Christ is the Anointed One, in Hebrew - the Messiah, whose coming was predicted in the Jewish scriptures and who was longed for so poignantly by the Jews.

I tell you nothing you do not already know. I refer to it all only to assert that spiritually I am of Hebrew descent. That legacy has been of crucial importance to me in our struggle against Apartheid.

#### Our Anti-Apartheid Struggle

At the height of the struggle when apartheid's repression was at its most vicious and it seemed indeed as if the apartheid rulers were firmly ensconced in power, when they had all but knocked the stuffing out of their opponents and they were strutting the stage as invincible cocks of the walk, then we turned to the inspiration of our Hebrew tradition and antecedents.

We were able to revive and sustain our people's hope for their vindication and the ultimate triumph of good over evil, of freedom over injustice and oppression by our references to our biblical traditions. It was often quite exhilarating. I remember once when there had been a massacre in one of our townships which had been instigated by a sinister Third Force linked to the apartheid security apparatus, our bishops suspended a session of Episcopal Synod to be there as Ezekiel had been with the stunned exiles, to be there in a ministry of presence, and we held a service in one of our ghetto township churches. The people were stunned, devastated by the naked violence of the massacre. I preached and used Exodus 3:1-9, God's words which Yahweh asked Moses to announce to the children of Israel, I said, "Our God is not deaf – our God has heard our cries; our God is not stupid – God knows our suffering; our God is not blind – God has seen and sees our pain and anguish and....yes, our God will come down and set us free." Yes, our God will come down to open the prison doors and lead our leaders from prison, lead them back from exile. For we had learned from our Jewish tradition

that God, our God, is notoriously biased, forever taking the side of the weak, the oppressed, the downtrodden against the kings and the powerful oppressors. Our God had been met first, not in the sanctuary, but in the mundane world of politics, taking the side of a rabble of slaves against the mighty Pharaoh. God is not neutral, God sided with Uriah the Hittite against his favourite, King David after his adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of Uriah. Thou art the man. Anywhere else the king could have got away with both actions, but not in Israel. It really seemed as if the Jewish scriptures were written specifically for us. The story of Naboth's vineyard and King Ahab and Jezebel being confronted on Yahweh's behalf by Elijah seemed to have been written especially with our situation in mind, where blacks (not exclusively, but overwhelmingly) were shipped in their millions like so many pawns in population removal schemes and dumped in poverty stricken Bantustan homelands, hardly able to eke out a living, cut off from the more affluent so-called white South Africa.

The widow, the orphan and the alien, who in most traditional societies would be the weakest of the weak seemed to be particular favourites with God who appeared to have a soft spot for them. And so worship of God's people however elaborate and ritually correct would be dismissed as an abomination, unless it made the worshipper have the sensitivity to care for God's favourites (Is.1:11-16). Even something so obviously religious as a fast was rejected out of hand by this God who could declaim that the kind of fast He wanted was that which fed the hungry, set free the captives – all thoroughly secular activities but which confirmed Yahweh's bias in favour of and concern for those who were hard done by, who were at the end of their tether, who were so low they could crawl under a snake. We could multiply references to the prophets Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Micah, et al. It reverberated throughout the prophetic writings, this concern for the poor, the hungry, the downtrodden, the widow, the orphan, the alien.

But it was not just in the prophetic oracles. It was so also in the Pentateuch, the Torah, the scriptures *par excellence* for God's chosen. Extraordinarily in what was perhaps the book most concerned for cultic ritual matters, Leviticus, where holiness referred most frequently to ritual cultic purity, the worshipper, the Israelite is bidden to be holy as Yahweh is holy and just when we imagined that this would be concerned with ritual holiness, we are brought up short that this is a holiness that plays itself out in a concern for the hungry, the poor. "Be holy even as your God is holy", and so you must not glean your fields clean at harvest, leave something for the poor and hungry too (Lev.19:1,98). Fantastic – God's special people must be holy but this is a holiness that expresses itself in mundane acts of caring, of kindness and compassion, of humanitarian concern. In Deuteronomy the motive for doing acts of kindness to God's favourites, the widow, the orphan and the alien is not emulating God's holiness, it is the memory of their former status as slaves in Egypt. That memory, it is implied, would prevent them from inflicting on others the kind of anguish they had experienced. They would never do to others, it is assumed, what had been done to them.

I think they are words to be written in letters of gold as pertinent to the situation we are in.

Deuteronomy 24:17-22

*"You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.*

*When you reap your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands.*

*When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.*

*When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.*

*You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this.”*

That is how the people of this God were expected to behave. If you were set to rule over these people as king these were as it were your marching orders, your manifesto, found in the book of Psalms (Psalm 72:1-4,12-14)

*“Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son!*

*May he judge thy people with righteousness, and the poor with justice!*

*Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness!*

*May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor!*

*For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper.*

*He has pity on the weak and he needy, and saves the lives of the needy.*

*From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.”*

The three sections of the Hebrew scriptures – the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings are unanimous in their depiction of the nature of the God revealed in these books.

It was exhilarating preaching to the oppressed and downtrodden. The well to do, the powerful often complained that we were mixing religion with politics and we would declare that we were doing no more than in fact preaching the Gospel. We would be accused of being political and I retorted “I don’t know which Bible you are reading” and “I must say I have never heard the poor complain”, “Bishop Tutu now you’re being political!” If anything they could possibly have said, “You are not political enough.”

And God vindicated us. Apartheid’s rulers bit the dust as all oppressors have done always, for this is a moral universe, right and wrong matter. It cannot happen that evil, injustice and oppression can have the last word. No, ultimately goodness, justice, freedom – these will prevail.

### What is this to the point?

I could have spent a great deal of time rehearsing what we all know. How I experienced a *deja vu* when I saw a security check point which Palestinians had to negotiate most of their lives that I was reminded so painfully of the same checkpoints in apartheid South Africa, when arrogant white policemen treated almost all blacks like dirt, or, when someone pointed

to a house in Jerusalem and said that used to be our home, but now it has been taken over by the Israelis, which made me recall so painfully similar statements in Cape Town by coloureds who had been thrown out of their homes and relocated in ghetto townships some distance from town. I could have bemoaned the illegal wall that has encroached on Palestinian land, separated families, divided property and made what used to be a short walk to school turn into an expensive nightmare voyage running the gauntlet of checkpoints, etc. I could have said there were things that even apartheid South Africa had not done, for example collective punishment.

I have not gone that route. No, I have chosen a different approach. My address is really a *cri de Coeur*, a cry of anguish from the heart, an impassioned plea to my spiritual relatives, the offspring of Abraham like me – please hear the call, the noble call of your scriptures, of our scriptures, to be with the God of the Exodus who took the side of a bunch of slaves against the powerful Pharaoh, be on the side of the God who intervened through His prophet Elijah on behalf of Naboth, hear the plea of your scriptures and stand with the God who intervened through his prophet Nathan on behalf of Uriah against King David. Be on the side of the God who revealed a soft spot in his heart for the widow, the orphan and the alien, be on the side of the God whose “Spirit sends us out to preach good news to the poor.” Don’t be found fighting against the God, your God, our God who hears the cry of the oppressed, who sees their anguish and who will always come down to deliver them. Be not opposed to the God whose Spirit when it anoints you makes you concerned for the poor. This is your calling. If you disobey that calling, if you do not heed it, then as sure as anything one day you will come a cropper. You will probably not succumb to an outside assault militarily. With the unquestioning support of the USA you are probably impregnable. But you who are called are they who are asked to deal with the oppressed, the weak the despised compassionately, caringly, remembering what happened to you in Egypt and much more recently in Germany. Remember and act appropriately. If you reject your calling you may survive for a long time, but you will find it is all corrosive inside and one day you will implode.

A recent report by a clinical psychologist Nufan Yishai Katrim at the Hebrew University speaks of how Israeli soldiers were gratuitously cruel and carried out acts of brutality to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. When you uphold an unjust dispensation it corrodes your humanity. In South Africa a former Cabinet Minister showed this. When told of the death of Steve Biko in detention, he said it left him cold.

Thanks be to God for the many, many Jews who know what their divine calling is and who want the Israeli Government to live it out. We believe in a two state solution – of two sovereign, viable states each with contiguous borders guaranteed as secure by the international community. We condemn acts of terrorism by whoever they are committed. The suicide bomber has to be condemned for targeting innocent civilians. But equally must the Israelis be condemned for their acts of indiscriminate reprisal. We say please learn at least one positive lesson from apartheid South Africa. Under Mr F W de Klerk who must be commended for his outstanding courage, they decided to negotiate, not with those they liked but with their sworn enemy and they found the security that had eluded them for so long and that had cost so much suffering and blood. It came not from the barrel of a gun. No, it came when the legitimate aspirations and human rights of all were recognised and respected. That

was thirteen years ago and the peace is still holding. Many had predicted that South Africa would be overwhelmed by a catastrophic racial blood bath. It did not happen. It did not happen because they negotiated in good faith with their enemies.

Somebody has said if something happened once then clearly it is something possible. It happened in South Africa, why not in the Middle East?

The world needs the Jews, Jews who are faithful to their vocation that has meant so much for the world's morality, of its sense of what is right and wrong, what is good and bad, what is just and unjust, what is oppressive and what sets people free. Jews are indispensable for a good compassionate, just and caring world.

And so are Palestinians.