

Christ Under the Rubble

A Liturgy of Lament¹

Rev. Dr. Munther Isaac

Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church Bethlehem

Saturday, December 23rd, 2023

We are angry...

We are broken...

This should have been a time of joy; instead, we are mourning. We are fearful.

20,000 killed. Thousands under the rubble still. Close to 9,000 children killed in the most brutal ways. Day after day after day. 1.9 million displaced! Hundreds of thousands of homes were destroyed. Gaza as we know it no longer exists. This is an annihilation. A genocide.

The world is watching; Churches are watching. Gazans are sending live images of their own execution. Maybe the world cares? But it goes on...

We are asking, could this be our fate in Bethlehem? In Ramallah? In Jenin? Is this our destiny too?

We are tormented by the silence of the world. Leaders of the so-called “free” lined up one after the other to give the green light for this genocide against a captive population. They gave the cover. Not only did they make sure to pay the bill in advance, they veiled the truth and context, providing political cover. And, yet another layer has been added: the theological cover with the Western Church stepping into the spotlight.

The South African Church taught us the concept of “The state theology,” defined as “the theological justification of the status quo with its racism, capitalism and totalitarianism.” It does so by misusing theological concepts and biblical texts for its own political purposes.

¹ Re-printed with permission, this article is available elsewhere online.

Here in Palestine, the Bible is weaponized against. Our very own sacred text. In our terminology in Palestine, we speak of the Empire. Here we confront the theology of the Empire. A disguise for superiority, supremacy, “chosenness,” and entitlement. It is sometimes given a nice cover using words like mission and evangelism, fulfilment of prophecy, and spreading freedom and liberty. The theology of the Empire becomes a powerful tool to mask oppression under the cloak of divine sanction. It divides people into “us” and “them.” It dehumanizes and demonizes. It speaks of land without people even when they know the land has people – and not just any people. It calls for emptying Gaza, just like it called the ethnic cleansing in 1948 “a divine miracle.” It calls for us Palestinians to go to Egypt, maybe Jordan, or why not just the sea?

“Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” they said of us. This is the theology of Empire.

This war has confirmed to us that the world does not see us as equal. Maybe it is the colour of our skin. Maybe it is because we are on the wrong side of the political equation. Even our kinship in Christ did not shield us. As they said, if it takes killing 100 Palestinians to get a single “ Hamas militant” then so be it! We are not humans in their eyes. (But in God’s eyes... no one can tell us we are not!)

The hypocrisy and racism of the Western world is transparent and appalling! They always take the words of Palestinians with suspicion and qualification. No, we are not treated equally. Yet, the other side, despite a clear track record of misinformation, is almost always deemed infallible!

To our European friends. I never ever want to hear you lecture us on Human rights or international law again. We are not white – it does not apply to us according to your own logic.

In this war, the many Christians in the Western world made sure the Empire has the theology needed. It is self-defence, we were told! (And I ask How?)

In the shadow of the Empire, they turned the colonizer into the victim, and the colonized into the aggressor. Have we forgotten that the state was built on the ruins of the towns and villages of those very same Gazans?

We are outraged by the complicity of the church. Let it be clear: Silence is complicity and empty calls for peace without a ceasefire and end to occupation and the shallow words of empathy without direct action — are all under the banner of complicity. So here is my message: Gaza today has become the moral compass of the world. Gaza was hell on earth before October 7th.

If you are not appalled by what is happening; if you are not shaken to your core — there is something wrong with your humanity. If we, as Christians, are not outraged by this genocide, by the weaponizing of the Bible to justify it, there is something wrong with our Christian witness, and compromising the credibility of the Gospel!

If you fail to call this a genocide. It is on you. It is a sin and a darkness you willingly embrace.

Some have not even called for a ceasefire...

I feel sorry for you. We will be ok. Despite the immense blow we have endured, we will recover. We will rise and stand up again from the midst of destruction, as we have always done as Palestinians, although this is by far the biggest blow we have received in a long time.

But again, for those who are complicit, I feel sorry for you. Will you ever recover from this?

Your charity, your words of shock AFTER the genocide, won't make a difference. Words of regret will not suffice for you. We will not accept your apology after the genocide. What has been done, has been done. I want you to look at the mirror... and ask: where was I?

To our friends who are here with us: You have left your families and churches to be with us. You embody the term accompaniment — a costly solidarity. “We were in prison and you visited us.” What a stark difference from the silence and complicity of others. Your presence here is the meaning of solidarity. Your visit has already left an impression that will never be taken from us. Through you, God has spoken to us that “we are not forsaken.” As Father Rami of the Catholic Church said this morning, you have come to Bethlehem, and like the Magi, you brought gifts with, but gifts that are more precious than gold, frankincense, and myrrh. You brought the gift of love and solidarity.

We needed this. For this season, maybe more than anything, we were troubled by the silence of God. In these last two months, the Psalms of lament have become a precious companion. We cried out: My God, My God, we have you forsaken Gaza? Why do you hide your face from Gaza?

In our pain, anguish, and lament, we have searched for God, and found him under the rubble in Gaza. Jesus became the victim of the very same violence of the Empire. He was tortured. Crucified. He bled out as others watched. He was killed and cried out in pain – My God, where are you?

In Gaza today, God is under the rubble.

And in this Christmas season, as we search for Jesus, he is to be found not on the side of Rome, but our side of the wall. In a cave, with a simple family. Vulnerable. Barely, and miraculously surviving a massacre. Among a refugee family. This is where Jesus is found.

If Jesus were to be born today, he would be born under the rubble in Gaza. When we glorify pride and richness, Jesus is under the rubble...

When we rely on power, might, and weapons, Jesus is under the rubble...

When we justify, rationalize, and theologize the bombing of children, Jesus is under the rubble...

Jesus is under the rubble. This is his manger. He is at home with the marginalized, the suffering, the oppressed, and displaced. This is his manger.

I have been looking, contemplating on this iconic image.... God with us, precisely in this way. THIS is the incarnation. Messy. Bloody. Poverty.

This child is our hope and inspiration. We look and see him in every child killed and pulled from under the rubble. While the world continues to reject the children of Gaza, Jesus says: “just as you did it to one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did it to me.” “You did to ME.” Jesus not only calls them his own, he is them!

We look at the holy family and see them in every family displaced and wandering, now homeless in despair. While the world discusses the fate of the people of Gaza as if they are unwanted boxes in a

garage, God in the Christmas narrative shares in their fate; He walks with them and calls them his own.

This manger is about resilience – صمود. The resilience of Jesus is in his meekness; weakness, and vulnerability. The majesty of the incarnation lies in its solidarity with the marginalized. Resilience because this very same child, rose up from the midst of pain, destruction, darkness and death to challenge Empires; to speak truth to power and deliver an everlasting victory over death and darkness.

This is Christmas today in Palestine and this is the Christmas message. It is not about Santa, trees, gifts, lights... etc. My goodness how we twisted the meaning of Christmas. How we have commercialized Christmas. I was in the USA last month, the first Monday after Thanksgiving, and I was amazed by the amount of Christmas decorations and lights, all the and commercial goods. I couldn't help but think: They send us bombs, while celebrating Christmas in their land. They sing about the prince of peace in their land, while playing the drum of war in our land.

Christmas in Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus, is this manger. This is our message to the world today. It is a gospel message, a true and authentic Christmas message, about the God who did not stay silent, but said his word, and his Word is Jesus. Born among the occupied and marginalized. He is in solidarity with us in our pain and brokenness.

This manger is our message to the world today – and it is simply this: this genocide must stop NOW. Let us repeat to the world: STOP this Genocide NOW.

This is our call. This is our plea. This is our prayer. Hear oh God. Amen.