

## **PLENTY OF ROOM AT THE INN – CHRISTMAS MESSAGE 2007**

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Having just returned from a visit to Israel and Palestine I can't help but think of how different Christmas day will be for those in the Holy Land.

Australia is a long way away not just geographically but in the shape of daily life. Even with the increased security measures of recent years, we still live basically free from the fear of terrorist bombings, explosions, attacks and mass murder. We sleep soundly in our beds at night and for the most part we rise each day with hope in our hearts. Mostly our days are not clouded by constant fear. Our basic needs are met. Our education and health systems, despite ongoing concerns, are basically strong and functioning. 99% of the time our police service protects us and our rights as does the justice system. Most of us have work. We are secure in a society where our participation is welcome and we are free to live and move as we choose in a country where law and order is assured.

It's hard for us to imagine any one of those things we take for granted suddenly being removed. It's virtually impossible to imagine them all gone. But that is the reality for many citizens in troubled parts of the globe.

Two weeks ago I was in Bethlehem where Jesus and Christmas were born. A Palestinian man said to me '2000 years ago we made a mistake saying "There is no room at the inn." Today there's plenty of room.'

It was a sad comment on the devastating effects on the Palestinian economy of the long-running conflict with Israel. Hotel occupancy has actually improved from 10% a few years ago to 50% today. But with unemployment running at about the same rate and a segregated road system, road blocks and checkpoints making movement of people and goods difficult at best and impossible at worst things are grim. Christmas is not such a happy time in Bethlehem these days.

A few days earlier I had stood on the Mount of Olives and looked across the valley to Jerusalem. I had stood in roughly the same place Jesus stood 2000 years ago. Then he wept for the city saying, 'If only you recognised the things that make for peace.' As I stood there these words echoed in my ears.

At his birth the angels announced 'peace on earth.' 2000 years later there is trouble and conflict as far as the eye can see.

There are no easy solutions. I have no doubt that the vast majority of Israelis and Palestinians want to live in peace. And yet, according to the Israelis, check points, road blocks and concrete walls are needed to protect their citizens from terrorist attacks. At the same time Palestinians feel hemmed in, oppressed, and disenfranchised. There are no absolute rights and wrongs in this conflict. There can be progress but only if there is generous participation on both sides in negotiations centred on mutual understanding. Respect and trust must be rebuilt.

Security is a key word for Israel and Palestine. Israelis need to feel secure against the threat of terrorist attacks. Palestinians also need security to live in their own homes and freedom of movement to work, to participate in education, to access health care and to engage in economic activity.

Another leader I spoke with said that what the Palestinians need is peace, peace, peace...Without peace, he said, there can be no security for Israel. He was positive that with respect for each other and basic human rights ensured for all then the peoples of the Holy Land could live in harmony with difference.

During our visit we Australian church leaders were asked time and time again to speak about what we had seen and heard and to urge Australians to embrace three 'P's: prayer, pilgrimage and projects. Those who live in the Holy Land need us to pray for their peace. We can assist by visiting the Holy Land and the holy places to become better acquainted with the situations there. And we can

support projects initiated to build peace and well-being for all the peoples of that land.

Despite all the challenges Christmas remains a festival of hope. That hope springs from the life lived by the Christmas child. He revealed the things that make for peace: respect for all human beings, acceptance, neighbourliness, kindness, gentleness, humility, forgiveness, wisdom. These things make for peace in our own hearts and in our families, peace in our neighbourhoods and workplaces, peace in our nation and in our world.

Let us recognise the things that make for peace and grasp the hope held out to us by this birth.