

Christmas Eve
The Cathedral of St. George the Martyr
December 24, 2010
11:30pm

The Rt. Rev'd Suheil S. Dawani
Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem
The Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem

Christians all share the Good News of a great joy which is for all the people of the baby Jesus born in Bethlehem. At Christmas we are no longer Lutheran or Anglican, Orthodox Christian or Latin Catholic. We are the Body of Christ.

We sing carols of praise in many languages but with one voice thanking God for the gift of his only Son. In the spirit of Pentecost, we pray in many languages but with one voice in thanksgiving to God for the gift of the Prince of Peace. We are of many cultures from all over God's creation and yet we offer one witness for all the world to see that we are a people who love God, who love our neighbor and who seek peace and pursue peace in all of our relationships.

Christmas celebrations for us here in the Land of the Holy One and throughout the Middle East are vitally important. Our celebration of the birth of the Prince of Peace gives our people a spiritual boost. Our lights and decorations on our churches, schools and hospitals remind our people and our neighbors that the Christian presence in villages, towns and cities is alive. This Christian presence is shrinking throughout the Middle East, but Christians continue to provide a vital and fulfilling witness to Christ throughout this region.

Christmas celebrations provide visibility for the ministry of the Christian churches to be seen by their Muslim and Jewish neighbors. This reminder of the Christian presence is very important because of the small number of Christians who remain here.

The Christian minority is only between one and two per-cent of the total population here in Jerusalem and throughout Israel and Palestine. Therefore the visibility of the indigenous Christians during major celebrations like Christmas is critical so that our neighbors do not think the only Christians they see are pilgrims from other parts of the world.

We are always looking for ways to empower the Christian presence here in the Land of the Holy One. Major feasts and celebrations help to make the Church visible, but we all know that more must be done if Christians are to survive in this region. Christians here look to their brothers and sisters in Christ to assist in the important work of adding their voices to ours for peace and reconciliation. We invite the world-wide Body of Christ to join us in the responsibility of peace-building from the grass roots in support of our education and health care programs which serve all of our neighbors regardless of religion, gender, race or social standing.

The world community must renew its commitment of advocacy and support of Christians here in the Middle East if our tolerant spirit is to prevail. The violence against Christians in Iraq has reduced the Christian population in that country by half in recent years. Without a political solution to the violence and political oppression in this region, the Christian voice of moderation and mutual respect will no longer be heard.

Christians here in the Middle East speak, pray and act as one body when it comes to proclaiming peace for all of God's people. We continue to call upon all those in political power to bring about a just and durable peace for all people. Christians throughout the Middle East speak with one voice about their deep desire to bring about the end of conflicts rooted in violence and political oppression. Violence has not and can never be accepted as the way to bring about a just and lasting peace between peoples.

Many of us believe that peace in Bethlehem and here in Jerusalem will be a source of hope and inspiration for the world to no longer learn war any more. We believe that the reality of peace for all of God's children in the Holy Cities of Jerusalem and Bethlehem can provide an example for the world to follow in building bridges of understanding instead of walls of separation and rockets of destruction.

Here in Jerusalem, in Bethlehem and throughout the world, Christians celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace. Celebrating the birth of this new born baby gives us hope for a future for the peace we all desire for all of God's people. Thank God for the celebration. We need the opportunity to celebrate our Lord's birth and the gift of love, forgiveness and eternal life which God promises through our Lord Jesus.

After the celebration is over, we must ask all who have been to the Christmas feast; we must ask all who celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace; we must ask how does the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ affect our lives? How does this event touch our lives in the weeks and months after the Christmas tree is put away until next year?

We may celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus, but what about the new birth within each of us? Is there not the need for each Christian soul to find within ourselves new life, new energy, new focus and renewed commitment for living our faith in the Name of the Prince of Peace?

If we are people of peace whose faith is shaped by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, then how will that renewed commitment to peace be brought into reality? I believe faith and action must come together in our lives if Christmas is to have genuine meaning.

After the echo of the Christmas carols fade away, what action are you going to take to be a peacemaker in your family, within your church, at work, in your city? Let us not always be looking elsewhere for peacemaking to take place. Let us start with how we will be at peace with ourselves and with our God. Let us be worthy of being disciples of the Prince of Peace in faithfully following the one who was born for us, lived for us and died for us. Let us be worthy of living the forgiveness which our Lord promises to all who repent.

Let us bring this way of life to our neighborhoods, our churches and our ecumenical and interfaith partners. Let us encourage the politicians around the world that a vision of peace for all of God's creation is in their best interest for their future and the futures of their children and grandchildren. Let us be visible as people of hope for all to see that Christians throughout the world are willing to pray and work to bring that peace into reality by our words and actions.

In these next two weeks, let us celebrate. Let us celebrate with our families and with our friends in our homes and in our churches. Let us celebrate the joy of this season of hope with the holy family, with the shepherds, with the angels and archangels. In a few days time let us also welcome the wise men to our celebration as they follow that star.

As Christmas celebrations come to an end, we will see a New Year dawn upon us. May this be the year that the hope of fulfillment of the aspirations of the Palestinian people becomes a reality. Two states for two peoples with security and freedom for both Israel and Palestine.

The spirit of Christmas and the hope of a New Year is about more than the celebration. The spirit of Christmas is about Christians giving birth to all that is possible for the peace of the world in the name of the Prince of Peace, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Let us act on our faith with renewed commitment, with courage and the love of God on our hearts. Let us speak and act for peace with justice for all of God's people. By God's grace, we are a people for whom the concept of hope will never fade away.

May God bless you in this Holy Season and may God bless us all.
Amen.

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