

JOHN
RACKLEY

Reflections

Advent Crowd

THE BUSES were queuing to get into Bath. The car parks were filled to overflowing. The cranes high above the city re-development carried neon-lit season's greetings and the rain poured down.

It was that time of year again when Bath's Christmas Market filled the city centre beyond its capacity.

I had forgotten that this was happening until I found myself in the crowds around the Abbey. My usual route was now a battle with shoppers, other locals caught in the throng and security men standing tall and twice their size in padded jackets.

So with elbows ready and head positioned in its old prop-forward angle I made my way.

I wondered whether the wood-carvers from Bethlehem were at the fair as last year. In previous years Bath authorities questioned whether they should come. I and other ministers had to argue for their presence. This year I had heard nothing; shoving and pushing I made my way to where they might be.

And they were there! Smiles of recognition burst out, exchange of news and enquiries as to how the trade was going. I had explained how difficult it had been to get through the crowds.

'It is always difficult to get into Bethlehem,' my Palestinian friend replied. 'If you come this year it will be easier for you – we expect many tourists in Bethlehem but for me – to get in or out is never easy'.

The matter-of-fact way she spoke of one of the consequences of the Israeli Occupation transformed the conversation.

Will it always be difficult to get Bethlehem?

Was it difficult for you, Joseph, as you travelled with the heavily-pregnant Mary alongside many others of your clan to be counted in the census? You were not travelling with strangers but cousins, members of other families that your parents lived near and your grandparents knew. I wonder what you talked about. Old times before the Occupation by Rome? New times under the authority of a King kept in place by the power of a foreign empire? Or was it the lovely, simple things of an advent baby, and the face of grandparents and special meals even though Rome was the reason for the displacement?

This forced removal of a civilian population meant that Bethlehem would see a great home-coming. Was there celebration? People who had not seen each other for a long time melted into each other's arms and found room among the clan's houses.

So why was it difficult for you, Joseph? Was it something about why you had left the town in the first place? Perhaps you were not so welcome. Maybe so many had returned that the only place of privacy for Mary and her advent child was in a shepherd's cave.

Or is it that we do not notice God is with us because we just do not care or have the eyes of faith?

As I continued to talk with the Palestinians in Bath Christmas Market it was clear that they were looking forward to Bethlehem's Christmas this year. There were glad the tourists were returning. They were glad that they would have time together with their families. The difficulty of travel into that little West Bank town would be worth it.

But I have to admit that there are other types of difficulty when it comes to getting to Bethlehem.

Lethargy. Grief. Fear. Bitterness. Cynicism.

The journey of our spirit can find it hard to get there. In the Advent weeks we can find ourselves struggling against the crowd of experiences and feelings that come from the past year, and which seem to want to keep us away from the place of our Lord's birth.

It doesn't seem a year since we last sang carols, and we realise it's our age.

It doesn't seem the same since separation, death, argument has broken our family unity and drained us of vitality.

It doesn't seem the same to children, who are less tolerant of their parents' desire to play happy families when they remember the row at the beach in the summer.

It doesn't seem the same when another year has gone by, but the signs of God's blessing on our ministry have not been in sight.

It doesn't seem the same when instead of singing 'O come let us adore him' members of the church prefer two other choruses.

The first is 'How can we sing the Lord's song in this atheistic land?' The second, looking at the greater numbers at the Carols by Candlelight is 'We wish you a Happy Easter, because that's when we'll see you again.'

What's going to prevent us getting to Bethlehem this year?

The Revd John Rackley is minister of Manvers Street Baptist Church, Bath

Blessed are

In a part of the world where conflict has deep roots and international reputations have foundered on failed attempts to bring peace, **Mark Woods** meets Christians who are doing things differently

JUST a fortnight ago, Israeli security forces cleared out a house in the West Bank town of Hebron, not far from Bethlehem. A group of Jewish settlers had taken it from its Palestinian owner and, in spite of a court order, had refused to leave. As a result of the clearance, mobs of settlers went on a rampage nearby. They set fire to at least one Palestinian house, threw stones and torched olive trees all over the valley.

Not long before, a record-breaking number of Christians turned out for the Feast of Tabernacles celebration organised by the International Christian Embassy Jerusalem (ICEJ). More than 7,500 delegates from nearly 100 countries marched through Jerusalem sang songs, waved flags and handed out sweets to children.

Particularly in the US, these Christian Zionist organisations, who believe that the return of Jews to the Holy Land is a direct fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, have huge influence both theologically and politically. It translates into an unconditional support for Israeli expansion to its Biblical borders, at the expense of Palestinian territory.

So what if you are a Palestinian Arab and an evangelical Christian? Where do your loyalties lie, and how do you negotiate the bewildering theological, social and political territory in which you live?

For Salim Munayer, the key word is 'reconciliation'.

'Reconciliation is a central theme in the Bible,' he says. 'Jesus came to bring reconciliation, to change a heart of stone for a heart of flesh, to bring us the Holy Spirit.'

Reconciliation is the best translation of the title he's given his ministry – Musalaha – which receives support from BMS World Mission. He started it in 1989 when he was lecturing both at the Bethlehem Bible College and in Tel Aviv, where he worked with Jews who had come to believe in Jesus as Messiah ('Messianics').

'Messianic Christians had questions about their identity as Jews, and the relation between church and synagogue,' he says. For Arab Christians, 'What we do is study the Bible, but which people group was the Bible written about? For Palestinian Christians, their spiritual heritage comes from the people

who are oppressing them.

'One of my [Palestinian] students came and shared with me, with tears in his eyes. A Jewish settler came and took his land. My student said, "This is mine, I have deeds to this land." The settler took out his Bible and said, "This is my deed."

'The Bible was working against them. So, they can begin to play down their Christian identity, or they can say, "The New Testament is for us," and be very selective about the Old Testament. How were they to deal with their spiritual heritage?'

Sometimes the encounters of Palestinian Christians with Western evangelicals were devastating. 'At the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, they encountered thousands of Christians who were marching and saying that they loved the Jewish people,' Salim explains. 'That was fine, but what about the household of God? My students came back in tears; one speaker had said, "The

evangelical community, but its work is much wider than that now. It has a staff of 10 full- and part-timers, and it works with Christians, Muslims and Jews. It trains people in reconciliation ministry, and they go on to work with groups of all kinds. Desert encounters are still a key element of its work, but it also runs youth and women's activities, leadership retreats, and conferences.

'For instance, we have just brought 50 women together to talk about the Holocaust and the Nakba [the expulsion of Arabs from their homes in 1947-49].

'They heard a lecture on the Holocaust, and then a witness from a Holocaust survivor. Then they heard a lecture on the Nakba, and a witness from someone who was there.

'This is not to compare suffering. It's saying, "Understanding our neighbour's suffering is essential to our relationship." Each person is unique. How we deal with it reflects who we are.'

So far this year 1,000 people have been through Musalaha's programmes. Six groups of 20 women have been through a two-year programme to train them as reconcilers. In Bethlehem and Ramallah 100 young people are in training.

For Salim, reconciliation reflects a distinctive Christian contribution to the Holy Land. 'In 1 John 4 it says that God is love. For Muslims, God is justice – so there must be justice at all costs. For Jews, he is the Holy Creator, leading to isolationism.

'Our process of reconciliation reflects our understanding of who God is and how he relates to us. God came to earth to embrace us with his love.'

There is, though, the question of justice, and for Salim this is integral to the process.

He speaks of four stages – confession, repentance, intimacy, and restitution. 'Justice is a component of reconciliation. But if you only talk about justice, you're saying, "I want to continue this conflict."

JUSTICE, of course, looks very different through Jewish and Arab eyes. For Jews, they have spent 60 years in a struggle for national survival, having to face the hostility of surrounding nations, and terrorist attacks on their own ground. They know that they only have to lose one war. Their treatment of the Palestinians is justified on the grounds of national security.

For Palestinians, it's very different: they point to the ethnic cleansing, the massacres, rapes, looting and destruction of whole towns that accompanied the War of Independence in 1947-49 and led to 750,000 people leaving their homes. They call it the Nakba, the Catastrophe, and it's an aspect of Israel's founding that has been airbrushed out until

recently. A number of Israeli historians – Benny Morris and Ilan Pappé, for instance – have unsparingly revealed the atrocities committed by Jews at the time. (Though they differ widely in their interpretations – was it a concerted policy, or a response to events, for instance?)

Palestinians also point to the Greater Israel ideology which, exemplified in the powerful settler movement, seeks an expanded Israel with fewer or no Arabs within its borders.

And over the years, Palestinian territory has been eroded to the point where a two-state solution – the default starting-point for negotiations – is barely viable. Despite all agreements to the contrary, settlements are still being built or expanded on Palestinian land, defended by Israeli soldiers and supplied by settler-only roads. And of course there is the Wall, which divides communities and perpetuates a profound division.

All of this leads to both sides dehumanising each other, says Salim. 'Identity develops by denial. People go to their sacred texts to justify it – they equate Palestinians with Amalek, for instance.'

He adds that 'both sides have a severe victimisation mentality. For the Israelis, it's the Holocaust – we have to defend ourselves or it will happen again, they say. For Palestinians, it's the belief that they are paying the price for what Germany did to the Jews.'

So, he believes, reconciliation is in three stages: change of attitude, change of behaviour, change of structures. He's working on the first two; the third, he believes, will follow.

MUSALAHA is the only organisation working in this way with Jews, Muslims and Christians. But it's not the only Christian organisation seeking to make a difference in the Occupied Territories. The Holy Land Trust is run by Sami Awad, whose father Bishara is president of the Bethlehem Bible College, and it also receives BMS support.

Started in 1998, the Trust runs training and workshops in non-violence. For Sami, violence as a strategy isn't just wrong – it's doomed to failure. He wants to build a strong culture of non-violent resistance among Palestinians – Christians and Muslims – which will enable them to level the playing-field with the Israelis, and to create a just and lasting peace.

In the beginning, Sami and his co-workers faced hostility from the community. 'They called us traitors, Mossad agents, CIA agents, collaborators,' he says. 'Now, even militant groups have come round.'

The Holy Land Trust has 40 trainers who work all across the West Bank and Jerusalem.

If you are a
Palestinian
evangelical,
where do your
loyalties lie?

Palestinians need to move out, to prepare for the second coming of Jesus." For 2,000 years they had been trying to hold the faith – now they were told they were an obstacle to the coming of Christ.'

His approach to dialogue was radical: he took 15 Palestinians and 15 Israelis out into the desert. 'The first night they slept on different sides. By the second day, things were changing – they were listening and talking.

'It was outside the pressure cooker, a neutral space; it wasn't us and them; they had to help each other, and they discovered each other as human beings.'

Musalaha began within the