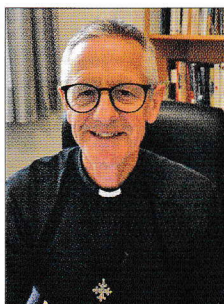


One year of war and no end in sight...

The dean of St. George's College, Jerusalem, the Rev Canon Richard Sewell, reflects on the current situation in the Holy Land.



The Israel-Gaza war began early for us on Saturday 7th October. Our group of pilgrims was receiving a lecture from course director Rev Dr Rodney Aist, prior to a visit to Bethlehem and specifically to the Basilica of the Nativity. My phone started to buzz manically with notifications about 'terrorist activity' around the Gaza border in Israel. It was clearly different from other types of upsurges of violence which had happened previously, so I immediately cancelled the visit to Bethlehem and said we would stay within the college grounds all day. Little did we know then the full scale of the horrors of October 7 and we could not have imagined the terrifying destruction that would follow afterwards, right up to the present day.

Since then, we have not been able to run any pilgrim courses at all. With the situation dangerous for travelling, we are to all effects, closed. Closed to pilgrim groups but definitely not closed up with no signs of life. The college management team and I have been keen to ensure that we keep all the staff employed either full time or part time. We talk, in good times, about the college being a family. A family doesn't discard people in hard times so it has been important to find a way to maintain staff on some kind of a salary. Of course there is still some work to do. We have a few travellers passing through, bishops and others on solidarity visits, journalists and NGO staff who know the appeal of the college and the cathedral close. But these are few in number.

Our course director Rodney Aist and I have been making short on-site films about the holy and historic places. These ensure that we maintain a profile amongst our supporters. They can all be seen on our YouTube channel:

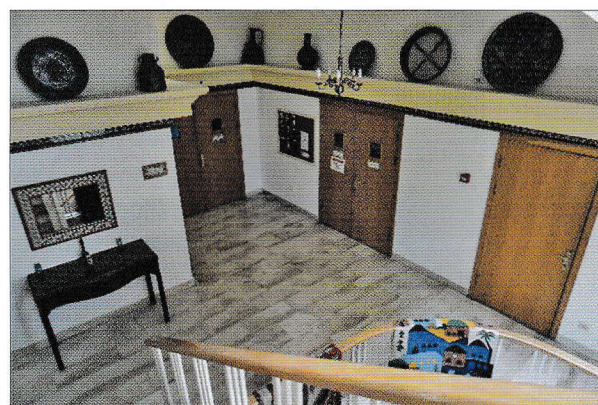
<https://www.youtube.com/@richardsewell4849/videos>

This means that while people are currently unable to come to Israel/Palestine on pilgrimage, we can at least give them a taste of what the college does, in terms of the way we approach the sites, archaeologically,

historically and spiritually. But as the war has progressed it has got harder and more challenging to get around the country. Clearly everyone knows that it is impossible to get into Gaza, but travelling in the West Bank is also much more difficult because of internal checkpoints and flashpoints of violence which are far more frequent in these days. For those who live there, it makes travelling incredibly difficult but even for us, when we seek to visit places such as Nablus and Jericho, there are risks which serve as a disincentive to make the journey.

Inevitably, there has been a significant financial impact on the college as there has been for almost every sector of the community and the country. With no income from pilgrimages and ongoing costs of salaries and the maintenance of buildings and the cost of utilities, we have taken a heavy blow. Consequently, we have launched a fundraising campaign 'Let light shine in the darkness...' to address the significant shortfall between income and costs. We are also looking to restore our emergency reserves which have been decimated by two years of COVID and now the war. If any would like to support the College in its time of great need, all the information about how to donate is on the College website:

<https://www.saintgeorgescollegejerusalem.com/>



St George's College is an institute of the diocese of Jerusalem although we serve the whole Anglican Communion as the Anglican Centre for pilgrimage in the Holy Land. We want to ensure that when the war finally ends, the college is in a strong position once again to be the key doorway back into the Land and into the life of our diocese. Since we are not a commercial enterprise, all the benefits of the success of the college are fed back into the ministries of the Anglican church and to local people.

The economic impact of the war has been almost immeasurable for all parts of Israel/Palestine as well as for Lebanon but Jordan has also been impacted. The suffering is greatest for those who

Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East

Jerusalem Archbishop Hosam Naoum

have suffered the loss of lives and the obliteration of their neighbourhoods. But there is no part of the country which has not been severely affected. So many Christian families are dependent on the pilgrim and tourist trade that their livelihoods have collapsed. But there are many other economic effects too. To detail the impact on all the peoples of the whole region would take up another article. Needless to say, I do not minimise the effect that the war has had on Israel and its Jewish population but our perspective in the college, is primarily through the Palestinian experience.

Strangely, Jerusalem, which has been the boiling pot of the conflict at times in recent history, is more like the eye of the storm in the present conflict. The Holy City has been eerily calm for much of the time since October 2023. Except, on several notable occasions when missiles have been fired at, or over, Jerusalem and we have had to run to the college bomb shelter as sirens scream their fearful warning. In fact, the most obvious impact is in the Old City which has been almost completely devoid of pilgrims.



Many of the tourist shops have been closed, rather like they were during the pandemic and so we can wander the winding streets unhindered by weary, limping pilgrims and visit holy sites without queues or crowds. We yearn for those busy days once more. The college and

the Cathedral Close have always been and continue to be an oasis of calm whatever is occurring in the neighbourhood or the wider context. For the college staff I sense that coming in to work even when for some the workload is a far cry from the busyness of normal times, is something reliable in the midst of

frighteningly uncertain times. The 'fellowship of the close' for those of us who are resident, is a constant source of encouragement and strength. Added to that, we are continually assured of the prayers of friends of ours and friends of the college and this is a boon. We feel uplifted by prayer and the grace of God.

I am regularly asked if, in all this suffering, I see any hope. The reply which I have come to favour is that I distinguish between optimism and Christian hope. I do not see grounds for optimism at present. I cannot see the route out of the present unholy mess and I cannot see the path towards the justice and peace which we desire. My Christian hope is founded on the conviction of the promise of God in Christ to be with us in our suffering and to never leave us without comfort. The seeds of encouragement which I cherish are the extraordinary acts of dedicated service of the staff of our Al Ahli Hospital in Gaza and of many others who serve vulnerable people too. They belong to the wider Christian community and indeed also in the words and acts of Muslims and Jews who resist the magnetic draw of hatred and division and who work against all odds for the goal of reconciliation which they cling onto with faith.

While we wait for that day, we are called to remain steadfast and determined. As we do not have the luxury of despair, we commit actively to seek the goals which we proclaim in the grace and mercy of God.

