

Hopes and fears meet in Bethlehem

Posted: 20 Dec 2010 @ 00:00

Bethlehem lies in the shadow of the Separation Wall, but beacons of hope still burn bright, says **Sarah Meyrick**

EVEN when the American clergyman Phillips Brooks wrote “O little town of Bethlehem”, the town could hardly be described as lying “still” in “deep and dreamless sleep”.

Brooks (later a bishop) was inspired to write the carol on a pilgrimage he took to the Holy Land, in 1865. But at the time, it was under Ottoman rule. Its inhabitants were leaving in droves to escape unemployment, compulsory military service, heavy taxes, and water shortages.

A century and a half later, life in Bethlehem remains bleak for its 30,000 or so residents. In the intervening years, there has been administration by the British Mandate, annexation by Jordan, and occupation by Israel.

Eventually, in 1995, as a result of the Oslo Accords, Israeli troops withdrew and the city came under the administrative control of the newly formed Palestinian National Authority.

If hopes for the future were high then, they have been cruelly dashed by the events of the past decade. In 2000, the second intifada erupted, and, in 2002, the Israel Defence Forces laid siege to Bethlehem and the 200 Palestinian freedom-fighters who were holed up in the Church of the Nativity.

Later that year, the Israelis began building the Separation Wall across the West Bank: a vast concrete structure nine metres high and 750 kilometres long — twice as high as the Berlin Wall and five times longer.

Bethlehem, then, is boxed in on three sides. The wall cuts across the historically strong religious, economic, and cultural ties between the “little town” and its much bigger neighbour, Jerusalem. It severs routes that have existed for years, disrupting day-to-day freedom of movement.

To travel the five miles to Jerusalem now means not just an unnecessary diversion, but a series of permits, and humiliating queues at military checkpoints where passage is granted at the whim of the soldiers on duty. And all the while — just the other side of the barrier — the building of illegal Jewish settlements, on land confiscated from Palestinians, continues.

CHRISTIANS represent a tiny proportion (less than two per cent) of the population of the Palestinian National Authority, but, in Bethlehem, their numbers were always relatively high: in 1948, they made up 85 per cent of the city; in 2005, that figure had shrunk to 20 per cent, or about 8000.

Although the official position of the Hamas party is to support the Christian presence, many Christians fled after the second intifada wreaked havoc on the town’s infrastructure and inflicted devastation on the centuries-old tourism industry. The siege of Bethlehem alone left half-a-million dollars’ worth of damage. There is also a chronic lack of opportunity.

Claire and Johnny Anastas are Palestinian Christians who have lived all their lives in Bethlehem, and used to run a successful souvenir shop on the ground floor of their apartment block. Visitors were plentiful.

“Before the wall, there was a lot of business in this road,” Mr Anastas says. “But the wall has closed the road to traffic and to the tourists who buy our gifts. Our business has died. We have lost all our income.”

The wall looms over the Anastas home. Desperate to salvage a living for their family, the couple are trying to trade their traditional crafts online. They have also opened part of their home as a B&B — one with an exceptional view. “We want the dignity of work,” Mr Anastas says.

It is not easy for anyone to make ends meet. “It’s really depressing,” a GP in Bethlehem, Dr Robert Tabash, says. “I am 65, and I have lived all my life here. But unemployment is extremely high. People cannot earn anything, and they are desperate. The children are leaving, and the hope for future generations becomes less and less credible by the day.”

He fears for the future of Christians in Palestine. “Politics in the region is increasingly dangerous to all Christians in the Middle East. In Iraq, there have been attacks on Christians, and we’re not very far from that. I’m not sure how much longer the Christian minority can be preserved in the Holy Land.”

Nor is he optimistic about the current peace process. “Experience has taught us that Israel is not ready to pay the price. No way is there going to be peace as long as the settlements are built — and the Israelis are not ready to give way on this.”

He believes that it is “make or break” time. “If these negotiations fail, the moderate Palestinian authority will be phased out in favour of something more radical. We all have to pray and hope that common sense will prevail. But hope is fading very quickly.”

None the less, those Christians who stay are doing extraordinary work. Dr Tabash recently retired after 25 years as the administrator of the remarkable Holy Family Hospital, which is run by the Order of Malta.

When Dr Tabash took office, the hospital, which had occupied the site since 1882, had been forced to close, owing to the political and economic situation. It is now a thriving maternity hospital, with 63 beds and 18 intensive-care beds, and is internationally respected as a training institution with reciprocal links to institutions in Paris, Dublin, and London.

Facilities are state-of-the-art, and its record is enviable. Since 1990, 50,000 babies have been born there, and mortality is less than two per cent. In Gaza, by comparison, the rate is somewhere between 35 and 40 per cent.

The hospital is dedicated to providing quality care for women and infants, irrespective of religion or nationality. In an area of 70-per-cent unemployment, no Social Security, and no medical insurance, the Holy Family’s slogan is “The poor deserve the best.”

There is no direct government funding. The equipment has been provided by the Belgian government and charities such as USAID, and the annual running costs (a relatively modest \$3 million) are met by patients, who are asked to give what they can, and by donations.

“It really is a beacon of hope in the middle of all this,” Dr Tabash says. “It shows that things can be done in a quite desperate situation. But the Holy Family Hospital is an exception. We cannot continue to be at the mercy of international support.”

ANOTHER shining light is provided by the ministry of the Revd Dr Mitri Raheb, the Palestinian pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, who founded the Diyar consortium, an organisation that serves the Palestinian community in Bethlehem, 15 years ago.

He says that the indigenous Christian population is easily forgotten by the international community. "Americans tend to ask us when we converted. I tell them that the first Christian missionary was Jesus Christ, and he was born in our town. The only thing Palestine exports is Christianity. The gospel has 'Made in Palestine' on the back."

He says that it is essential that Christians do not disappear from the Holy Land. "We don't want to become a Christian theme-park. We really believe that the gospel is as valid today as it was 2000 years ago, for the whole world and this country. Without our Christian witness, Palestine and Israel would be weaker."

In his book *Bethlehem Besieged*, Dr Raheb describes the traumatic events of 2002, and gives a flavour of life today in the city. He and his family have suffered as much as anyone from the restrictions on movement. His father-in-law died from a heart attack; he was unable to get through the military checkpoints to get to hospital in time, in spite of his American citizenship.

"Life here isn't easy," he says. "The Jewish settlements make Palestine like a Swiss cheese, with the Palestinians forced into the gaps. Life is severely restricted. But we are here by choice. We believe it is our calling."

The Diyar consortium is now the third largest employer in Bethlehem. The projects are concerned with community building, development, and outreach.

There is a women's co-operative craft workshop that makes glassware from fragments picked out of the rubble left by the Israeli invasion of 2002. There is also a college specialising in culture and the arts, which is attended by 150 students. Hundreds more take part in music, theatre, and the arts. Dr Raheb believes the arts are "a foretaste of the Kingdom", and essential in a culture when the dominant sound is that of gunfire.

"If the end to conflict is a marathon, not a sprint, we need to teach people to breathe, and that is what music does, what art does," he says. "I believe it is dangerous to give in to liturgies of death. We need to create liturgies of life, and for that we need music."

Dr Raheb was one of the signatories to the Kairos Palestine Document, a call by Palestinian Christians for an end to the occupation and for a just peace, launched in Bethlehem a year ago. But he admits that he, too, is pessimistic about the outcome of the current peace talks.

"Jesus said, 'Blessed are the peacemakers' and not 'the peace-talkers'. Meantime we are moving towards the most sophisticated system of apartheid in the modern world."

There are times when it would be tempting to give up. "But our hopeful vision is to go out today into our garden, into our society, and plant olive trees. Unless we plant olive trees today, we will have no oil for healing, no shadow for our children from the heat, and no branches to wave when peace comes."

www.holyfamilyhospital-bethlehem.org

www.diyar-consortium.org

www.shepherdsfieldymca.org

www.eappi.org

www.anastas-bethlehem.com

Glad tidings

Mu'in Al Atrich (below), aged 24, grew up in Bethlehem. Six years ago, he was at university in Bethlehem when he was shot in the back and neck by Israeli soldiers firing into the crowd at a rally. He was told that he would never walk again.

But the YMCA came to his aid. Christian Aid works in partnership with Bethlehem YMCA, which runs a rehabilitation programme at Beit Sahour, on the eastern edge of the city.

The YMCA rehabilitation programme offers counselling, physical rehabilitation, and vocational training to Palestinians who are injured or traumatised as a result of the conflict.

“When the injury happened, I was in a very bad psychological situation,” Mr Al Atrich says. “It was a very serious psychological problem for me: how to deal with others, with myself, with my family; how to return to the community.”

He became depressed, and was struggling to imagine a future for himself, when a YMCA field-worker visited and told him about the services they had available. He was assigned a counsellor, Houssein, and for seven months Mr Al Atrich lived in and out of the YMCA's rehabilitation centre.

“All my conversations with Houssein were very useful and enjoyable. Without sitting with him, I would not be here now,” he says.

After months of counselling, Mr Al Atrich felt strong enough to start thinking about the future. He enrolled on a vocational training programme with the YMCA, where he learned to make olive-wood nativity scenes for shops to sell to Bethlehem's tourists. After seven months of training, he was given a loan to set up his own workshop. Now he is master of his own business, and employs two other staff — both also disabled.

“I was frightened about employing others to begin with, because I wasn't sure I was standing in sound soil myself financially, but now it's OK. I'm doing well. People in the market take my goods because they are the best quality.

“The achievement I've reached makes me never regret or feel negative about what happened.”

Abide with us

The Revd Enid Gordon, a 63-year-old Methodist minister from Tyneside, volunteered in Bethlehem from November 2008 to February 2009, working as a protective presence for vulnerable Palestinian people.

She was working for the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI), a Christian-run organisation run by the World Council of Churches and administered by the Quakers in the UK.

It brings international volunteers to the region to shield Palestinians, monitor and report human-rights abuses, and support Palestinians and Israelis working together for peace.

“This meant joining the men and women queuing to pass through the checkpoint out of Palestinian Bethlehem into Palestinian East Jerusalem at 4.30 a.m.,” Ms Gordon says. “Some people begin queuing as early as 2 a.m. The checkpoints are supposed to open at 5 a.m., but that doesn’t always happen.

“On a bad day, it can take two- and-a-half hours to get through. You have up to 800 people sometimes, dependent on the whim of an 18-year-old Israeli conscript.

“People are crushed together in metal cages as they wait. The very first time, I thought I’d be crushed to death. It’s so important for them to get through — they are paid by the hour, and they have to catch the bus at the other end.

“There’s one queue, then another, and then at the end a fingerprint machine, and, if you have a cut on your finger, you still might not get through. And they can only set out if they’ve queued somewhere else for hours to get a permit.

“Most people say [to us] ‘Thank you, it’s so much better when you’re there.’ Sometimes they say ‘Tell them what it’s like.’ Others say ‘It’s your fault in the West.’ Sometimes it’s ‘Can you help — I need to get to hospital.’ I’ve waited with people desperate to get their child to a hospital appointment.

“We have no bulletproof vests, only our EAPPI shirts. We’re there to observe and report on what we see and hear. We are a quiet presence. It’s not about taking sides.

“Also at the checkpoint is Machsom Watch [a group of Israeli women who monitor checkpoints]. We tell them what’s happening, and, being Israelis, sometimes they can help Palestinians with particular problems more effectively than we can. These women feel that the occupation is destroying the soul of the Jewish people, and, in some cases, making monsters of their young people.

“I’ve visited as a tourist nine times, and each time I’ve been, the situation is worse. There are more people dispossessed, and more people desperate. Christians continue to leave. In 2003, if anyone asked me for money, it was so that they could stay. Now, if they ask for money it’s so that they can leave. But it’s not the role of EAPPI to give money, only to support by their presence.

“Wonderful Christians are staying because of their faith, but life is so difficult; they’re such a minority.

“I consider it a great honour to have worked with EAPPI. It’s a way of showing Christian love and compassion for people in their extreme suffering; and that people in the West do care and want to do something. I’ve felt the pres-ence of God at that checkpoint.”