

1 November 2023

Joint Kairos Southern Africa and Kairos Palestine Open Letter to Church leaders and Christians in the USA, Europe and the Ecumenical Family

“Vindicate me in your righteousness, LORD my God” (Ps. 35:24)

Sisters and brothers:

We are witnessing a genocide against Palestinians in Gaza unfolding in front of our eyes, not dissimilar to what happened less than 30 years ago in Rwanda and 80 years ago in Europe. Many in the West were complicit in those genocides. We cannot and dare not let it happen again. It must be stopped.

Failure to act to stop this genocide, which is being supported by many in your countries, and encouraged by the supply of arms to Israel to carry it out, will make you complicit in this genocide. Those whose governments support this genocide have a greater responsibility to ensure that their governments stop this genocide.

While we condemn all violence against civilians and non-civilians, this war did not emerge out of a vacuum. Its genesis can be traced back to the illegal occupation of Palestinian territories, the expansion of illegal Jewish settlements in Occupied Palestine, the violation of the rights of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and the siege of Gaza for the last 17 years. And most recently, the rising of the ultra-national and ultra-religious fascist groups to power in Israel and the denial of the current rightwing national and religious coalition to recognize the inalienable right of the Palestinians to freedom and self-determination. The entire world witnessed the continuing violations and attacks against Muslim and Christian Holy sites and worshippers in Jerusalem and other places carried out by Jewish extremists, settlers, Knesset members, and ministers, discounting the religious sensibilities of not only Palestinians but also millions of Christians and Muslims around the world; to name a few of the reasons behind the suffering of the Palestinians under Israel’s settler colonialism regime.

In 2022, the Israeli Occupation Forces have killed 230 Palestinians; 171 in the West Bank, 53 in Gaza, 6 in Israel and 44 of which are Child fatalities. Moreover, since the beginning of the year and until Oct. 7th, 2023, the Israeli Occupation Forces have killed a total of 243 Palestinians. We hope that this provides you with a macroscopic view of the situation of the Palestinian people. This is simply to underline the point that pain, grief and sorrow did not start on Oct 7th, 2023.

We all know that all of these atrocities against all human beings are against God’s intentions for God’s world. They are also against international law and in breach of the Geneva Conventions. These Laws and conventions were put in place mainly by Western powers after the Second World war and no state was precluded from it or given exceptional status.

Combine all which have been described above with the total siege imposed upon Gaza by Israel and the dangerous blocking of almost all non-violent avenues, then any reasonable human being will understand that things will explode. If Americans or Europeans were placed in a similar situation to what the people of Gaza have been exposed to, then we wonder how they would have reacted? History teaches us that they would not have reacted non-violently and therefore we find some of the labels being placed on Palestinians (and previously on South Africans) as extremely hypocritical.

South Africans know what it means to be labelled as “terrorist” or “communist”. Worse labels have been put on Palestinians by those who are guilty of the worst kind of anti-Semitism, a burden and responsibility that they have placed on the Palestinian people. In practice, we see how the Palestinians are being terrorized daily by Israeli settlers and by the Occupation forces and other Zionist militia. And therefore, we call out the hypocrisy of these labels being imposed only upon one group of people.

Most of the churches in Europe and the USA seems not to have repudiated their colonial and racist history. Because of this, the lens through which our lives are being viewed is still colored by their sins of colonialism and racism. Now and once again, we need to hold this before you and make you aware of this. This is a projection of the worst kind and is inconsistent with the Jesus we know from our Scriptures. We therefore call you to deep repentance.

The Jesus we know and have experienced - and whose birth in Bethlehem we will soon celebrate - is best encapsulated by the words of the young South African Christian poet, Thandi Gamedze, when she writes:

*“If Jesus were alive today –
And I do mean the brown Jesus
The one who grew up in occupied Palestine
The Roman empire a constant threat
Its military weaponized against anyone stepping out of line*

*The Jesus whose welcome into the world was tainted by violence
Air resounding with Roman ally King Herod’s order
For the genocide of all boy children in Bethlehem*

*If that Jesus were alive today
It’s clear where he would be
Likely making his way South
Dodging bombs and white phosphorous rain
Mourning family and friends
whose homes had been turned to rubble
While they were sleeping inside*

*Healing powers compromised in the face of all the casualties
Lament the only plausible response to the devastation*

*That Jesus would have no water to turn into wine
Because the present empire has poured cement into the supply*

*And cut off all means to access
His supernatural abilities would be tested
In this humanitarian crisis
Because the five thousand hungry people
have multiplied to two million
And even five loaves and two fishes are hard to find*

*I'm quite sure he would be scared
Just as when contemplating his imminent crucifixion
Drained of all hope in the face of the empire's inhumanity*

He'd probably turn to prayer as he did the day before his murder

*"God, would you take this cup of suffering from us
And free Palestine"*

It is with this lens, so beautifully and confidently encapsulated above, that we address you now.

We firstly acknowledge our Jewish sisters and brothers who have begun to say "not in our name" and we pray that their numbers and protests may grow. The people taking to the streets across the globe are now primarily the ones carrying the good news of peace, justice and reconciliation. It is to them that we shall turn.

It is therefore an indictment on the Churches in the USA, Europe and the Ecumenical Family that they seem strangely indifferent to the murder of Palestinians and the acts of vengeance being meted out to our Palestinian sisters and brothers and only react when Israelis get killed. You constantly speak "peace, peace where there is no peace." As far as we can see, any pretense for peace has been abandoned long time ago while pieces of Palestinian land have been stolen. The empty phrases are therefore an affront not only to us, but to the God of justice, the God who took sides with the oppressed, the downtrodden and the marginalized.

If this was 1943, Jewish people being persecuted by Europeans would have been the oppressed, downtrodden, and marginalized and we would have taken their side. But it is now 2023, and today the formerly oppressed have become an empowered oppressor breaking the necks of the current oppressed people, the Palestinian people, even wishing away their very existence. They are being bombarded daily with messages from settlers: "Move to Jordan!"

We have news for them and for you: the Palestinians are not going anywhere: instead, the Palestinians will rise from their current crucifixion and all oppressed people everywhere will identify with the Palestinian people in the same way that people identified with black South Africans under apartheid. The Christian community in Palestine is a small and often forgotten minority, but with Bishop Tutu we say: "God is not a Christian" and God does not only care about those who call themselves Christians. All human beings and all those who do the will of God are equally loved and cared for by God.

Human rights have no borders of religion, culture, class, race, or gender. Palestinian Christians stand with and identify fully with all Palestinians. The West needs to understand that you are placing the values of democracy and human rights at significant risk, in effect delegitimizing it, if you continue your current trajectory.

While this open letter is addressed to you, our hope is in God, who is in solidarity with his people. God will hold you accountable for your sins of commission and omission.

We put our trust in the Jesus who proclaimed Good News to the poor and oppressed. Jesus reminds us all that God is not a tribal God, but a God who cares deeply for all peoples. This same Jesus fills us with hope and joy and we pray deeply that you too will meet this Jesus, and be liberated by him.

If your hearts do become somewhat moved by what we have written, we call for deep and immediate solidarity with all Palestinian people and in particular those in Gaza. We stand ready to engage with you on the contents of this open letter.

May God bless you,

Rev Frank Chikane
on behalf of Kairos Southern Africa

+ Patriarch Emeritus Michel Sabbah
on behalf of Kairos Palestine