Sermon: Mount Hawthorn Community Church

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Thank you for the kind introduction, and the warm welcome that my fellow Palestinians and I have received here today.

I wish to acknowledge the land on which we gather as Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar — I pay my respects to the indigenous people of this land.

Only two generations ago, my grandparents were made to leave their ancestral homeland of Palestine; coming from a city not too far from where today's reading takes place.

I am here today as a settler-migrant, due to the exile of my people, during the Palestinian Exile of 1948AD.

The story of my grandparents is not unique to the indigenous experience. In fact, it is not unique even to the Australian experience.

After all, we live in lands today that belong to indigenous people, who were driven from their homes, by foreign settlers, just as continues to happen today in Palestine.

My acknowledgement of Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar falls short of the enormous debt we collectively owe to the original inhabitants of this land.

What happened on these lands is unfolding before our very eyes in today's colonisation of Palestine.

No biblical story can be told without involving the land where the story takes place.

While some say that the scriptures are a story about land, we as Christians know that our scriptures involve something more precious than even this: the Kingdom of God.

While some continue to believe that their salvation will come through the taking or possession of land, we as Christians believe in a new covenant.

For the coming of Christ was to become the beginning of the entry of gentiles into the story of salvation.

As regard the Palestinian Christians however, our inclusion into the biblical story did not occur after the death of the Jesus, and the heralding of the new covenant.

A little known fact about Palestinian Christians is that our ancestry was largely Palestinian Jewish.

Given these complexities and nuances, and the circumstances in which we find the world today, allow me to acknowledge some truths, which are relevant to today's reflection.

The genocide taking place against the indigenous people of Palestine, mirrors the genocide that took place on this land here in Australia.

It echos the grief of generations.

Amidst the deep pain and trauma of non-Palestinian Jews — who some call Israelis, and yet others confuse for biblical Israelites — there is a story about universal suffering of the human condition.

Today most of Gaza's two million people are being deliberately starved to death, where most human beings have been pushed into small concentration camps, as bombs are dropped on families, many living in tents, many eating whatever grass or tree leaves they find, to survive.

Antisemitism — which some confuse for criticism of the State of Israel — was the original sin.

It gave rise to the belief that Jewish safety could only be achieved by demographically reversing the majority non-Jewish population of a country, in order to attempt to build a state for Jews only.

This has led to today's apartheid State of Israel.

It is against this backdrop of reality, that I now turn to today's reading, which takes place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, in Palestine, which since 1948, some have referred to as the State of Israel.

Today is the Third Sunday of Easter, meaning about five weeks have passed since we celebrated the arrival of the Messiah into Jerusalem, on Palm Sunday.

This was followed by our Lord's crucifixion on Good Friday.

Then three days later the miraculous resurrection of our Lord on Easter Sunday.

These events are the stories recorded by the descendants of the early Christians — the Palestinians.

The Gospel of John tells us of Jesus' appearance to seven of the disciples, some weeks after Easter Sunday.

Some have commented that what is striking about this passage is that after the miracle of resurrection, the disciples simply go back to their lives.

In the case of Simon — which Jesus re-named Peter, meaning the Rock — this was, of course, completely normal.

Peter was a fisherman by trade, and lived in the Palestinian Jewish city of Capernaum.

The traditional Palestinian fishing net is something you might have seen depicted in the famous Palestinian Kuffieh, which has become one of the symbols of Palestinian identity.

I have placed my Kuffieh here, and can point out the traditional design which captures the image of the fishing net, and of the fish.

Make no mistake: the Gospel is woven into the very fabric of Palestinian life, not just spiritually, but economically, historically, and culturally.

After the resurrection of the Lord, Peter resumes his Palestinian Jewish life.

How are we to view the expression of faith that Peter has, to go back to work, back to fishing, after only a few weeks after watching the miracle of resurrection?

Is Peter regressing, or persisting?

Is Peter's return to fishing a form of resilient faith, a refusal to give up on daily life, despite living in what will soon become a precarious life for members of the early Church of Palestine, whose persecution is imminent?

Like the descendants of the early Christians — the Palestinians — that continue to live on the land today, tending to olive trees despite the threat of violence from non-Palestinian Jewish settlers, Peter goes about his daily life.

Yes, the resurrection has happened, but the world has not suddenly transformed.

Rome still rules, death still haunts, and daily survival, matters.

After spending the whole night fishing, Peter and the other six disciples, had not caught a single fish.

As morning breaks, a man — who we later come to know is Jesus — appears to them saying, 'Young men, haven't you caught anything?'

'Not a thing,' they answered.

'Throw your net out on the right side of the boat, and you will catch some,' Jesus tells them.

They cast the net on the right side of the boat, not knowing that the man commanding them to do this, is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh.

When Jesus tells his disciples to cast the net on the right side, this becomes a metaphor of hope — an invitation to try again, to persist in their vocation, to believe that even empty nets can be filled again.

Many people ask how is it that the Palestinian people, particularly those in Gaza have the strength to go on despite the genocide against them?

Unlike their ancestors, today's fishermen of Gaza are forbidden from casting their nets into the water, under the State of Israel's naval blockade.

If the job of the theologian is to provide hope, then what hope is to be made of a miracle that requires the casting of a net, which is not allowed to be cast?

Gaza's fishermen risk being shot at, killed, or having their boats destroyed — this is a common experience — an assault on daily life.

Yet, while they are denied the right to work, to provide for themselves freely from their own waters - like Peter does after witnessing the resurrection of Christ — the fishermen persist.

The deep connection to land and history that the people of Gaza share with Peter is an inheritance of steadfastness; a collective memory passed down through generations that says, 'we will continue to cast our nets, even if they come back empty'.

The people of Gaza say, 'we will continue to fish, even if the State of Israel shoots at us.'

In this way, the Gospel story mirrors the real lived experience of the people who live on the lands where these stories take place.

The Gospel tells us that after the disciples threw the net out they could not pull it back in, because they had caught so many fish.

How many times have we in our daily lives felt despair, whispered a prayer, only to similarly see our lives go from nil to abundance, in the same way that the disciples' net went from empty to full?

It is at this point — when the net is full — that someone yells 'It is the Lord!'.

Indeed, we tend to give thanks when the net comes back full.

But in this case, the Lord's presence is both metaphoric and literal.

So literal is the appearance of Jesus after death that Peter jumps into the water, in excitement.

Though the Gospel does not say, we can only assume that he swam to shore, as the remainder of the disciples bring the small boat there.

On shore, Jesus invites the disciples to sit with him.

The disciples do this, bringing with them the 153 fish they caught, through the grace of God.

‘Still the net did not tear’ —

This unbroken net resembles our own capacity to carry, that which is full, and that which is empty.

But what was Jesus trying to teach us through this miracle?

As Jesus invites the disciples to ‘Come and eat’, I recall the story of a young girl in Gaza recently who stared down the barrel camera as she lamented, holding a piece of bread in her hand. She said, ‘the problem is that by the time I have shared all of my food, there is nothing left for me.’

‘What should I do? Tell me, what should I do?’ asks the little Palestinian child.

Back on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus tells Peter, to do exactly what this Palestinian child is already doing.

‘Take care of my Lambs,’ Jesus tells Peter.

‘Take care of my Sheep,’ Jesus tells Peter.

‘Take care of my Sheep,’ he repeats again.

And at the point of every affirmation in the exchange between Jesus and Peter, Jesus asks Peter to take care of his folk.

When I think of that little Palestinian child in Gaza, waiving a small piece of bread, lamenting how she will have enough to share, I wonder: Is God alive in the hearts of the children of Gaza today?

What does it mean for Jesus to call on his disciples to look after his sheep?

The old covenant once mandated an eye for an eye.

The old covenant once mandated a tooth for a tooth.

But the new covenant mandates that we tend to the folk.

In trying to do so, one of my personal greatest faith challenges is learning to love my enemy — even though this is a command from our God.

It is as though Jesus says to Peter, ‘if you love me, look after my people’

Today a great moral question faces the Church, as regard the land and place where our Lord once walked.

How do we meet the challenge of love, in the face of a brutal apartheid?

How do we tend to the folk when parts of it conduct such vile violence?

How do we meet the challenge of anti-semitism with compassion, while still being true to the agency God has provided each of us, to act for justice?

The answer is simple: we cast our net to the other side.

We continue.

We fish.

We pray.

We carry on.

This morning many Australians woke up to news of the re-election of a progressive government.

Many Australians — particularly Australians of colour — were scared of this election.

They feared the politics of division, or a Trumpian-style Government.

In my community, many Palestinian refugees from Gaza were fearful that their visas would be revoked, that they would be sent home to the rubble of war, under an alternative outcome to that which we have this morning.

Some say we are lucky to live in a country where we can exercise our political will.

But in truth, this is not luck.

Just as the men caught the fish through the grace of God, so too do we exercise our political will through the grace of God.

In the same spirit in which our Lord walked through Jerusalem, as my ancestors watched on, then, let me call on you, and your congregation to do even more.

Just as our Lord called out from the side of the Sea of Galilee to the disciples, to cast the net on the right side of the boat, let me call on you too to cast your net.

Cast your nets of knowledge more widely, and open your eyes and ears of those around you, to distinguish between antisemitism, which is harmful to Jews, and anti-Zionism, which is harmful to Palestinians.

To cast your nets of action more widely, and participate in non-violent actions to end apartheid in the State of Israel today, just as the world ended South Africa's apartheid, edging us closer to the arc of history, which always bends toward justice.

To cast your nets of compassion more widely, and soften the hearts of other Australians to the plight of Palestinians, and Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land.

And lastly, once your nets are cast, to accept Jesus' eternal invitation to sit with him.

To care for his folk, with the same grace and care that you have shown me here today.

Thank you.