Keynote: Being Faithful Witnesses: Serving God in a Changing World

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“May God’s peace, mercy,
and blessings be unto you.”

Sisters and brothers, from the heart of Palestine, a land besieged and violated by Israeli military occupation, I have come to join you today. From the midst of Palestine, a tortured nation held in captivity, I stand with you today. Each of us brings to this gathering our own history, our own experience, our own context which informs how we view the world and our place, as Friends, within it. As we listen deeply and share openly we learn from each other and our vision widens and deepens.

The story of my people is a story of human hurt and human hope. I represent a narrative of exclusion, the denial of basic human and community rights. Nevertheless, I come with a message of hope. A message embodied in the will and spirit of all those who refuse to submit to the forces of oppression, violence and injustice, structures of domination, colonialism and foreign occupation.

The situation in Palestine calls on all of our resources: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. And in the darkest nights of the soul, we seek your affirmation and actions, especially as governments and power systems have failed us because of their power politics, absence of will and shortsighted self-interest.

The current atmosphere in Jerusalem is highly charged, and the situation in the Holy Land is far more complex than that we encounter in Luke’s presentation of the first century. Even my identity as a Palestinian Christian is not easily explained to anyone living outside my immediate context. Never mind my identity as a Quaker. When I spoke in the United States and I introduced myself as a Palestinian Quaker, people said “the absurdity of absurdities”. I don’t know why, but this is how we are perceived. I am a Christian and I am Palestinian. One part of my identity cannot be separated from the other. As such, we Palestinian Christians are often referred to as the embroidery work of our people. We are an interwoven and an integral part of the whole society, that cannot be taken away from us.

Although we are the modern heirs of the disciples of Jesus in Jerusalem and despite our rich contribution to the Middle East, we have become unknown, unacknowledged and forgotten by much of the world. Very few people realize that there are Christians in the Middle East and in Palestine. Because there are few of us they think we are the outcome of Western missionaries.

We are a highly educated community with deep historical roots, a community that is, unfortunately, diminishing every day as a result of political and economic pressures. Our future is uncertain, the pressures are enormous.

As we are part of our society, not outside of it, it is a daily challenge to remain faithful, to witness to our faith in these the most dire of circumstances where today, as Palestinians, none of our rights are guaranteed. We stand with our Muslim sisters and brothers at the margins of life in Palestine, sharing a common reality of prolonged suffering and working together in hope for a brighter future.

And so I have come to you from the ends of the earth, from Jerusalem and Judea, on a truth pilgrimage, to share my story and to witness to that which I know and experience daily. I have travelled from my homeland to a place where we gather, as Friends from the far corners of the world, to reflect on being faithful witnesses as we strive to serve God in a changing world.

What is it that we hold in common amidst all of our diversity?

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you: and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth “ (Acts 1 :8).

How do we understand the nature of power in our world?
How do we understand that power we receive when the Holy Spirit comes upon us? To what are we called to witness?

As I sought answers to these questions and prepared for my time of sharing with you, I was spoken to powerfully by a writing by Edicio de la Torre, entitled A Meditation on Walls. Let me begin by sharing that Meditation and I think as we proceed you will see how walls for us are both metaphor and reality. I think you will see how the dismantling of walls must be central to our witness.

A Meditation on Walls[1](http://www.fwccemes.org/quakers/keynote-being-faithful-witness-english#fn6206422524a16fb1927db4)

There are walls that divide one nation and people,
like Korea.
Ideological walls, built by big powers,
that make brothers and sisters
see each other as different, as enemies.
In South Africa, apartheid is a racist wall.
It has been most visible there,
but other countries have their own racist walls.

There are one-way walls between North and South.
Northern countries can enter the South
To invest and intervene – even to invade.
Southern countries face protectionist walls.
(That’s why some of our Friends are not with us today.)
Northern walls rise higher and higher
against migrants and refugees.

There are walls between oppressed nations and people.
Old walls that they have inherited and chosen to retain.
New walls that they have built against each other.

There are walls
that churches compete with each other to build
that try to imprison and set limits
to God’ s saving power and grace.

There are walls too close to see
too painful for us to confront.
Walls that are convenient for us to keep.
Between men and women, within families,
among friends and companions
in the struggle for justice, peace
and the integrity of creation.

What do we do about walls?
Acknowledge that they exist and will not quickly disappear?
But if walls have been built by people,
people can also pull them down.
Perhaps not all at once,
with a blast of trumpets as in Jericho,
but by creating enough breaches, enough openings.

We thank God for walls that have fallen.
And for those whose faith kept struggling when walls seemed eternal,
whose blood marks where they gave their lives,
against the wall.

Edicio de la Torre
Philippines, 1990

What are the walls you confront in your life, perhaps even walls which you have been part of erecting?

More than half a century ago, the Palestinian people were cast outside the course of history, our identity denied, and our very human, cultural and historical reality suppressed. We were victims of the cruel myth: “a land without a people for a people without a land”. And we continue to be victims of an exclusive agenda – an agenda that usurped our rights, our lands and confiscated, as well, our historical narrative.

More than 500 villages were destroyed in what became Israel, leaving hundreds of thousands of Palestinians either as refugees or internally displaced persons. Today, Palestinians constitute the largest and longest standing refugee population in the world. Over five million of us are waiting to return home. Those who remained in what later became the state of Israel continue to experience exclusion and discrimination in their historical homeland. Those of us who came under Israeli occupation in 1967 in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem have since been subjected to a unique combination of military occupation, settler colonization and systematic oppression.

I have lived all my life in Ramallah, and more than half of my life under Israeli military occupation. It was never as difficult as it is today. While Israeli troops are amassing in the occupied territories and with the siege tightening, we are increasingly subjected to a policy of persistent shelling, random shootings, political assassinations, house curfews, impoverishment (where two-thirds of our population live on less than $2 a day), abductions, imprisonment, house demolitions, the illegal confiscation of our land and water resources and the destruction of our remaining crops and trees.

There are thousands of Palestinian political prisoners in Israeli jails. Thousands of them are held without charge or trial. Some are children. At least 10,000 homes in the occupied Palestinian territories have been demolished since the beginning of the occupation, leaving tens of thousands without shelter. Israeli colonial settlements have mushroomed to at least 214 in the West Bank and 18 in the Gaza Strip. Gaza is the most thickly populated spot on earth. Recently, the state of Israel announced its plans to substantially increase the number of settlements in the occupied Syrian Golan Heights, as well. And then, they say we really don’t want peace! The reality on the ground says otherwise. In order to connect these illegal colonies, particularly in the West Bank, and to render impossible a viable, independent Palestinian state some 350 kilometers of highways and by-pass roads have been built on confiscated land. All of these acts are illegal under international law, namely the Fourth Geneva Convention. Restriction on movement is also referred to by the United Nations as one of the main punishments that denies us most of our basic human rights. We have over 400 checkpoints in the West Bank. That means we cannot use the roads to travel between one Palestinian village and the other.

I’ll just give you one example – how I had to travel to leave the country. I cannot leave from Tel Aviv. I must go to the Jordan River, cross the bridge and fly out of Amman. Jericho is twenty five minutes from my home town Ramallah. It takes six hours to get there. I can’t use the roads. I take three taxis, a long donkey ride, and a walk of one mile, cruising behind the mountains. This is not for security, this is for humiliation, so people will leave and not stay there. When I left the country it was so difficult that when I finished my speaking tour in the beginning of December I didn’t return. My son told me, “Mother, if you come back to Palestine you won’t have enough time to purchase all the permits and go through that ordeal again to go to this meeting”. So I stayed in the United States, flew back to Jordan and joined you today.

The severity and frequency of violations to our human, political, social, and environmental rights is only increasing. Perhaps the most dangerous reality on the ground at this time is the Israeli constructed separation wall that flies in the face of any of the current peace plans, including the Road Map, and disregards any rights based framework to resolving the conflict. Over a quarter million Palestinians will be affected by this apartheid wall that makes deep cuts into the 1967 Palestinian territories. So far, 102,350 trees have been uprooted and over 11,000 people are trapped in the no-man’s land between the wall and the State of Israel, cutting them off from the rest of the Palestinian society.

In the first phase of construction of the wall, over 12,145 hectares of Palestinian land was transformed into “closed military zones.” Anyone caught in one of these zones may be shot. Furthermore, 50 Palestinian villages will soon find themselves on the Israeli side of the wall, annexed or separated from their agricultural land. With the ongoing construction of the wall, which they have now started around Ramallah where I live, there have been demonstrations by Israeli peace groups, the International Solidarity Movement, and Palestinians. Some of them were shot in these peaceful demonstrations. The ongoing construction of the wall will continue to confiscate and destroy private property. Families will be made homeless and left without free access to their water wells. Moreover, in the middle of a regional water crisis, some 35,000 meters of water pipes have been destroyed. These water pipes were built with contributions from the European Community. They made a complaint to the Israeli government, but nobody listens. In addition to all the hardship and impoverishment this wall is and will induce, its broader significance lies in the fact that it will essentially render a contiguous, viable and free Palestinian state unattainable. Without doubt, our misfortunes are many.

Our country is becoming one gigantic prison and one vast cemetery. The people, land, trees and houses have been brutally treated. Fear and insecurity have replaced compassion and trust. Relations have become hard and tense. When almost every aspect of life is framed in oppression and humiliation, the moral space in diminished. Our own humanity is threatened and role models for our children become hard to find. People are tired and depressed. They are traumatized by the violence that is perpetuated against them which affects both their physical and mental health. My people need time to mourn, to heal their wounds, to pacify their children and to find their daily bread.

I have found that the most basic form of deception in my context is the fabrication of a fake symmetry between occupier and occupied, between oppressor and oppressed or victim. The violence of the powerful Israeli occupation army which uses live ammunition, tanks and helicopter gun ships is at best equated with the violence of Palestinian civilians protesting their victimization and continued loss of rights, lands and lives. Moreover, if we are not grateful for this form of occupation, colonization and the isolated Bantustans under Israel’s apartheid system, then we will be pounded into submission.

For me it is clear: the Israeli military occupation of the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem must end. It remains the most pervasive form of violence, both direct and structural, of human rights violations, and immoral enslavement of a whole nation. It is the ultimate provocation at both the individual and collective levels.

Conflicts can only be resolved politically and legally on the basis of parity of rights and the global rule of law. All, without double standards, should adhere to United Nations Security Council resolutions and international law. Israel is not above the law. I do hope that the Israeli public and the international community will realize the extreme danger of their policies before it is too late and more innocent blood is shed. And I hope that the United States government will realize that its blind support and military aid to Israel is not necessarily in favor of Jews or Israel or even in the best interest of the United States government.

My heart breaks knowing the pain, the humiliation and the injustice suffered by my people. Both my life experience and my ecumenical work in many corners of the world require that I share with you our story if I am to be a faithful witness and also that I share with you the spiritual challenges we encounter in an environment in which violence, or the threat of violence, is an ever present companion.

Having lived under foreign Israeli military occupation for over 36 years and having raised my three children and seven grandchildren in a situation where we are denied the right to self-determination and freedom, I constantly ask myself these central questions:

What is my witness? What is the witness of my community, my people? In the light of the challenges we face, what responsibilities do we bear?

As Palestinians, we are part of the political struggle to end Israeli occupation and to work for equal rights for all. We participate fully in the life of our community, in our programs of social work, education, health, and economic development. For some of these activities we have been receiving support from many churches and western countries. In our search for identity, dignity and mutuality of help, we must refuse the old structures of giving and receiving which carry with them power and powerlessness. We should learn together the blessing of giving and receiving, giving in receiving and receiving in giving. This sharing will allow us to discover one another and should lead us to mutual accountability and transparency.

Is it not time to shape a new model of assistance that might lead us to a fuller partnership?

In our witness to democracy and equality, we cannot be silent about the situation of women in our society. Churches should take the lead to work for social justice. The Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether called Quakers “the mothers of feminism”.

Are we witnessing to this legacy of equality in all walks of life? How might we more fully do so?

We live side by side with our Muslim neighbours. The history of the Crusades is remembered by both of us. The invasion of Iraq is still fresh in our memories and the suffering of its people continues. Our oppression and the Israeli occupation could not have lasted so long without outside assistance. Proportionate to its population, the state of Israel is the recipient of more United States aid than any foreign state in history. This aid, combined with political support from the United States, enables Israel to tighten its grip of occupation and make our lives more difficult, more unlivable.

The truth has been so twisted that anybody who dares to speak out for justice is now associated with terrorism, anti-Semitism or, according to the theology of some, against God as they understand God’s purpose in this world. This is all done in the name of the so-called Christian West. As indigenous Palestinian Christians we have no choice but to answer that claim and the many religious leaders who exploit the Bible to endorse the legitimacy, policies and conduct of Israel. These Christians have established a linkage between Biblical Israel and the modern nation state of Israel. Evils of discrimination, oppression and dispossession are justified in my country by reference to biblical texts. David Ben-Gurion called the Bible the “sacrosanct title deed” to Palestine for the Jewish people. Recently in a big demonstration in Palestine the right wing Jewish groups were saying: “We don’t need a roadmap. We have a roadmap. Our roadmap is the Bible and we should continue settling the land.”

As Palestinian Christians we must liberate our theology from such an understanding. God for us is a God of justice and compassion, not a God of vengeance and exclusivity. As Palestinian Christians, we have long been forgotten, even unknown, and certainly unacknowledged. We have suffered, as have all our people from dispossession, displacement and oppression. We are then blamed for the history, politics and theology of others. Thus there is another level of oppression we suffer from as Christians in Palestine – the theology of the right wing Christians. That is why I got involved in liberation theology. Not because I have nothing else to do.

Fortunately, there are many faithful witnesses in Palestine and Israel. The Christian Peacemaker Teams, members of the accompaniment programme of the World Council of Churches, and the International Solidarity Movement joined by many local Palestinians and Israelis, and some Jews from outside the country, all bear witness to peace and justice. These are but a few examples.

How, then, do these experiences of mine as a Palestinian Christian inform the conversation which we as Friends need to have as we seek the leading of the Spirit in being faithful witnesses?

Both my context in Palestine and my travels throughout the world have brought me into relation with many religious traditions. Many thinkers struggle with religious diversity. Others, as activists, are concerned with militarism, the degradation of the environment, racism and sexism. Many are working from a faith base on peace and justice issues. Often times, I have found that dialogue within the Christian tradition and among these various groups is not easy. Because some of these difficulties concern our understanding of witness, mission and the Bible, I believe that we will encounter them in our work with each other.

Let me begin by stating that I personally cannot take the Bible literally. It is my understanding that the stories in the Bible reveal people’s perceptions of God but not the full reality of God. God is greater than all we can say or write about God. The view that the Bible is to be understood in a literalist way must, I believe, be surrendered. There are many narratives that are problematic, containing texts of unsurpassed violence, which are an affront to moral sensitivities. Every effort should be made to rescue the Bible from serving as a blunt instrument in the oppression of one people by another. There’s a famous book written by an Irish priest called The Bible and Colonialism 2. He speaks about how in Palestine, the Americas and South Africa, the Bible has been used as a tool of oppression rather than liberation. In Nairobi in 1975 for the World Council of Churches Assembly, there was an African play. I remember the Africans saying: “When the colonizers came we had the land and they had the Bible. Now they have the land and we have the Bible.” God was active and present in the world long before there were Christian missionaries.

If we want to know what God has been up to in the world, the Spirit bids us to keep our eyes and ears open to the witnesses of others. After all, the Spirit is about movement, and the presence of God. The Spirit fills, inspires, teaches, reminds and comforts. The Spirit both nurtures contemplation and empowers action.

Struggling and reflecting on Acts chapter 1, verse 8, I have been led to such thoughts as these:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you…Clearly, there is emphasis on waiting. We must wait until the Holy Spirit has come upon us. Don’t rush, for otherwise it will be your spirit or mine, and not that of God. The work of being emptied of one’s ego spirit is absolutely essential. It is hard work, as well. It includes deeply and seriously asking oneself: “Why do I want to do this? Why do I want to say this?” For not everything we wish to say is necessarily of God’s Spirit. God’s Spirit is not simply unusual and uncommon signs but, above all, it is love and compassion.

…and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

I understand the meaning of “bearing witness” to be everything that one is and not in any way restricted to words, talk or preaching. The latter do display part – a small part I believe. Infinitely more important is the way in which one lives one’s life. And for me, my testimony of bearing witness must shine through most clearly in my way of life. How I live, behave and relate to people says much about how I am, in relation to God.

Does Jesus’ way of seeing things (i.e. the Sermon on the Mount) find an echo in me and show forth in the most ordinary things of daily life?

What I am and who I am testifies whether I am authentically bearing witness to Jesus or, rather, to me, to some “master” or to a set of ideas or political convictions.

Doesn’t it mean that you and I – wherever we are, under whatever conditions and if all is genuine within us – might express quite unconsciously the Spirit and way of Jesus?

Chuang Tzu and other Chinese wisdom people put great emphasis on our not being aware when the true Spirit comes through us. Once we are self-conscious the danger of our egos being mixed up in it is very great. If we are sadly self-conscious, as missionaries and Christians so often are, what we do is in danger of being useless.

Many Christians differ in their understanding of witness and mission. In many places I have visited, the church’s concern about evangelism is related to the growing influence, in their context as well as mine, of sects and new religious movements. The stories are very similar from Russia to the Pacific, from the Middle East to South Africa. The churches are disturbed by a massive influx of Christian charismatic and fundamentalist groups and by the aggressive methods of recruitment they use. I am disturbed by their theology where they generally advocate nationalist or religious exclusiveness and the subordination of women. They reject many of the political and ethical values of modern democracy, basic human rights, pluralism, freedom of speech, and sharing of power and responsibility. Their literal understanding of the Bible is frightening and violent and, more often than not, justifies my oppression and dispossession as mandated by God. This is serious, even dangerous.

Must we not re-focus our efforts towards articulating a religious vision that can contribute to a global outlook and a discourse of a radical, democratic human community and well being for all? So, too, are we not challenged to articulate and then realize a liberating spiritual vision of justice?

Biblical studies must be re-thought in such a way that they can contribute to the articulation of spiritual understandings that envision human dignity, justice, inclusivity and diversity in new ways.

On many occasions the witness of action has cast doubt on the witness of the Word. To witness to Christ is to follow Jesus’ way and mission as expressed in Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

This message is all about economic, social, political and environmental justice. This is what we should address if we want to witness to the truth as Jesus often exclaimed. We cannot distinguish between social action and witness, for it is our social action that reveals the authenticity of our faithful witness to Jesus Christ.

Throughout his entire ministry Jesus’ message was centered on the kingdom of God. Jesus envisioned a society upon earth where God’s will would be as perfect as it is in heaven. Because of that very fact, it would necessarily be a kingdom founded on love and not on power. Its source is the power of love, rather than the violent love of power. Christ’s kingdom is a kingdom of truth. As Paul writes in Romans 19:17:

The kingdom of God is righteousness (justice) and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

To work for God’s kingdom on earth, we need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are not to think that the Spirit came into existence recently. It is quite possible for a power to have existed always, but for people to experience it at some given moment later in time. The power of the Spirit makes us Christ’s witnesses. The witness should operate in ever-extending circles without limits, for the message is universal.

A witness is one who knows, who can give a first-hand account of something seen, heard or experienced. A real witness is not a witness of words, but of deeds. Faith for me is a source of power. It should direct us and activate us to find just living human solutions in response to injustice. Without a sincere commitment to the healing and reconciliation of our broken world, how might we possess either the discernment or the trust that is proper to the children of God – who share already by grace in the divine life opened to us in Christ? Faith is more than believing, more than having hope in what God will do without us. It is active participation in the work of God, in the task of bringing justice to the nations. We have to bring forth true justice to all – to the Palestinians, but not at the expense of the Israelis; to women but not at the expense of men; to humanity but not at the expense of nature and mother earth. Rather then, justice for all creatures and creation.

How can we be faithful witnesses in a changing world?

Can we find a basis for a broader, deeper and more durable community? One that embraces our common destiny, our shared eco-system? One that affirms our common humanity and recognizes our possibilities?

Do we realize that we are members of one body as Saint Paul tells us? If one is hurt, we all suffer?

We are all involved in humankind because we are all humankind. The more we recognize God within us, the more we recognize God in others and grow closer to them. Living in the Spirit of God will make us more conscious of every creature and of his or her worth. We will then be conscious “that the least of these brethren” is dear in God’s sight. This consciousness will, in turn, enable us to realize that all God’s creation is one world and all the people are God’s people, our neighbors. Living in the Spirit of God will not only enable us to discover our neighbors, but it will prevent us from harming or even offending these neighbors.

As our shrinking world makes us all near neighbors, we should be increasingly aware of two facts about our nature, as people of this world. One is that we are different from one another in color, lifestyles, cultures and beliefs. The other is that we are exceedingly alike. There is a fantastic range of common needs and desires, fears and hopes that bind us together in our humanness. The well being of each is intricately inter-related to the well being of each other.

Throughout the ages people have engaged in a universal search for meaning in life, but have turned this search into a struggle for a particular ideology, religion or nation. Our age of unparalleled advancement in education, science and technology has been an age of enormous violence. Meanwhile, the need for imaginative understanding, simple trust and creative cooperation was never more urgent. Maybe the time has come when all of us should unite in common affirmations of life. These might be:

• A pledge of honor and respect for every race, culture, religion and individual.

• Recognition of the claim of every individual upon the resources of the earth, for the necessities of human survival, and the moral obligation of the more fortunate to share with the less fortunate.

• The right and responsibility of every individual to use their talents, energies and resources for the benefit of the community.

• Commitment to the search for universal values, however differently expressed, in hopes that these values may enable both the individual and the community to overcome greed, power and self-seeking.

• Affirmation of the “presence”, the presence of a spirit of hope and compassion available to all by which our lives may be made more whole, more creative, more harmonious as we draw directly upon that power around us, and within us and within all life.

We cannot live a day without saying “yes” or “no” for death or for life, for war or for peace. The choice is ours. There is no compromise in the matter. To postpone or evade decision is to decide. To compromise is to decide. There is no escape and this is our challenge and charge as true disciples of the Prince of Peace.

Let us pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit to empower women and men for community, from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth.

Lord,

make us instruments of your justice. Make us instruments of your peace. Make us instruments for the renewal of your creation.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.

References:

1 Delivered by Edicio de la Torre in 1990 at the World Council of Churches Consultation on Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation, “Now is the time”, Seoul, 1990

2 The Bible & Colonialism by Michael Prior, CM. Sheffield Academic Press, UK, 1997.