

The Balfour Declaration

Yesterday marked the centenary of the Balfour Declaration. This short statement was contained in a letter dated the 2nd of November 1917 from the then Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community. It read:

“His Majesty's government view with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

This short statement was to have a far-reaching effect and you may perhaps have seen the television documentary about it earlier this week.

Other conflicts around the world may have been more prominent in the media recently but the situation in the Holy Land, Israel/Palestine, remains ongoing with no immediate sign of a satisfactory solution. The vision embodied in the Balfour Declaration of Jews and Arabs living peacefully together has sadly not materialized, though there was a moment of hope with the Oslo Accord of 1993. Some claim that the Balfour Agreement was a cause of the problem rather than a solution. The jury is still out on that.

Since 1993 the situation has got worst instead of better, with more intransigent factions on both sides asserting themselves. The main issues are the Jewish settlements in the Palestinian West Bank, the status of Jerusalem, and of course the wall dividing the Jewish and Palestinian areas. That wall is one of the strongest impressions that has remained with me after the pilgrimage to the Holy Land that I took part in three years ago. The wall causes immense disruption to the lives of many ordinary Palestinians. And yet, on the other hand, one can understand the need of ordinary Israelis for the level of security that we take for granted here. One has to try to appreciate the concerns of both sides.

Jerusalem is the holy city of Jews, Muslims and Christians. Even three years ago I was aware not only of the holiness of the city but also of its very real tensions. That of course is nothing new. There are very many passages in the Bible about conflict and suffering in Jerusalem. But for me Psalm 122 which we heard just now is a particularly potent prayer for the peace of the city and its inhabitants.

On our pilgrimage we were privileged to be given a very moving and inspiring talk by the Dean of St George's Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem, which is a partner in the Community of the Cross of Nails. The Cathedral sees reconciliation as its main focus and works with the other faiths to bring people together in mutual love and understanding. We give thanks to God for that. And our prayer is that their continuing efforts may be blessed and bear fruit.

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Kingsley Boulton