

## INTRODUCTION TO BALFOUR REPORT

Moderator,

When I was a young boy I used to be both fascinated (and, to be honest, terrified) by the story of the Frenchman, Charles Blondin.

As I'm sure everyone knows, Blondin, the so-called 'Daredevil of Niagara Falls,' was a tightrope walker. On several occasions he walked across a 3-inch rope 160 feet above Niagara Falls.

I was fascinated by the story but also terrified because as a child I was scared of heights and because I didn't have a particularly great sense of balance myself. The very thought of walking across a high wire scared me rigid.

Moderator,

some months ago—as I began to realise that I would be the one who would have to present this report—for some reason Charles Blondin came into my mind.

However, now that the report has actually been written I bring it to the GA with considerably *less*

trepidation than I thought might have been the case, for I believe that the working group, and our two Councils, have produced a careful, thoughtful and helpful piece of work.

Of course, it cannot cover every aspect of such a complex issue and of course there will be areas over which there is likely to be considerable debate.

But let me remind the Assembly of what exactly we were asked to do:

The Deliverance approved by last year's Assembly, said: **The General Assembly:**

Note the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Balfour Declaration in 2017, and instruct the World Mission and Church and Society Councils to bring a joint report to the General Assembly in 2017 on *what might be appropriate to mark this anniversary, and on what other factors might make for peace and justice amongst the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.*

So there were two issues for us to address:

1. How should we mark this 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary?

2. What can the Church of Scotland do at this time to help promote peace and justice among Israeli and Palestinian peoples?

Simple really... Nothing controversial there, eh?

In answer to the first question posed by our remit, both Councils are very much aware that there are those, within Israel and beyond, who will see in the approaching centenary a cause for celebration. But for many others, including our Palestinian Christian sisters and brothers, it is a painful reminder of the loss of their homeland.

It is for this reason that we are urging that any public commemorations of the Balfour Declaration should be undertaken sensitively, and always in the context of calling for peace and justice. And we hope that this Assembly will instruct the Church and Society Council to write to the Scottish and UK governments to that effect.

That is, in our view, a suitably balanced response.

Of course balance is not the same as neutrality.

And when it comes to the second question—to the issues of justice and peace—*neutrality* is not an option for us.

As followers of Christ we are *for* justice and *against* injustice; we are *for* peace and *against* discord and division.

Neutrality is not an option.

On that, I'm sure everyone can agree.

I'm sure that we will also agree that there are *huge* and glaring injustices in that part of the world right now.

The report highlights some of those injustices particularly in relation to Israeli settlements on Palestinian territory. And it is blatantly obvious to everyone that there is no real peace there.

Where we may begin to *disagree* is on what **are** “*the factors that might **make** for peace and justice*” in this situation.

Especially when we realise that it is never real justice unless it is justice for *all* who are involved; and it is not real peace until it is peace for *all* involved.

Replacing one injustice with a different one does not establish justice.

We've seen *that* happen all too often in history. [In fact, it might be argued by some that this is precisely what the Balfour Declaration did.]

Justice has to be justice for all.

Similarly, any semblance of peace or security that is a privilege enjoyed by one side at the *expense* of the other is not real peace and certainly not real security.

So identifying clearly the things that make for peace and justice is not always easy.

If we want to get beyond simply choosing sides and begin to find ways of building a truly just peace then all those involved need to begin to understand the perspective of others who are also involved yet who see things very differently.

Of course this is precisely what does *not* happen in situations of conflict.

Walls are built, either literally or metaphorically, and the 'other side' becomes simply 'the Enemy.'

Moderator,

While I hope all of us would agree that we should always be concerned about situations of conflict or injustice *wherever* they occur, some may wonder why the Church of Scotland should concern itself in particular about a letter written almost 100 years ago.

The letter was from the then Foreign Secretary, Lord Arthur James Balfour, and it was sent to Lord Walter Rothschild, a prominent leader of the British Jewish community, stating that the British Government “*viewed with favour the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people*”, and would “*use their best endeavours to facilitate the achievement of this object.*”

The letter also stated, “*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.*”

Why this matters to us is that Lord Balfour was, of course, an elder in the Church of Scotland. And what’s

more the General Assembly of 1918 explicitly gave its support to the proposals in the letter, even though the statement did make two promises that were fundamentally opposed to each other, one of which seems to have been conveniently ignored.

And so our report says, *“we recognise how deeply western Christians and western governments have been, and still are, implicated in this conflict”* and *“how the stories and suffering of both Israelis and Palestinians are deeply intertwined with our own history.”*

There is another reason why we cannot simply walk away from this situation.

To borrow a phrase from the world of diplomacy, one of “facts on the ground” is that the Church of Scotland has had a physical presence in the Land for a very long time, from long before the establishment of the State of Israel, and well before the Balfour Declaration.

In addition to our two congregations in Jerusalem and Tiberias we currently have a Christian school in Jaffa, with a multi-faith staff (a school which educates

children of all faiths and none) and, of course, we have a hotel in Tiberias and a guesthouse in Jerusalem. Beyond that, we support a wide range of partners among the Palestinian Christian Community and within Israeli civil society who are all working for justice and peace and the protection of human rights. The question is: does that 'presence,' and the way that it currently operates (including these partner-relationships) contribute helpfully and positively and effectively towards peace and justice? or does it hinder it?

Our report states, *“These are small but real examples of ways in which the Church’s presence allows it to have a positive impact. Such actions should not be underestimated, and yet as we reflect on nearly 200 years of presence in the area, and 100 years since the Balfour Declaration, it is right that we should explore what more can be done to contribute towards a just peace. Can the Church do more to promote dialogue? Is the Church of Scotland in Israel/Palestine being as*



*effective as it can in working for justice and peace?”*

These are questions that the World Mission Council would like to explore strategically and in much more depth, in co-operation with the Church & Society Council and the Council of Assembly and in consultation with other relevant committees and groups within the church.

Moderator, this report was not produced by a group sitting in a room in Edinburgh reflecting on past history and abstractly theorising about the political situation 2500 miles away.

It began with a visit to Israel/Palestine and a series of conversations with people there, principally our partners— both Palestinians and Israelis—and we continue to have good conversations with the Jewish community here in Scotland.

It's *their* voices that are heard throughout the report.

And, perhaps surprisingly to some, **our partners do not all share the *same* view as to what might make**

**for peace and justice**, especially with regard to the issue of economic leverage.

You might imagine that they (or at least all the Palestinian partners) *would* all have the same view but in fact that is not the case.

It is significant also that none of our ecumenical church partners in the region have chosen to endorse the so-called BDS option (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) and this is also true of most of our major International church partners, such as PCUSA.

**This is a major reason why at this stage our two Councils have not yet come to a definitive position on that issue. And to do so *before* understanding fully ALL of the consequences ...for others and for ourselves... would be foolish.**

The good thing about any anniversary is that it gives us an opportunity not only to look back into the past but also to take stock of the present and to check out our direction for the future.

We would like to take that opportunity to do it properly and to consider every aspect of our engagement. And in particular to focus on what can be done to bring about a just peace.

Moderator, following our practice in the WMC of “attentive accompaniment” I have sat in a Palestinian refugee camp with the family of a teenage boy, shot dead by Israeli soldiers, and I have sat with the Jewish parents of an Israeli soldier who lost his life in the conflict. Their grief was the same.

I have joined the crush and shared the humiliation of Palestinians trying to get through the Bethlehem checkpoint just to go to work. They just do what they have to do because they see no other way.

I have shared conversation with a Jewish settler who lives in a settlement not for ideological reasons but because it meant he could afford a home for his young family. When I asked him if he thought the current situation was just, was it really tenable and sustainable for the future, and would he want his children to grow

up behind walls? he said, “No- but I cannot see any other way at the moment.”

Moderator, it is the responsibility of all of us who care to help everyone to look for other ways—ways of building a just peace that it is for all.

Some may argue that the situation is too urgent to tolerate such a cautious approach: others would argue that it is far too important to get it wrong.

If nothing else, however, the Balfour Centenary should remind us of the dangers of unintended consequences. We urge the Church as a whole to read and study the report in its entirety, along with the Kairos Palestine document in *its* entirety, and to engage prayerfully and practically in the pursuit of a just peace for all in that Land.

Moderator, I present the report and, as I am not a Commissioner, ask the Principal Clerk to move the Deliverance.