I’m very grateful I am for the invitation to share with you some reflection from the time my wife and I spent in Jerusalem, while I was the chaplain at St George’s College, a centre for pilgrimage and study attached to the Anglican Cathedral.

I have two texts, bookends for this reflection. First, Colossians 1.20; Paul says of Jesus, ‘through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things…by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Col.1.20). Reconciliation - the work of God and the distinctive calling of this cathedral! Let me take you where we first took our pilgrims for orientation, to a vantage point on the Mount of Olives. Looking east, across the Palestinian Territories, the Judean wilderness stretches out before you, to the Jordan Valley and the Kingdom of Jordan beyond. On hilltops you see large Israeli Settlements. Scattered throughout the Israeli-occupied Palestinian West Bank these settlements are now home to more than 400,000 Israelis. Look west and across the Kidron Valley is the Old City and the Temple Mount, dominated by the Dome of the Rock and Al Aqsa Mosque. Modern Israeli Jerusalem reaches to the horizon and to the north and east lies East Jerusalem, a bustling Palestinian area – two worlds far apart, invisibly divided by a major road. From 1948 this was the heavily militarised border between the new State of Israel and Jordan, until the capture of the Old City and east Jerusalem by the Israelis in the 1967 war. Today armed police and soldiers are posted at flash points and the delightful Palestinian bookshop, near the cathedral, a good place for coffee or lunch, is regularly raided by the security forces. Though some Israeli Jews will go there many others fear to enter the area and so I heard a guide, hired by two American tourists, saying in the cathedral Guest House as he patted his pistol, ‘Twelve bullets, twelve good reasons’.

Two peoples, who have both suffered grievously, inhabit a land about the size of Wales. After centuries of persecution and the unutterable hell of the holocaust, the UN vote for partition of the land was followed by the melting of its political resolve and 1948 saw the armed establishment of the State of Israel opposed by six invading Arab armies - a time of terror and devastation resulting for the Jew ish people in great rejoicing but for Palestinians it was ‘the Nakba’, ‘the Catastrophe’, with hundreds of thousands driven permanently from their homes. Over the decades more war followed, with more land occupied by Israel. The Balfour Declaration of 1917 had supported in Palestine ‘a national home for the Jewish people… it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine’. Hearing those words there might be a sharp intake of breath because there has been a devastating ‘collision of land and peoples’ fomenting resentment, suspicion, fear and hatred – though there are many on both sides who seek a new order based on mutual recognition and justice.

Jesus approached Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives and wept over it saying, ‘If only, even you, had recognised on this day the things that make for peace. But now they are hidden from your eyes’. It is difficult to walk in his steps and not to weep. There are so many tragic stories, like that of a Palestinian woman haranguing the security forces at the Damascus Gate into the Old City, brandishing a pair of scissors, grieving the shooting of her son (an admitted case of mistaken identity). She was shot dead on the spot and her family home demolished. Intelligent, charming sixth-formers told us of a cousin abducted and burned to death by Jewish settlers. They told of the danger of running in the street for fear of coming under suspicion and being shot. There are deadly attacks by Palestinians on Jewish people. Jesus wept, we wept.

How might we reflect on the torture of the land of the Holy One and indeed the ravages of sin from which none of us are immune and which continually threaten to tear us all apart? From the Mount of Olives you see the domes of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, marking the site of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and through the eye of faith a Christian can see all the narratives of human history focussed on Jesus. The prophets had described the coming return of God to Zion. Ezekiel (43.2) says, ‘the glory of the God of Israel was coming from the east’. As Jesus rode into
Jerusalem in humility on a donkey from the east, Pontius Pilate with all the panoply of Imperial Rome, was coming from his headquarters in the west, to a confrontation that would change the world. Though Jesus would be condemned by Pilate to die as ‘the King of the Jews’, of his kingdom the gospel says, ‘there shall be no end’ or, as we heard from St John this morning, ‘the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it’. God’s wisdom and power, his glory was made known at the cross and in the garden on the first day of the week, the day of resurrection, and of the remaking of our humanity in the likeness of Jesus.

Today, whether it be Israeli and Palestinian, Sunni and Shia, people separated by the great divide of globalised economies or by opinions published on social media, it seems increasingly difficult to have a dialogue with those with whom we disagree - but Christians belong to him who has reconciled us to God and calls us to be his ‘peacemakers’, those who ‘hunger and thirst for righteousness’. It has been said that in the New Testament the phrase ‘one another’ rings out like a peal of bells: ‘love one another’, ‘pray for one another’, ‘forgive one another’ – whoever is our neighbour, for all are made in the image of God.

I urge you to pray for all the people of that divided land. Pray for the tiny minority of Christians, the ‘living stones’ - people like the Greek Orthodox priest and his small congregation at Jacob’s Well, in the heart of the West Bank, a place that speaks of the age-old purposes and promises of God. Here, where Jesus spoke to a Samaritan woman in a first century no-go area, in the beautiful church above the well is a glass sarcophagus holding the body of a former priest hacked to death and in the church gates the bullet holes multiplied between our visits. Pray for the many schools, clinics and hospitals they provide to serve everyone in their communities. Pray for Archbishop Suheil and the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem running about thirty such institutions. Pray for all our Christian brothers and sisters and their ministry of reconciliation. Pray for the young people, many of whom leave to study and find careers abroad because they see no hope for the future.

I urge you not to leave this morning before you have discovered more from Friends of the Holy Land representatives Maria McCaffery and Chris Haines, about the grave challenges facing the Christian community and the much needed support we can give them.

Finally, my second text, that I often read in Bethlehem and at the tomb of Christ: ‘The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us….full of grace and truth’ – met by rejection and crucifixion between two rebels. In that death we are reconciled to God and raised with Jesus to new life, for his life of utter given-ness to God and neighbour was the life that death could not defeat. So, wherever we dwell, let us strive in awe and humility, never to be ‘overcome by evil but overcome evil with good’. Anything less pierces his heart. Amen.