



# **BibleLands Annual Lecture**

## **2011**

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Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford

## **Introduction**

Thank you very much Lesley (Lord Griffiths, Chair) and it's a pleasure to be here. I'm instructed to talk for 40 minutes, which I will do, I'll keep that time..... so will I..... (laughter) yeah, OK!

## **The Palestinian Experience**

Basically when one looks at Palestinian experience, being a refugee is in the heart of that experience. I mean you cannot be a Palestinian without having experienced being a refugee. I like a lot what Edward Said has written and has filmed in "*Out of Place*" because there, there is a feeling that in spite of their accomplishments and in spite of the stature the economic stature that he has gotten to at Columbia and elsewhere he still had to grapple with the idea that he was to start with a Palestinian refugee. And being a refugee for us really is associated with banishment, with separation, with deportation and with finding ourselves in a place different than our original homes; and I have to tell you that this is not an easy experience, it's a very terrible experience. People don't play it, some people don't play it, you know for example one time I was talking to a Polish Jewish friend and she told me but that there were so many refugees in and out of Poland and I asked her have they forgotten and I wasn't sure that she gave me the proper answer. But the problem in Palestine is that today not only people who have become refugees have experienced

banishment and separation, actually people who are living in Palestine today are also experiencing that, in their own homes, in their own cities and in their own towns because in a sense they are strangers in their own place of residence and you ask why, how? Simply because they are a restricted and constrained either by the Separation Wall or for example a person in Bethlehem cannot freely come to Jerusalem not even to worship so, in a sense, he lives or she lives in a state of banishment and separation.

### **Cut off from Jerusalem**

I mean one time I had a friend that Bethlehem University who asked me who said I have haven't been in Jerusalem for the last 15 years. And I said then why would you like to go to Jerusalem, you know I always ask this kind of silly questions, and I said why would you like to go to Jerusalem and he said simply to take my children and walk down the streets, I love to do it, visit the holy sepulchre go to the mosque, feel that I belong to Jerusalem. So this sense of not belonging of being out of place is really imposed on the Palestinian people today and accordingly I cannot see the future with this continuing to be the standard procedure or something so normal that Palestinians, that we Palestinians have to endure.

## **Estrangement and alienation**

Now I spoke about Edward Said and I have read his book "*Out of Place*" and I have seen the film he has done, I don't know if anyone one of you have seen the film of Edward Said "*Out of Place*" and we were sitting there one time on a French station and I showed the "*Out of Place*" in French with Arabic sub titles. It was beautiful because he was really reflecting on the experience of most of us in Palestine and at the same time he was sending a message of hope, and he was talking also about his association with Daniel Barenboim. I was taken back with that and I remember I got to my computer and I had his e-mail address I didn't know Edward Said that well but I had his e-mail address and he was sick then, so I said I would write him a message. So I wrote to him and I said we just saw in the family your film and we like it and I think there should be an Arabic version of that, because while it spoke about the depression, about the feeling of estrangement that Said went through it also spoke at the same time not really about adaptation but about how do we get from this state of estrangement and I would say alienation and marginalisation to a state where we are standing on our own two feet. So ..... and it so happened that when Edward Said and his family came for the first time to Jerusalem I was on the same flight in Paris with him and we sat across from each other and he started asking me *'how does it feel in Jerusalem? would the Israeli's allow me to go visit my school?*

*can I go from my school to visit my old home? can I go from my old home to visit where my father had his educational bookstore in Salem Bin Street(???)', and all kinds of questions that felt that the guy really was disoriented even though he was coming back to his own home.*

### **Multiple identities**

Now I visit Amman so often and one of the exercises I do all the time is ask taxi drivers where they come from. And often the taxi driver tells me,

*'I come from Haifa or I come from Lod I come Jaffa'* and I say,

*'not really', especially if he's young,*

*'oh no, no really I come'*

*'but you wasn't born there'*

*'no I wasn't born there but my parents told me about our beginnings in Lod, Jaffa and Haifa'* and so on.

Now my next question usually to the taxi driver is,

*'would you like to go back?'* And then I have different views, like one would say a 60/65 year old taxi driver would say,

*'I come originally from Haifa and if I'm given the chance of having a cave in which I can live I will come back'.* And I say,

*'but really would you be in your own environment with so many Israeli Jews?'*

He said, *'I don't care, I would live with them, but I want to come back'*.

Now another taxi driver would tell you listen, in his late 20's he would tell you,

*'I have been born in Amman, I like Amman, I'm doing OK, but at the same time I have attachment to my home back to my parents home back in Lod, back in Jaffa'* etc.

*'Would you go back?'*

*'I'm not sure, I'm not sure you know'*.

So you have this kind of experience found among refugees, why I'm saying this is because when you talk about exile and refuge, being a refugee, on the one hand you have desperation, you have a feeling of estrangement and maybe also withdrawal with subsequent mental and physiological disorders and it happened, it happened in so many Palestinian families after 1948 it did happen. But on the other hand, and I say that with reservation because I explain it later on, there is also a process of adaptation. In order to overcome the negative effects of dislocation and exile, and the two together, the two together make Palestinians today with multiply identities really. While I would like for example to say that I come from a Palestinian refugee family, at the same time maybe if you ask me, 'how do you identify yourself?' I would start by saying, *'I am a Palestinian, I'm a Christian, I'm an Arab, I'm a Roman Catholic'* and then maybe I would say at the end, *' I'm a child of refugee parents, I am a*

*refugee*'. Why I'm saying that? Because I feel like Edward Said, like these taxi drivers, that what happened to our people in 1948, to Palestinian people in 1948 was really putting on us a new identity.

### **The British Legacy**

Now 726,000 Palestinians in 1948 became refugees including 50 – 60,000 Palestinian Christians. My own parents were refugees and I remember that when they were sitting in the old city of Jerusalem in that single room which housed 8 people, sipping their early coffee in the morning, I could hear them talking about their experience and saying we have nothing against the Jewish people, our problem is with the British and the Americans, as simple as that. I know this is a British audience mostly but I have to tell you what my parents used to tell us, and one time I asked my father, why would you accuse the British and the Americans? He said because these two countries are supposedly subscribing them, (I don't know now), to Christian values and therefore we would have expected them to keep up to these values, and therefore we cannot expect them to make two wrongs and to say it is right, it's not right. And that gave me an explanation why my parents were never anti Jewish, but they were in a sense critical of the UK and the US.

## **A visit to their lost home**

Now in 1967 when the war took place, '67 war took place and Jerusalem was once again open, the eastern part was occupied by Israel and my mother, (God bless her soul), said,

*'I'm going to go see my home in Catamon',*

because my parents were made refugees from Catamon to the old city of Jerusalem. It was the Franciscans really who provided the one single room for our housing in the Old City. So I think around June 28 1967 my mother took the bus and went to see her home in Catamon, she knocks on the door and this guy, Jewish/Israeli comes out and he looks at her and he says,

*'I know you',*

*'How do you know me?'*

*'Hah! you left some photos in the attic you know'.*

My mother came back quite shaken by that experience. He asked her *'please come in'*

I don't know if she went in or didn't go in, but that is the kind of experience which left an impact on me, on my brothers and sisters and I think it is the kind of experience that most original Palestinian refugees speak about. Now when in 1967 we had the June war again, again another 300,000 Palestinians were made refugees, of whom 175,000 were made refugees another time. And most of these people they ended up in Jordan. It was difficult but what I remember from my own mother and that is why a majority of

Palestinians in the 1967 war did not budge, did not move, was that she was always telling us that never again.

I asked her one time, *'what do you mean never again?'*

She said, and this was in I think 65/64 she said,

*'If there would be another war between Israel and the Arabs I am not moving from the old city of Jerusalem.'*

And I say *'why not?'*

She said, *'because I don't want to be a refugee another time. I have had enough with being a refugee for one time.'*

### **The Palestinian Diaspora**

Now what do we do with the refugees? Today you have close to 7 million Palestinian refugees all over. Out of the 726,000 refugees, original refugees today there are children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren make up 7.1 million refugees and they are spread all over. You find them in Lebanon, in Syria, you find them in Jordan where you have close to 2 million of our Palestinian refugees. You find them in the occupied Palestinians territories where again you have close to 2 million. And the question becomes, if they are so overwhelming in the population in the Palestinian population then can we resolve that Arab Israeli conflict without really resolving the problem of the refugees?

## **The Right of Return**

The answer is definitely not, because in 1948, December 1948 the UN General Assembly has undertaken resolution 194 which among other items said that those refugees who would like, who wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practical time. And to date this has not transpired, in fact the opposite is happening because recently the Israeli Statistical Bureau or Ministry of the Interior or whoever release data indicating 140,000 Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem have lost their identity cards as permanent residents in the West Bank, in other words they cannot come back and live in the West Bank. And the Israeli's who control the borders would not allow them in. This is happening also in East Jerusalem.

## **BibleLands involvement with Palestinian refugees**

Now where does **BibleLands** and the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees of the Middle East Council of Churches come in, in all this? Well back in 1948 three Anglican Deacons of the diocese of Jerusalem saw the plight of Palestinian refugees, and they were moved and it was specially harsh winter back in 1948/49/50. We have had two or three major snow storms and all the refugees who came out of Palestine were housed in tents open tents, so it was a very harsh winter. So these three Deacons

decided we are going to help those refugees and the first thing they did is they wrote to the Israeli government and they said,

*'why don't you take the refugees back?'*

The Israeli Government came back nicely, kindly and said,

*'we are willing to accept 100,000 refugees back',*

Then a couple of years back the Israeli Government said,

*'Sorry we made a mistake we cannot accept anyone back'.*

Why did the Israeli Government make such a promise at the beginning? It's because when Israel was accepted into the UN one of the conditions of its acceptance of the UN organisation was to accept all UN resolutions including 194, which stipulates that refugees should be coming back and that was the end of the story.

So the three Deacons decided together with Palestinian Christian public figures that they are going to set small committees, small acting committees in order to service Palestinian refugees. And we did that in Gaza, in Jordan, in the West Bank, in Galilee, because in Galilee and many people don't know that there are today almost 350,000 of the children and great-grandchildren of the displaced Palestinians back in 1948. And they were displaced from their villages and towns and they were not allowed to go back. So there was also this area committee in Nazareth to tend to those displaced, and Jordan and Lebanon and this made up the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees, and we have been partnering with **BibleLands** on providing educational, health and

other services to young Palestinian refugees in all of these areas.

Often people asked whom do you serve? And we say we serve Palestinian refugees full stop. And they say, *'are they Christians?'*

I say, *'no they are Muslims'.*

*'Then why do you serve them?'* some would ask.

*'Why, if you are a Christian why do you serve Muslims?'*

I say, *'because we are part of our society and we don't differentiate between Christians and Muslims'.*

### **Who is my neighbour?**

Yes, there are Palestinian refugees who are Christians and one example of that is the Dbayeh refugee camp in the north of Beirut. Here you have 6,000 Christians, Palestinians who are refugees, and yes we do some work there but our work and outreach is not restricted by religion. In fact our experience in the Gaza Strip, where you have a Christian population of only 2,000 to 3,000 mostly Greek Orthodox, is where we have three clinics that serve up to 30,000 Palestinian refugees and all of them are Muslims. Out of the 101 employees we have we may have 6 or 7 Christians and the rest are Muslims. I'm not saying that to receive your applause on our open-heartedness, pluralism we are very compassionate Christians and so on. I know there is Brother David here from Bethlehem University and this reminds me that at Bethlehem University 70% of the students are Muslims, and by the way 70% of

the students are females too which is maybe more important you know. But what I'm saying is when you do that, you do it because as a society we want to be a vibrant group and not, and I would want to go back to this question of adaptation because some people say Bernard, if you talk about adaptation then you are forgiving the Israelis and you are forgetting and in my opinion this is not so. I look at Edward Said, I look at my mother, I look at the taxi drivers and I have all admiration for them. They have grappled with very difficult, personal and identity issues and yet they kept going, they kept writing, they kept doing things and this is why I am proud of my people because mostly we live with dignity and many of us have learned to say no we don't want to be dependent, we want to be independent, we want to stand on our own two feet. I can tell you that like thousands of Palestinian families my parents made it a point that we get a good education, even, even when their means were very limited and they couldn't afford and yet they went and sent to us to the best schools in order to get their education. And I, my Professor in the USA told me one time, this is the capital that your parents left you and likewise with thousands of Palestinians families the stress on education is really the way out, the way out.

### **The search for a solution**

Now I'm not saying that we don't need to work on politics. I mean it is very important to work on politics but at the same time waiting

for politics and waiting for the US to make up its mind, waiting for Israel to provide a vision for peace in the area. I think I personally am not very optimistic. You know Lesley you maybe a little bit more optimistic than I am, but I personally am not that optimistic. So I say if I'm not optimistic so what do I do, I go forward. I don't become a victim, I get the models of people who have made it with dignity and who went forward rather than getting stuck with being the victims.

### **Victim mentality**

And I think if you allow me, that one of the problems that we are facing today in the Middle East is that our Israeli neighbours are always projecting themselves as victims and they have not liberated themselves from this victim mentality. And I think yes, I am a refugee but I don't want to be a victim and I therefore I want to see really a solution, a fair and just solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, and I want the Palestinian refugees to be part of finding the solution. I don't want some smart guy who thinks that he can negotiate on behalf of the Palestinian refugees to sell down their rights, because simply when I think of a solution I think of the pain and anguish of my parents, I think of the trouble of thousands of Palestinians who really were wounded by what happened to them, who lost their homes and at the same time had to bear personally, psychologically the brunt of becoming refugees. I cannot with all

honesty do away with that and yet on the other hand I want to go forward, I want my children to have a good a broader vista, I want them to see the prospects for a better future, and I want them to stay home, if possible, and not to leave and therefore they cannot do that if they are withdrawn as victims and this is very important.

### **Lebanon**

Now I have been asked to briefly, I know it is not on Palestinian refugees and I can tell you the conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are some of the worst, there has been some easing nowadays with the condition but yet not enough. For example Palestinians refugees in Lebanon cannot inherit property, cannot build or construct, recently the Lebanese army, I was going to say the Israeli army, but the Lebanese Army came in and destroyed a couple of the buildings in the refugee camp that they felt were built and they were not supposed to be build. So employment is limited to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and really you cannot expect Palestinian refugees to live in dignity while they are prohibited from working or from building decent homes and so on. People ask, 'what would the Arab Spring do to the Palestinian refugee issues?' I think one of the effects of the Arab Spring was what was seen on Sunday. This past Sunday when thousands of Palestinians and Lebanese came to the border and attempted, some of them attempted to cross over to Israel. In fact some of these people, for

them this was the first time they had ever seen what used to be Palestine and so, for them, it was a really emotional encounter with this view of their own country. Now some people would say, and I heard an Israeli saying that listen history will make the younger generation forget and therefore if we wait more and more on the refugee issue eventually everyone would forget about it. And what I'm seeing today on the internet is really proof to the contrary. It's younger people today who are talking about the land, who are talking about refugees who are talking about the place of origin of their parents and great-grandparents. And therefore if I were the Israelis I would hurry up with the Arab Spring in there, I don't know what will happen with the Arab Spring, but I will hurry up to really make a political solution with the Palestinians. And this will be to the good of everybody, but I doubt that there will be a political solution.

### **Recent political developments**

Now one last item is the reconciliation. Somebody asked me to say a word about the reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah. And I think this is a good move, I am not very optimistic but I think it is a move in the right direction and I'm hoping, as a Palestinian member of Parliament that truly we'll have elections next year, and we will be prepared to really run the country and the Parliament in a productive manner and not the way we have done in the last 3 – 4

years. Now am I optimistic that the Palestinian refugee issue will be resolved? I am not that optimistic, therefore I think that the Palestinian refugee issue unfortunately will stay with us. And when countries like the UK come out and say we are donating £110m between 2007 and 2011 to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, UNRWA and some people complain. I think without this kind of assistance then many Palestinian families would not have the chance to send their children to schools, they would not have a chance to send them to have good proper medical care, and therefore all vocational training, and therefore if we want to maintain the dignity of Palestinian refugees we really need to stand with them and to promote that dignity. Some of us have made it on our own with help here and there, but others continue to need help and I'm hoping and praying that this august meeting here would keep our people in your thoughts and that your solidarity with our people will translate into peace, justice and eventual reconciliation in that troubled land, which we all call the Holy Land.

Thank you very much.

End of tape.

**Response to Professor Bernard Sabella from Dr. Karma Nabulsi, tutor in politics, St Edmund Hall, Oxford University.**

Thank you I'm just going to take 10 minutes but there is a lot to say because that was a wonderful talk. Good evening.

.....*tape turn over*

Part of commemoration around 60 years, but actually the 63<sup>rd</sup> year this year is critical, and I would say that's because of the Arab Spring and I would say exactly for the reasons that Bernard eluded to, I'm optimistic and that is because of our young people. To see those tens of thousands of young Palestinians in Lebanon and in Jordan, there wasn't much coverage of that but there was in the Arab press and in Syria who came from Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, Hanashe(??) camp, who originally came from Jaffa or Haifa and who saw for the very first time the barbed wire to get to return home. It's an individual story and I think people could start to touch what this conflict is all about, very simple human rights of return. And it captured everything because it's representative in such a monstrous way, in such a kind of dangerous and difficult way that this is we're talking about the destruction, we're talking about you know war, and actually it's nothing like that at all. It's such a simple thing and I think Bernard spoke in very, very beautiful and moving way, when he introduced about the beginning of it being an

individual experience, exile and the alienation and the separation, but also that's it's a collective experience.

The individual experience is that it happened to each Palestinian whether they became a refugee or didn't, because what happen to us collectively between 1947 and it continued after 1948, was that the majority of our people were expelled or forced to flee or fled in fear because of the massacres that happened over the Summer of 1948. So that it affected all of those that stayed behind as well, because it happened to us collectively as a society, we became in that instant that long year that was one instant, a completely fragmented society and that is why that simple right has to be addressed with humanity and dignity, because those are the kinds of things that you cannot jump over, it happens to you both as an individual and as a person, and I come like, probably like some of Bernard's family, but like most Palestinian families some of us were refugees and some of us are not, it's quite complex in a sense that we come from that part of the world and the reason is that, you know I'm a city girl what they call I come from the city in the Nabulsi family, but the majority of our people are a peasant society. That means we have a relationship to the land that goes back for centuries and if any of you know, if you're not all city people, but know farming communities yeah. It's a very deep attachment to a place to an orchard, to a hill, to a tree, to the land that you have a relationship with, and that is, as I said we have the big cities Haifa

and Jaffa and Lod and Jerusalem and Nablus and Bethlehem. The vast majority of our people are farmers, peasants coming from working the land and that is why we remain, as a refugee people, very close to the borders of historic Palestine, the majority of us are 20 - 30 kilometres living away and that is because of our society and culture is of a peasant family we want to return to our land. So that history which is very intimate, and as Bernard talked about the individual story and the collective story, so you'll find young people, you know and that's that quote that you said many Israelis say that's that quote from Ben-Gurion when he said about the refugee issue, you know because there was that, that resolution, that Palestinians who wish to do so should be allowed to do so and instead over 500 small villages, which is how most of us live were destroyed and were razed so that we wouldn't be able to return, and there was a slogan by Ben-Gurion at the time and he said, "The old will die and the young will forget".

### **The right to choose**

The reason I'm optimistic, and I'll close here because I think I've..... yep, its taken 8 minutes so far so I hope I'm keeping to time. Is that the young have not forgotten because the young cannot forget because this is a legacy of their humanity from their parents and their grandparents which is actually the basis of all international law of refugees, which is refugee choice and you'd find

in my family and I'm sure in Bernard's family and in other families of refugees and made up that some would like to return and some don't, some have made lives in Canada, some have made lives in Jordan, yeah. But actually the Palestinian people are united in wanting the right to choose like any other human being and that's about dignity which Bernard talked about so beautifully, but it's about the dignity and respect of the human, so I think that when see that young generation who are as touched by the collective spirit of being Palestinian that this is what it means to us, whether you are a refugee or not a refugee, this happened to you as a people, yeah. That they are determine to claim that right of choice which means to live facing forward because it means living in the middle and in the midst of their own humanity, for me it's the positive sign that I could see.

So thank you very much Bernard for and I hope you all have questions for him and push him.

Tape ends.