

**Sermon by the Rev. Dr Olav Fykse Tveit,
World Council of Churches general secretary
at the Ecumenical Prayer Service on Ash Wednesday, 10 February 2016
at the Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Jerusalem
Launch of the Lenten campaign of Ecumenical Water Network of the World
Council of Churches:
Seven Weeks for Water
Theme: *Thirst for Justice: A pilgrimage of justice and peace in Palestine***

Isaiah 58:1-12; Revelation 22:1-2

Dear sisters and brothers, dear fellow pilgrims of justice and peace,

The Ash Wednesday reminds us that transformation is needed and possible. True fasting is not about being seen, but to see better, what should be changed. The Word of God in the time of Lent does not only give us a critical light to see, but it also helps us to see that transformation is possible.

For some churches this is the start of the season of Lent; for the Orthodox churches it comes later. It would be good to have joint calendars for the Christian feast so that we could give a common Christian witness at the same time. The time of lent is not about us being seen, though but that we see the need for change and transformation in our own lives and in the world around us. The time of Lent is an opportunity to see both the injustices and the root causes of injustices and conflicts.

Being in Jerusalem together offers very significant views to us to see better and more clearly. We here see both the harsh reality of sin as well as the true signs of hope. The holy cross and the empty tomb remind us every day that God has come into our world as it was and as it is to change what we see and know. Christ came to change the reality of sin, to give hope that we are not alone in the struggles for justice and peace, to show us that the sins and the evil of the world will not have the last word. The cross shows us the deepest expression of God's solidarity with us. The power of the resurrection changes the direction of our lives. In the name of the risen Christ we are in relationship with the living God with a hope that is sometimes against hope, but a hope as an expression of the faith we share in Jesus Christ.

In Jerusalem, we also see that spirituality expressed in prayer and fasting can open new doors for us and for the Church and the world. This place is a site for pilgrims to come and see and to be strengthened by what we see and experience. We see the potential of

people of different lands and of different faiths coming to search for conversion, for healing, for transformation. Almost all the religions in the world have some occasions where the faith communities are encouraged to fast. Fasting during the Lenten period is a common practice in many Christian traditions.

In Jerusalem, we also see the hard realities that are not like the ones we hope and pray for. A diplomat once said after visiting Jerusalem that he believed at least one sentence in the Bible, "He is not here." This critical word also helps us to see that the visions for the city of Jerusalem are not fulfilled in the way many things currently happen.

The Seven Weeks for Water campaign particularly makes us able to see the justice and peace which are lacking as we are shown what the consequences of occupation and unfair sharing of resources lead to.

Today, we have gathered here in the Holy Land, which has given birth to three major religions of the world. "And yet, in this holy place, we have confronted a most unholy reality: the terrible suffering of the Palestinian people from lack of clean water and adequate sanitation. And what is lacking in Palestine is not water; what is lacking is justice. The Palestinian people thirst for water justice." ([Statement of the Ecumenical Water Network of WCC, 2014](#)).

We read the second scripture passage from the Book of Revelation. John gets the vision of the New Jerusalem, where "the Angel showed him the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city". Bishop Munib Younan, who has contributed to this year's Seven Weeks for Water Lenten reflections, elaborating on this texts says, "But as I sit in my church office here in Jerusalem, I know very well there is no such river flowing through the city. Here in Jerusalem and the Holy Land, we are still thirsty for healing. We are still thirsty for peace."

We heard today the voices from Palestine with regards to the water crisis, that, the most vulnerable communities have available as little as 20 litres of water per day/per person, just one-fifth of the minimum required to meet their daily needs (WHO recommends 100 litres/day/person).

The advocacy group of Palestine, [EWASH](#), says that on an average, Ramallah receives more rainfall than London. However, the average per capita water consumption in London is 150 litres/day compared to that of only 70 litres/day for an average Palestinian. On the other hand, the per capita consumption for Israel is 300 litres/day. 80% of the ground water from Palestine's mountain aquifer is pumped underneath all the way to Israel; and, the Palestinians are left with only 20% of the available water. Some communities in West Bank have to pay up to 2/3 of their income to buy bottled water, which is the only option. This is unacceptable!

Another report from EWASH said that only 1.5% of the applications by the Palestinians for digging wells and other water facilities in Area C have been approved by Israeli authorities over the [past 4 years](#).

Access to clean water is a basic human need and a basic human right.

We are here to see and to say “Lord, how long shall this continue?”

In such a situation, the assurance from the book of Isaiah reassures all of us. “The LORD will guide you continually, and satisfy your needs in parched places, and make your bones strong; and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water, whose waters never fail.” The book of Revelation also holds this promise of the New Jerusalem, as John envisages, “on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” This promise is a hope for the people of Palestine that justice will be restored and bring back peace and healing to this region. But is also a hope for all nations, for all people living here, both Palestinians and Israelis And for all the people in the world, Jerusalem should be a sign and a city of peace.

We cannot use fasting as a tool to take God hostage and seek God’s blessings as ransom. The text we just read from Isaiah tells otherwise. God is least concerned about fasting that is superficial if our lifestyle, behaviour and most importantly attitude are not changed. The true fast according to God, according to the text is: “to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke.”

As the WCC’s Pilgrimage of Justice and Peace is focused on issues of the Middle East, particularly in this year, we hope your stories and struggle for justice and peace will become the stories and struggle for the churches around the world. May this Lenten season help us to reflect on these issues more deeply. May the Seven Weeks for Water during this Lent help us to highlight the water crisis in Palestine and other places in the world in desperate need for more clean water.

As St Paul encourages us to do, let us Let us hope against hope, as the children of Abraham, our parent in faith. Let us proclaim again in this particular place on this particular day, under this particular theme what the prophet Amos said, “Let justice flow like water, and righteousness, like an unfailing stream” (Amos 5:21-24).

Amen