



## Interfaith Trumps Justice

Naim Ateek's response to the Episcopal Bishops' vote

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Although I expected disappointing results from the General Convention of the Episcopal Church USA, I was, nevertheless, heartbroken when I heard the news and discovered that our Bishops, yet again have failed to take a stand for justice.

I was asked to attend the General Convention as I have done a number of times in the past. I apologized, frankly because I felt deeply that under our present church leadership justice does not stand a chance. The concerns of the Bishops that masqueraded under the guise of "interfaith relations" or their "ability to reach out to people on both sides of the conflict...allowing [them] to be peacemakers" or "positive investment and not divestment" are tantamount to what we un-affectionately call "The Interfaith Ecumenical Deal." The agreement is to have polite conversations and wonderful dinners with the Jewish establishment organizations provided we remain silent about justice for the Palestinians. The "ecumenical deal" looks impressive from the outside but in actual fact it silences the prophetic and smothers the truth.

In the House of Bishops, interfaith concerns trumped justice----again.

In debating the issues that relate to Palestine and Israel, the Bishops' seemingly well intentioned words are clichés which the victims of injustice are sick and tired of hearing because they are simply hot air, or cries of "peace, peace, when there is no peace." Their words are void of meaning and an insult to all those who have a sense of justice and have "eyes to see and ears to hear" the reality of the oppression of the Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli government.

Of course, this is not the first time that people that hold authority in the church and have the power to make a difference and affect change use flimsy logic so that not to act during a critical situation. Obviously the Episcopal Bishops had their reasons. However, from the perspective of the victims of injustice their silence on our conflict is perceived as betrayal. The Bishops in essence took a stand to support the status quo. They refused to see or were unwilling to respond to the dire situation on the ground.

We as Palestinians are daily humiliated by the Israeli forces; our human rights are violated daily; our homes are demolished daily by bulldozers manufactured in the United States; our olive trees are uprooted on a daily basis; our land is confiscated and turned over into illegal settlements daily; our young people languish in Israeli jails with no legal charges or due process

for months on end; our teenagers are taken from their beds in the middle of the night and imprisoned by the Israeli army on an average two by night; and the Israeli government continues its daily violations of international law while the nations of the world remain silent. Is this not a Kairos moment for the church to speak a prophetic word of justice?

There are two questions that every bishop needs to answer before God: Who, in his or her opinion, has benefitted from the bishops' vote, the Palestinians or the Israeli government? And whom did the Episcopal Church USA protect through its vote, the oppressed or the oppressor?

When all is said and done, it is basically fear that prevents Bishops and governments, or for that matter anyone, from taking a stand against the rich and powerful and on behalf of the weak and marginalized. It takes strong leaders with the courage that Jesus Christ and the prophets modeled for us to champion the cause of the oppressed and that is precisely where the church must take its stand. Sadly that did not happen.

I believe this is a shameful breach of our baptismal vows. Our vows are clear: "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" Instead of a resounding "yes", our Bishops' response was a resounding NO. This is without a doubt how it looks to our Palestinian people including the overwhelming majority of Palestinian Christians. May God have mercy on us! We need to renew and take seriously our baptismal vows.

The bishops' vote is also a slap in the face of any bishop or any person who has a sense of justice and the courage to take a stand. It is a slap in the face of Archbishop Tutu who has said repeatedly that Israel's injustice against the Palestinians is worse than apartheid.

In spite of the disheartening Bishops' vote, I can still give thanks to God for the prophetic voice that was clearly heard from another sister church. The United Church of Christ General Synod was meeting about the same time as the General Convention of the Episcopal Church. Thankfully, the UCC Synod by an overwhelming majority voted for boycott and divestment. And last year, the Presbyterian Church and the Quakers took a similar decision. The United Methodist Church has taken an important step in the same direction; and I believe that we will see other denominations following suit.

Indeed, God continues to speak and many faithful people hear God's call and respond to it. We are certain that the prophetic responsibility will never die and there will always be people who, in faithfulness to God and in love of neighbor will strive "...to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God." People who have a sense of justice know that the movement of history is toward justice in the world. The words of Martin Luther King are pertinent in this regard, "The moral arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice," a lesson our Episcopal bishops need to learn.

The General Convention has also given us a new sign of hope. Indeed, the election of Bishop Michael Curry as the next Presiding Bishop is a sign of hope. We are hoping that his African American background gives him a sense for justice because of the injustices he has been forced to endure. We pray that through his leadership the sun of righteousness and justice will shine again on our Episcopal Church and the prophetic voice will again resound and our church will resurrect the prophetic and will once again, courageously, speak truth to power and the God of love, justice and peace will be glorified.

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\* A similar version was sent to Presiding Bishop-elect Michael Curry and Archbishop Suheil Dawany