The Theology of the Land with a focus on Reconciliation

A keynote address by Dr. Clare Amos at the conference: 'Homeland? Exploring the heritage of the Balfour Declaration', 21st October 2017

There is a wonderful saying of Archbishop Michael Ramsey that I often find myself drawing on when I want to encourage lay people to believe that they, or should I say 'we' – as well as clergy – have the right and duty to reflect on questions of theology. Ramsey said: To be a theologian is to be exposed to the vision of heaven and the tragedy of mankind. If this is true then all Christian people are called to be theologians. But it is also a saying that feels very – perhaps excruciatingly – relevant, when we reflect on the situation in the Holy Land, and seek to make theological sense of painful current realities. For this is certainly a context in which theology, whether it is good theology or bad theology, affects the real lives of real people, and in which one person's vision of heaven may, and has, resulted in tragedy for another.

Let me begin by sharing with you a personal experience which is directly relevant to the question I have been asked to address, the theology of the land.

It was in 1977. I was living in the compound of St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem. I was Course Director of St George's College – a place that like Tantur offers short courses intended to expose clergy, theological students and others, to the land of the Bible, past and present. In the courtyard of St George's one afternoon I met my friend Najwa Farah. Najwa was originally from Nazareth. She was the wife of Rafiq Farah, at that time the Anglican pastor in Ramallah, just north of Jerusalem. Najwa was herself a well known Palestinian writer and poet. On this particular occasion when I met her she was almost hyper-ventilating with shock. I asked her what had happened. She told me that she had just come from having lunch at the guest house of Christ Church, then the 'other' Anglican church in Jerusalem. Just as St George's had a tradition of engaging with the Palestinian Arab Christian community, so Christ Church's tradition, since it was part of the work of the Church's Ministry to the Jewish People, was to be a door open to Israel and Christians who sought closer links with Israelis and Jews. Over lunch at Christ Church's guest house she had got in conversation with a woman pilgrim from the United States. The woman asked her who she was. Najwa responded that she was a Palestinian, a Christian, married to an Anglican priest and living in Ramallah. The woman retorted, 'You can't be a real Christian, because if you were a real Christian you would have known that God has given this land to the Jewish people, the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and you would have got up and you would have left the country.' It seemed unbelievable to Najwa – and to me when she told me the story – that anyone could

be quite so crass not only in their religious sentiments but even in their human social skills, as this woman had just been. The incident certainly impacted on me, and has affected my own theological endeavours ever since. When 20 or so years later I found myself writing a commentary on Genesis, the underlying hermeneutical principle that I adopted was to explore how can Genesis be read in a way that offers justice to Najwa, and to other Christian Palestinians. For it was of course bearing texts in mind such as Gen 12, Gen 15 and Gen 17, which speak of God's promises to Abraham of progeny, covenant and land, in mind that Najwa's interlocutor had gone on her attack. I will return later to the way that I sought to address the issue in what I wrote.

Looking back on the incident from the space now of 40 years distance, what I often reflect on is that sentiments which seemed then, to both Najwa and myself, to be extraordinary and extreme, have become much more commonplace with the growth of what is commonly called Christian Zionism, especially in the United States. There are a variety of types of Christian Zionism, although almost all would include a focus on texts such a Genesis 12. A succinct recent definition of Christian Zionism is: "Political action, informed by specifically Christian commitments, to promote or preserve Jewish control over the geographic area now containing Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories." It is significant that this definition begins with the phrase 'political action', because one of the features of Christian Zionism in recent years has been the powerful role that Christian Zionists have had in the American political scene. A significant part of the evangelical wing of US Christianity, they have influenced US policy towards Israel, and seem likely to continue to do so for at least the next few years. In this sense Christian Zionism is a particularly American phenomenon: although there may be quite a few Christians in Britain and other parts of Europe whose biblical and theological beliefs are not that dissimilar to their American counterparts, they do not have today anything a similar political influence on European governments. Ironically however, since this conference is focusing on the Balfour Declaration, it however seems clear that one motivation of Balfour in promoting the declaration was his own religious beliefs which included what today might well be labelled Christian Zionism. Balfour was influenced by the those wings of the evangelical movement in Britain in the nineteenth century in which figures like Lord Shaftesbury was prominent. For Shaftesbury the return of the Jews to the land of Palestine was an issue of faith that he sought also to make government policy.

One reason however that Christian Zionism is so popular in the United States is because of the implicit links drawn in popular culture between America's own past and Israel's present as regards the land. For many in the United States the resonances between the Puritan migration to America and their pioneer settlement of

the land over the next 250 years and the 19th and 20th century Jewish migration and settlement in Israel are real and powerful. Back in 1630 John Winthrop, the leader of a group of a 1000 Puritan settlers, sought to inspire them by challenging them to make their home in America a 'new Jerusalem', 'a city set on a hill' was his exact words. Nearly four centuries later, Gary Bauer, head of the Christian lobbying group American Values, and a contender for the Republican Presidential nomination in 2000, drew on the same image as he promised that, 'A hundred years from now the star of David will still fly over Jerusalem and the Stars and Stripes over Washington – two shining cities upon a hill.' And when John Hagee speaks of God literally driving the original stakes into the soil of Judaea, there seems also to be a resonance with those American 19th century pioneers who drove west in search of land where they too could stake out their claim. Of course the problem, and the tragedy, was that neither place was in fact *terra nullius,* uninhabited land.

I come to this discussion in the first place as a biblical scholar by training, and one whose work and interests, have as I have already implied, been informed by the experience of 10 years of living in the Middle East, first in Jerusalem and later in the Lebanon. I am very conscious that my time of actually living in the Middle East was quite a while ago now, and that, certainly as regards Israel and Palestine the situation on the ground and the attitudes of many Palestinians and Israelis have hardened over the years. I also come as someone who for the last 20 years has been professionally involved with interreligious concerns. My current position gives me responsibility for interreligious relations and cooperation at the World Council of Churches, with particular charge for relations with Judaism and Islam. It 'also offers me the opportunity to travel regularly to several parts of the Middle East. Although not without its complications I find that my biblical interests and my interreligious ones inevitably interrogate and can help to illuminate each other. One other thing I bring to this table is my own faith as an Anglican Christian. Before I started work at the World Council of Churches in 2011, I was a staff member for 10 years at the Anglican Communion office in London. My responsibilities there included interreligious concerns and theological education. I believe that there are particular insights that theology in the Anglican tradition can bring to this discussion: indeed that was what myself and two colleagues and friends were seeking to do when we drafted the 2012 Anglican Communion report *Land of Promise? An Anglican exploration of Christian attitudes to the Holy Land, with special reference to Christian Zionism. Land of Promise?* In true Anglican fashion the questionmark in the title is important.

When I worked in the Anglican Communion Office I was in one sense quite grateful that so much Anglican attention and angst was devoted to the issue of sexuality.

Because as someone once pointed out to me, if Anglicans had not been so busy quarrelling about sexuality, they would probably have been arguing about the rights and wrongs of Anglican engagement with interreligious concerns – and that could have made my life far more difficult. In a sense the sexuality discussion offered a distraction that protected those of us in the Network for Interfaith Concerns from too much critique. But what was also true was that within the Anglican world at heart sexuality and interreligious concerns were two sides of the same coin. For in both contentious issues the fundamental underlying question was 'How do we as Anglicans read and use the Bible?' And that is also the case I think for the specific issue we are looking at here today. We all know that there are many factors that come into play when we think about Israel and Palestine, international politics and economics, history, the legacies of colonialism. Theology is not the only factor: it is probably not even the most important factor. But I have been asked to look at the theological question, and as with those other issues to which I referred a moment ago, when we seek to explore the situation in Israel and Palestine from the perspective of theology then I believe that we cannot avoid exploring how we understand, interpret and use Scripture.

That is obvious even from the incident with which I began: Najwa's encounter with the woman who quoted Abraham at her. The woman's views were formed by her understanding of the nature and role of scripture. Let us unpack that for a few moments. I am sure first of all that she would have conceived on Abraham as a historical person, perhaps living in the first half of the second millennium BC. She would also have believed that in the Book of Genesis we have a historically accurate revelation of God's dealings with Abraham and his family, and probably also the epochs of creation and the flood that came before. She would have most likely assumed that Moses was the human author of the Book of Genesis – and the rest of the Pentateuch, having had it dictated to him by God on Mount Sinai. This would have guaranteed its literal accuracy even though Moses lived several centuries after the putative time of Abraham. She would have considered the primary function of Scripture as being prescriptive and directive. Linked to this she would I imagine have seen many or most parts of Scripture as having a prophetic function, by which she would have understood the function of foretelling the future and ensuring that it came to pass. Her view of scripture could be summed up as 'fundamentalist'. As the Roman Catholic scholars David Neuhaus and Alain Marchadour comment in their interesting book *The Land, the Bible and History*, 'The fundamentalist reads both history and current events as the direct function of a literal interpretation of the foundational texts of his religious community, considering them the direct revelation of absolute truth derived directly from his God and uncompromising in the face of the complexities of the real world.'

She would probably have been the kind of person that the Anglican Israeli Palestinian Naim Ateek was thinking of when he wrote: 'In Israel-Palestine today, the Bible is being quoted to given the primary claim over the land to Jews. In the mind of many religious Jews and fundamentalist Christians the solution to the conflict lies in Palestinian recognition that God has given the Jews the land of Palestine forever. Palestinians are asked to accept this as a basic truth... Palestinian Christians must tackle the land from a biblical perspective, not because I believe that the religious argument over the land is of the *bene esse* of the conflict, but because we are driven to it as a result of the religious-political abuse of biblical interpretation.'

It is telling to note how interconnected the issue of the land promises has become with the question of the historicity of the Bible. To what extent do the Pentateuch and the historical books of the Bible, such as Joshua, Judges, I and 2 Samuel and 1 and 2 Kings give us an accurate picture of the history of ancient Israel? Is the Bible a reliable resource to tell us what actually happened? It is an area where there has been a considerable shift of scholarly opinion over the last 50 years or so. I can remember times and places where introductory courses in Old Testament studies were titled, 'History of Ancient Israel'. I suspect that few universities and colleges would use such a label these days. When I began my own theological studies at Cambridge University the question that hovered around was whether or not the patriarchal stories of Genesis reflected in some way, in their life style and customs a putative patriarchal age in the early part of the second millennium BC. Many still argued that they did, and we had to write essays on such topics. It was in my first year living in Jerusalem in 1973 that I met a young scholar Tom Thompson who made his name, and quite a lot of academic enemies, by arguing that the patriarchal narratives were constructed centuries after the age they apparently described and had virtually no basis in fact. But then the question became, even if the patriarchal stories are simply stories, surely the figure of Moses and the time of the Exodus has a kernel of historical truth, though like Bishop Colenso in the 19th century we might want to query the idea of half a million Israelites marching across the Sinai desert. But even if not half a million – surely a small group, say about 70, might have escaped from Egypt to enter the land of Canaan? Perhaps. I will come back to that in a moment. Then there was the time of the settlement in the land – the period ostensibly described in the books of Joshua and Judges. Here there was an internal contradiction within the Bible itself – for the blitzkrieg presented by Joshua could not easily be correlated with the far more ambiguous picture which included failure as well as success, offered by Judges. And archaeology too was playing a role. Back in the 1930s when excavating Jericho, John Garstang pronounced that he had found the walls that Joshua, or rather God, had knocked down. When Kathleen Kenyon excavated the same site in the 1960s she announced that her findings suggested

that at the traditional time of Joshua, say the 12th or 13th century BC, the site of Jericho did not appear to be settled as a city at all. Perhaps in fact the dramatic story of Jericho's fall in Joshua 7 was intended as liturgy or aetiology rather than history? There is a useful book by G.E. Ramsey whose very title highlights the problem that such apparent discrepancies can present for both Jewish and Christian believers: If Jericho was not razed is our faith in vain? If Jericho was not razed r-a-z-e-d, is our faith in vain?

But if the patriarchal narratives, the account of the Exodus, and the story of the entry into the land are not historically trustworthy, surely we can rely on the biblical accounts of the reigns of David and Solomon – for accurate historical information? Was it not during this period that the tales of earlier periods were drawn together by the hand of the so-called Yahwist, and can we not be fairly sure from this time onwards that we have reliable information provided by the Bible about the life and doings of the people of Israel? For much of my working life that was broadly speaking the position of critical biblical scholarship. But even that has shifted in recent years – with increasing scepticism about what we really know concerning the period of the kings in Israel and Judah. And along with the doubts about historicity there has come increased discussion about the dating of the biblical books and their contents, with much of the Pentateuch now thought to have been penned in the exilic and post-exilic period. When I began writing my own commentary on Genesis in the 1990s, I started from the premise of a 10th century Yahwist writer whose work was edited and amplified during the exile by a group designated 'P' – the Priestly Writers. By the time I finished the commentary in 2004 my view had shifted: I believed that Genesis in its entirety came from exilic and post-exilic hands, indeed that the book in its very final form came from the middle of the 2nd century BC, which as one reviewer commented was about as late as you can get, although he did not poo-poo my conclusion. I do however hold on to a belief in the reality of some actual Exodus and entry event in the folk memory of the people : however altered and influenced by its retelling during the exile might have been there seems to me to be a basic likelihood that the worship of the deity known in the Bible as Yhwh originated outside the land of Canaan.

But for our purposes today what is interesting to notice is the corollary between a scholar's surety or scepticism about what we can know about ancient Israel, and their positive or negative attitudes to modern Israel and/or the Palestinian people. It is perhaps inevitable: for if the biblical texts are a more or less contemporaneous and accurate reflection of the development of the people called Israel, their story can indeed be read as a hope of land, perhaps indeed God-given, initially being fulfilled then being temporarily negated and then being reinstated – though never quite coming to complete fruition. And what happened once can therefore happen again.

There is a clear trajectory between the historical scepticism of some scholars, and their pro-Palestinian viewpoints: figures such as Keith Whitelam and Michael Prior spring to mind. Conversely, those scholars of a previous generation, such as WF Albright and GE Wright who broadly believed that at least from the time of David and Solomon we can gain through the Bible, validated by archaeology, a clear picture of the actual trajectory of the history of Israel and Judah – a trajectory in which entry into the land and possession of the land for centuries played a dominant role – seem to have held political views that were implicitly at least pro-Israeli. There is a delicious –though questionable - quote from Albright's classic text From the Stone Age to Christ, which somehow seems to stir into one pot Albright's views of ancient Israel, his broadly pro-Israeli sympathies, and I suspect, a considerable dose of his own American Presbyterian Protestantism:

"From the impartial standpoint of a philosopher of history it often seems necessary that a people of markedly inferior type should vanish before a people of superior potentialities, since there is a point beyond which racial mixture cannot go without disaster … Thus the Canaanites, with their orgiastic nature worship, their cult of fertility in the form of serpent symbols and sensuous nudity, and their gross mythology, were replaced by Israel, with its pastoral simplicity and purity of life, its lofty monotheism, and its severe code of ethics."

What I think is undeniable however is that whatever the historicity of particular parts of the Bible, the actual theme of land is a major, perhaps the major, theme of the Old Testament. Whether it is seen as promise or gift or reward or threat, or its loss is lamented, or it is passionately hoped and longed for, or it becomes somehow the focus of the many of ethics and the laws, or it is interwoven with the story of the creation of the world, land does seem to be the ultimate sign and touchstone of the health or otherwise of the relationship between the people and God. A significant study of models of land in the Old Testament, *The Land is Mine*, by the Australian Christian scholar Norman Habel, posits six different models of 'land ideology' offered in different parts of the Old Testament: land as the source of wealth: a royal ideology; land as conditional grant: a theocratic ideology; land as family lots: an ancestral household ideology; land as God's personal heritage *(nahalah)*: a prophetic ideology; land as Sabbath bound: an agrarian ideology; land as host country: an immigrant ideology. These differing models can and do stand in tension and conflict with each other within scripture, a reality that suggests that an oversimplistic or uncritical dependence by Christians on only one or two Old Testament biblical verses when seeking biblical warrant for modern political dispensations in Israel/Palestine is perhaps less than fully biblical. Given, as we have seen, the particular use of the Abraham narratives in many forms of Christian Zionism it is interesting to note

specifically that it is this ideology which, in Habel's analysis, shows most sympathy for the indigenous inhabitants of the land to which Abraham came as an immigrant. In the Abraham narratives these indigenous inhabitants are seen as 'hosts', and in none of Abraham's dealings with these peoples is their right to possess the land put in question. 'Abraham is a peaceful immigrant who willingly recognizes the land entitlements of the peoples of the host country. Even the promises to Abraham about future possession of the land focus on Abraham mediating blessing to other families of the land, rather than on the annihilation of his hosts.' The vital connection that I expressed in Judaism, Christianity and Islam of the relationship between Abraham and hospitality is surely also important to bear in mind.

What I am wanting to suggest is that when we read the Old Testament we cannot ignore the materiality of this scripture – we cannot spiritualise it, and pretend that concrete topics such as land are unimportant. Speaking as a Christian and from the perspective of Christian theology, the Old Testament has been seen, and I think rightly so, as a bulwark against gnostic tendencies within Christianity, and though I would not want to subscribe to a simplistic sense of God acting in history, if we as Christians believe in God's intimate involvement with God's creation, which is the logic of our Christian and certainly my Anglican belief in the incarnation, then I think we have allow that physical land, in a real sense the raw material of creation, cannot but be part of the story of God's relationship with humanity.

Earlier, I mentioned that in my own writing on Genesis I had sought to respond to my friend Najwa's interlocutor, and perhaps this is the moment to share briefly something of this. In the first place I think it is important to look at Genesis as a whole. Certainly not taking one or two verses in isolation. And If you look at Genesis in its entirety you notice a development in the way that God relates with humanity … from the omnipresence controlling figure of the first eleven chapters, through a gradual withdrawal in the stories first of Abraham, then Jacob and finally Joseph, when God hardly appears at all as an active agent. In stages the divine director retreats from the scene permitting the human actors to shape and take responsibility for their own world. And accompanying this perhaps we need to see the scriptural text itself as an invitation to a conversation rather than divine dictat. To read Genesis properly requires us to stand at a slight distance from the text, and explore it quizzically. It should be treated as a dialogue partner for us which provides questions rather than offers easy answers – or commands. I like to think of that as an approach to scripture which links to the Anglican vision of reading the bible in the light of tradition and reason. That was part of my answer. And the second part is linked to a woman who has been described as the person who complicated the history of salvation, and who appears in the Abraham stories. Namely Hagar. It was a Jewish scholar

Jonathan Magonet who first pointed out to me the centrality of the figure of Hagar within the Abraham cycle. It has often been suggested that the Abraham saga itself is shaped chiastically, with the frame provided by two instances of the Hebrew phrase *Lek Leka* – perhaps most literally translated by the words 'Go for yourself'; one instance comes at the beginning and the other at the end of the story. In the first *Lek Leka* in 12.1, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you,' Abraham is being asked to sacrifice his past. In the second *Lek Leka* in 22.2, 'Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering…' he is seemingly being asked to sacrifice his hoped for future. Within this frame the story moves inward from either side, to find its perhaps unlikely or unexpected centre in the story of Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 16. Genesis seems to be trying to subvert the idea that particularity can totally replace universality, certainly as far as the ethics of relationships between human beings are concerned. I do not think it is an accident that Hagar's name contains the exact Hebrew consonants of the word *ha-ger* (a word that is notoriously difficult to capture the exact meaning of, but has been variously translated as the stranger, the sojourner, the migrant, the refugee, the alien), and I think that in some sense she stands for the universal other. It is by our behaviour towards Hagar, *ha-ger*, that human beings judge themselves. This, I believe, is what lies behind the cryptic verse in Genesis 15.13 which comes just before Hagar makes her first appearance, 'The Lord said to Abram, Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for 400 years,' … this verse which appears in the context of the covenant being made between God and Abraham, includes two words, ha-ger and oppress which will significantly reappear in the following chapter which deals with Abraham's treatment of Hagar. The slavery and oppression of Abraham's descendants in Egypt, are being directly linked to the abuse of their Egyptian slave-girl. We can say that justice for Hagar and those like her is being written into the fabric of the covenant between God and Abraham. Now I cannot pretend that this is a complete answer – not least because in the modern context it would be inappropriate to make a sharp correlation between modern Palestinians and those described as *gerim* in the Old Testament – but I think it does suggest the sense in which Genesis (and wider scripture) needs to be understood as holding an internal and quite subversive debate with itself over such questions. It is a debate in which justice insists on its rights, and it is also a debate in which particularity and universality each insist on having their place.

When we move into the New Testament there are for Christians a number of interlocking questions that need to be dealt with, which somehow compete with each other in a way that does not facilitate clarity. Indeed the lack of clarity is accentuated

by the different voices and theologies that we find in the New Testament among different writers, such as John and Paul, and even within different parts of Paul, whose head and whose heart I feel never did quite fit together. It is also impossible to read the New Testament without an awareness of how the New Testament has influenced later Christian history, and how that history can influence our reading of these scriptural texts.

To list some of these questions:

- Does the New Testament allow for any sense of continuing promise of land to what we might call Israel after the flesh, the Jewish people?
- Who does the New Testament consider to be the descendants of Abraham?
- What is the relationship between Jesus and the Land, and what might this mean for both Christians and Jews?
- How should we read the significance offered to the city of Jerusalem in a number of New Testament texts?

To respond to the first – there is one text in Paul, Romans 11.29 that speaks of 'the gifts and calling of God' to Jewish people being irrevocable. The question then becomes what is included under the heading of 'gifts', but it is prima facie likely that this might include a sense of land.

However against this we need to set the answer to the second question. There are a considerable number of texts that seem to suggest that the descendants of Abraham are potentially wider than any who might seek to claim biological descent from him – and that the promises made to Abraham now need to be read in a spiritualised, universalist sense. Some strands of New Testament thinking go further and deny the status of being Abraham's descendants to Jews, because of their disbelief in and disobedience to Christ. And in the later texts of the New Testament which date from after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD we see the beginnings of the theme which will dominate most of Christian history, that the loss and expulsion of the Jews from the land is a visible punishment for their lack of belief in Christ and the 'wandering Jew' constitutes a permanent reminder of Jewish infidelity. We can see here an abrogation of the material in favour of the spiritual, and a replacement of the particular by the universal.

To respond to the third question – the relationship of Jesus and the land, one can perhaps use the expression that the land is 'Christified'. In some ways the person of Christ replaces 'holy land'; this is particularly a motif in the Gospel of John. This might work in one of two ways: we can find and cherish holy space, holy land, wherever Christ is or has been. Alternatively we can follow the logic that seems to be

expressed in Jesus' discussion with the Samaritan woman about the respective merits of Jerusalem and Mount Gerizim as holy places and locations for the worship of God

[21]Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem ... the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. In other words holy places are now declared redundant by Jesus for his followers. This might be described as a classic Protestant view of the subject – but the reality is, and the many churches and Christian holy places in Jerusalem bear witness to it, that that is not how Christian history has wanted to think. There has been far more enthusiasm generated for giving particular recognition to places associated with the life and ministry of Christ. And is that so wrong? I return to my Anglican base and my affirmation of the incarnation. Quoting here from land of Promise "It is our conviction that the nature of our Christian faith, with its commitment to the 'scandal of particularity' in the incarnation, requires us to hold in creative tension both the material and spiritual, the particular and the universal, and suggests that incarnation does not invalidate the significance of chosenness but can be a pathway which allows it to open out to incorporate a wider and more inclusive vision." The incarnation calls us, I believe to chart a pathway somewhere between the over materiality of many forms of Christian Zionism and an over spirituality of that refuses to allow any space for the particular, and which is sometimes used by Christians as a high minded weapon against Jews.

A letter of John Paul II to a group of pilgrims put it thus: " God is equally present in every corner of the earth so that the whole world may be considered the temple of his presence…Yet this does not take away from the fact that just as time can be marked by *kairoi*, by special moments of grace, space too may, by analogy, bear the stamp of particular saving actions of God. " (Pope John Paul II)

There is one other thing that I think is important to add here however: that if we are to argue that incarnation requires us to take seriously a sense of particularity – then the implication is also we also need to take seriously the particularity of those who constitute the body of Christ in the land today, our fellow Christians in the land. Archbishop Rowan summed it up succinctly:

"Christianity is an historical religion: at the centre of Christian faith is a set of events which occurred in a particular place at a particular time …. Christians are answerable, they are responsible, to what happened in the Holy Land two millennia ago; they go back to be questioned and enlarged, to be challenged and inspired, by specific events, and the connection of Christians now with those specific events two

thousand years ago is a vital part of Christian faith. In that perspective, the continuity of Christian worship and witness in the places where these events occurred is not a small thing for Christian believers. It is a kind of gnosticism … a kind of cutting loose from history if we say that the presence of our brothers and sisters in the land of Our Lord does not matter to us."

That is another response to Najwa's interlocutor.

And I want very briefly to say something specifically about Jerusalem. In one sense, for both Jews and Christians, Jerusalem is the intensification for whatever is said about the land more widely. In my small book *Peace-ing Together Jerusalem* published by the WCC I reflected on what Jerusalem means to me, theologically and practically based partly on my experience of living in the city for five years. I touched on the way that the all too obvious failures that are visible in Jerusalem can become a source of grace:

"Jerusalem is a sacrament of what it means to be human. By that I mean that Jerusalem shows up visibly and physically the best and the worst of the human condition. On the one hand it is a visible symbol of our longing, our highest and best desires, our love of beauty and our desire to worship God. But it is also a powerful reminder of how this best can go so tragically wrong – precisely because we find it so difficult to love without also seeking to possess. Jerusalem is the place where this conundrum is squeezed into a sort of prism, so that it can be viewed in sharp focus. And there is a mysterious way in which Jerusalem does not simply unveil these realities about the human condition but also, I believe, challenges us at the same time to address them – to truly become the human beings God created us to be, in God's image and likeness, as God's partners in the creation and repairing of our world. That is what I mean by calling Jerusalem a sacrament."

Is it possible to say this of the land as a whole as well?

I want in my last few minutes to turn very briefly to some insights that I have explored in part due to my current involvement with interreligious dialogue.

The first is that people of other religions need to be allowed to define themselves and their priorities. Christians cannot do it for them. It is a particular issue when we are thinking of Christian relationships with Jews – where partly because of our theological closeness and partly because of an implicit Christian supersessionism – we have tended to view Jews through New Testament eyes. It has been remarked that though the great Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* actually originated due to a desire to rethink Catholic-Jewish relations, within the paragraphs of Nostra Aetate

Judaism is the one faith that is described essentially through Christian spectacles. The description of Islam and Hinduism in the document would be recognizable and acceptable to a Muslim or a Hindu. The description of Judaism however is in essence drawn from traditional Christian theology – even though seeking to be as positive as possible.

And it is in my view unquestionable that the majority of Jews today are Zionist – by which I mean having a desire for some physical relationship between the Jewish community and the land of Israel, even though many would also oppose the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.

There is a recent Vatican document published in December 2015, "The Gifts and Calling of God is Irrevocable" which is remarkable for its expression of theological closeness between Jews and Catholic Christians. But in typical Vatican tradition – the Vatican's body for Jewish Catholic relations is called, the Commission for Religious Relations with Jews" it brackets out the question of the Land. That was noticed by one of the Jewish leaders who was present when the document was presented. David Rosen's commented: "Perhaps then I may be permitted … to point out that to fully respect Jewish self-understanding, it is also necessary to appreciate the centrality that the Land of Israel plays in the historic and contemporary religious life of the Jewish People, and that appears to be missing [from G&C].' "

Or put more formally there is the section in Dabru Emet on the land, a common statement signed by a considerable number of Jewish leaders, particularly in the United States about 15 years ago.

"Christians can respect the claim of the Jewish people upon the land of Israel. The most important event for Jews since the Holocaust has been the reestablishment of a Jewish state in the Promised Land. As members of a biblically based religion, Christians appreciate that Israel was promised -- and given -- to Jews as the physical center of the covenant between them and God. Many Christians support the State of Israel for reasons far more profound than mere politics. As Jews, we applaud this support. We also recognize that Jewish tradition mandates justice for all non-Jews who reside in a Jewish state."

I personally have some problems with parts of this language of Dabru Emet … but I think it has to listened to, and perhaps the Jewish-Christian discussion then needs to begin by exploring together the last sentence of the statement, and work back from there.

I make this point about Christians allowing Jews their own theological self definition because I am aware of some well meaning Christian writers, generally from the evangelical wing of the church, who are anti-Zionist and anti-Christian Zionist, and who seem to start from the premise that the starting point for a theological discussion with Jews about the land is the New Testament.

As I draw to the end I want to leave you with what is for me as a Christian a fundamental issue. However even though the majority of Jews are pro-Zionist there are some who raise their voices in a different direction. One such is Mark Braverman, whose book *Fatal Embrace* I commend to you, even though I do not agree with its conclusion, argues that Judaism today needs to leave behind concepts of chosenness and particularity as regards people and land. What though is particularly telling for me is the introduction written by the Christian Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann whose own views on the subject of the land have shifted in the last 30 years. Brueggemann comments on how Braverman's critique of exceptionalism and chosenness within Judaism, has made him, Bruggemann, wonder about 'rethinking Christian exceptionalism as well, about being the new chosen people of God, and followers of the one chosen Messiah.' As I read Brueggemann his logic seems to be that Christians, following down the path first trodden by Mark Braverman, may need to rethink key Christological claims. I would then want to turn the issue around and say to my fellow Christians that unless and until you are prepared to rethink tenets of Christology such as the unique chosenness of Jesus Christ, then you cannot ask Jews to do the same as regards Jewish tenets of the uniqueness of people and land. Each religion needs to be allowed its jealousies. What I think that you can do is have a constructive discussion about how chosenness must never be solely for the benefit of the chosen one or ones – but become the means of good for others.

What is the solution? It is damnably difficult … but for me a willingness on the part of all to see in one another the image or face of God is part of what we need to do. I close by drawing on three quotations which have given me pause for thought:

The first is from a Jewish woman with Israeli nationality, Sharon Rosen, who is in fact the wife of David Rosen that I quoted earlier:

At a conference about a year ago she said: I have learned that it is possible to love something without having to possess it. (Sharon Rosen)

The second is by a Palestinian Christian, Elias Chacour, until a few years ago the Greek Catholic Archbishop of Galilee. He had taken a mixed group of young Jews and Palestinians to the top of Mount Tabor, the traditional site of the transfiguration. This reflection comes from there: The true icon is your neighbour, the human being who has been created in the image and with the likeness of God. How beautiful it is when our eyes are transfigured and we see that our neighbour is the icon of God, and that you, and you, and I - we are all the icons of God. How serious it is when we hate the image of God, whoever that may be, whether a Jew or a Palestinian. How serious it is when we cannot go and say, "I am sorry about the icon of God who was hurt by my behaviour." We all need to be transfigured so we can recognise the glory of God in one another.' *(Elias Chacour)*

And the 3rd – or rather it is two separate comments both important, comes from an expatriate, Donald Nicholl in the 1980s the Rector of the Ecumenical Institute of Tantur:

"If your immediate spontaneous reaction—if the movement of your heart— upon hearing of some tragedy is an ideological one rather than a human one, then your heart has become corrupted and you should leave straight away and go on pilgrimage until it is cleansed."

"The task of the Christian is not to be neutral—but to be torn in two. "(Donald Nicholl)