

Muriel Pearson & Stewart Gillan

Israel, June 2025

'I am for peace; but when I speak, they are for war.'

Psalm 120.7

We have both written letters which cover similar ground and offer them together along with points for prayer.

Stewart first:

First may I thank all who have sent messages of concern for us here – ministers, staff, congregation, and partners – and who have been in prayer for all in Israel, Gaza, the West Bank and the Middle East. Muriel and I are much encouraged by your care, faithfulness and solidarity.

As you will have seen, the situation, already dire after more than 600 days of military action in Gaza following the Hamas attacks on Israelis on 7 October 2023, has taken a major turn for the worse with the outbreak of a declared state of war between Israel and Iran. The cycle of strike and retaliation since the early hours of Friday 13 June marks a sharp escalation in the conflict, further destabilises the region, and threatens the lives of many in both countries day and night.

I have been replying to the question, 'How are you,' by saying I am safe and well, fortunate to have the community of St George's Cathedral and College around me, and recourse to its secure bomb shelter in the basement of the college. Several times, by day and night, since Friday, we have taken refuge there. The drill is alert, siren, shelter. Most of the missiles are intercepted by the surface to air defence system, though more have getting through this time as compared with April and October of 2024.

That said, our friends and colleagues on the West Bank and in Gaza have comparatively little by way of protected locations.

Reflecting on our situation in worship yesterday, I made metaphorical use of alerts, sirens and shelters, arguing that the alert issued by the Israeli Government at 03h00 Friday morning announced an 'extreme emergency' that runs deeper than the current cycle of strike and retaliation between Israel and Iran. It encodes generations of hostility, fear and conflict, and of the failure on all sides successfully to resolve it.

The sirens that sounded Friday night, as missiles launched in Iran began to arrive over Israel, warned of more than the need to move to the nearest protected location. The sirens warn of the long-term psychosocial and political consequences of decades of Israeli military occupation of the Palestinian Territories, and of the violence of resistance to it; of the ongoing reverberations of the attack by Hamas on 7 October and 20 months of IDF attacks by air and land in Gaza. All parties have been dehumanised – Palestinian, Israeli, and International – by the ongoing death, destruction and degradation of life.

The bunkers and protected locations – in homes, schools, firms, and public places – offer shelter from missile launches and drone deployments, but can offer no protection from rage, fear, and enmity. At the same time, they can be, and have been made into, places of pastoral support, of conversation, and prayer. Of psychosocial care and strengthening.

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It is not possible to say how long the war will go on, any more than it is possible to say how long the assault on Gaza will continue, and its attendant state of serial displacement and severe malnutrition unto famine and further death.

And peace? What news of it? It lives on in prayer, in our yearnings, in our respectful behaviour with each other, our advocacy for justice and right relations, in our refusal to accept that war is the way of the world, or what we're best at.

'Peace does not keep itself,' argued the American historian Donald Kagan in his influential *On the Origins of War*, 'it must be cultured and protected.' The history of conflict between states from ancient times through to the end of the twentieth century, he says, demonstrates the need for vigilance and proactive measures to prevent war. 'A persistent and repeated error through the ages,' he asserts, 'has been the failure to understand that the preservation of peace requires active effort, planning, the expenditure of resources, and sacrifice, just as war does.'

This holds for states that wish to preserve an existing peace, we might observe. With regard to the current war between Israel and Iran, the argument of the Israeli government is that the war, whatever its horrors, is necessary in the face of Iran's nuclear programme. And that any decrying of it is thus naïve and/or suspicious, almost certainly antisemitic.

Yet do we say, to Israel and Iran alike, and to all of our respective nation states, we are called to study peace and pursue it, to examine ourselves critically, not requiring our enemies to do it for us, to refuse to trade arms, to cultivate stillness, to practice the disarming disciplines of the love, justice and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ, in prayer and practical action.

Prayer points:

- For a rapid end to the cycle of strike and counter-strike between Israel and Iran, and a renewed commitment to negotiations on Iran's nuclear programme.
- For a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, and the conflict swiftly ended.
- For the release of all hostages held in Gaza, and of Palestinians held in administrative detention in Israel.
- For the free flow and just distribution of food and medical aid into Gaza
- For a just and lasting peace, that the soul of the Holy Land be saved, and with it the lives of Gazans, Palestinians and Israelis.

Grace and peace to you,
Stewart

And then Muriel...

Dear Friends,

For more than 600 days, wherever you are, you have watched horrified, feeling helpless, and angry, as the people of Gaza have been relentlessly attacked following the dreadful events of 7th October 2023. Most Gazans have been displaced many times, famine is now a very real threat and the suffering is unimaginable.

In the West Bank, settlement expansion has been going on apace and settler violence has increased. Since 7th October there are 800 new checkpoints. Unemployment is about 80% and folks are beyond weary.

Israelis, too, are weary. Call ups to reserve duty are repeated. The families of hostages have been pleading for a ceasefire and a return of their loved ones. More and more are dead.

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Humanitarian aid to Gaza, never enough at the best of times, is now cynically in the hands of a private company which has no experience of distribution and many Gazans have been killed, desperate to feed their families.

Many Palestinians are held without charge in appalling conditions in Israeli prisons.

The international community has failed to find a way forward.

And then, on Friday 13th June, Israel attacked Iran, targeting scientists and military leaders and seeking to degrade Iran's capacity to enrich uranium and produce a nuclear bomb.

Last night counterattacks from Iran led to alerts throughout the night. Those lucky enough to have shelters and secure rooms spent the night there. As I write, I can hear airforce jets overhead.

Aside from all the other reasons why Friday's declaration of war on Iran and counter declaration by Iran is catastrophic, our hotel in Tiberias was poised to have 100% occupancy. Food is stocked. Staff were hired. Today I am the only guest, along with a couple of members of staff.

Worship was on Zoom on Sunday and will be until the state of emergency is relaxed.

Here is part of our prayers of intercession from Sunday:

We pray for leaders who have integrity
And put their people first
For leaders not afraid to risk and trust
And build relationship
Who are not in politics only for themselves.
We pray for those institutions set up
After World War 2, flawed though they are
And for those who are left out and sidelined
But have insight and leadership to offer.
We pray for the leaders we have
And the leaders we do not yet see
And we pray that the wisdom of those on the edge,
Not at the treaty table, may be heard
We pray for the church and people of good will
Around the globe
Longing for a new way of being, a new way of trusting.

How can we move beyond existential fear and brutal inhumanity? The fighting will eventually need to turn to diplomacy. But where is the leadership which puts the most vulnerable first and has the creativity and imagination to begin to build trust?

Thank you for your messages of support and for your prayers. Here are a few pointers:

- Pray for clear international consensus on a way forward which will lead to peace with justice for all.
- Pray for the most vulnerable, the children and the elderly, the injured and the sick; that aid will reach them quickly and plentifully.
- Pray for those bereaved and those held prisoner by a spirit of revenge.
- Pray for all working on the logistics of aid delivery, all those seeking diplomatic solutions, all those prepared to risk talking to the enemy.
- Pray that apathy and a feeling of helplessness will be replaced by a sense that everyone can contribute.

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- Pray for the staff of our hotels and school, and our students and their families. Pray that kindness and unity in diversity will continue to shape their common lives and give hope that things can be different.
- Pray that Stewart and I will be given wisdom and grace as we seek to minister here.
- Pray that God's love in all its abundance will be the hallmark of our communities and of our work.