



n - we must pray and speak up for them, writes Archbishop Justin

About 15 years ago I sat in the home of an elderly Palestinian Christian man in Galilee, on a hillside where Jesus himself may have walked.

Foolishly, I asked, "How long has your family been Christian?" The man – who was as vibrant as someone half his age – gave me a look and replied, "Since about the time of Saint Paul, I should imagine."

Christians have been in the Middle East for nearly 2000 years – for much of that time at the heart of its life. They are the original Christian communities, already old beyond memory when Islam arrived in the region. Over the centuries they have tilled land, built towns and formed large, fruitful and productive communities.

They are survivors. They grew up under Roman persecution, dealt with invasions in the wars against the Persian Empire, endured conquest by Islam – and yet found ways to live together in peace and for each other's benefit. By the 12th century, they were producing some of the best scholars and theological thinkers to be found in the Islamic or Christian worlds. And they flourished amongst warm toleration.

To this day, in countries in the region where Christian communities are free and flourishing, they are essential to society. Alongside others they are teachers, doctors and lawyers. They own businesses and run them well. They hold the memory of times past and land they have lost. And at the heart of their faith is a profound belief in the victory of Christ over the power of death, demonstrated in his resurrection from the dead. They are community minded, counting their number by the total of families more than the total of individuals.

Yet four years ago, a Christian leader commented that the Christians of the region are facing the worst situation since the Mongol invasions of the 13th Century.

Christians in the Middle East do not need to be in the majority to survive and prosper. They have learnt to do that as equally valued citizens. But they do need freedom to worship – and security for themselves, their children and grandchildren. They need to know they are not forgotten by the world, or treated as an irrelevant minority, a societal optional extra, or even a threat.

There is no uniform experience of life as a Middle Eastern Christian. In some places they live in peace and stability. In Lebanon and Jordan, they are not simply welcomed and tolerated, but are an integral part of society, with a Christian holding the Presidency. In Israel there is a Christian Supreme Court Justice. Many countries have received vast numbers of refugees, But in others they face daily the threat of violence, murder, intimidation, prejudice and poverty. In the last few years, they have been slaughtered by so-called Islamic State, and in many countries they find themselves squeezed between the upper and lower millstones of pressure on them within society and of conflicts that afflict the region.

But the presence of Christians is good – no, essential for the region as a whole – and for all its faiths: a healthy Christian presence is a sign and a guarantee that religious freedom is preserved for all citizens.

Many, though, have left. Hundreds of thousands have been forced from their homes. Many have been killed, enslaved and persecuted or forcibly converted. Even those who remain ask the question, “Why stay?” The Christian population of Iraq, for instance, is less than half what it was in 2003 and their churches, houses and businesses have been damaged or destroyed. The Syrian Christian population has halved since 2010. As a result, across the region Christian communities that were the foundation of the universal Church now face the threat of imminent extinction.

Even where Christians are secure in physical terms, and have members at the very top of society, in democratic states such as in Israel, tensions in the region make life difficult for them. Israeli Arab Christians are impacted in everyday life because their families and communities are broken up by the dividing lines of Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. This context leaves them feeling vulnerable, insecure and looking abroad for the promise of greater wellbeing. The recent Nation State Law, for example, downgrades the status of Arabic in Israeli public life and raises great concerns amongst Christian communities as to whether they are as valued and as equal as Israeli citizens of Jewish tradition.

On Tuesday there will be a service at Westminster Abbey, in which His Royal Highness The Prince of Wales will play a leading role. We will celebrate and pray for Christians in the region, we will raise their profile and we will publicise their plight.

At this point you may be wondering: what needs to be done to address this deeply alarming situation?

First, everyone can remember Christians in the Middle East and pray for them. At the beginning of Advent our eyes turn towards Bethlehem in the West Bank, to Nazareth, to Egypt and to other places in the Christmas story. It’s a time to pray with special focus and dedication for those Christian communities who trace their roots right back to the time of these stories. God is faithful and hears our prayers.

Second, we must understand their plight and not present it as simple or with obvious solutions. For example, to ask Syrian Christians to choose between President Assad, under whom they were tolerated, and the unimaginable horrors and threats of so-called Islamic State, is to impose a choice that we would not accept for ourselves, and which we should not judge too easily.

Third, we must support and help them in every way we can. Where they wish to leave, they will be refugees in need of asylum. Where, courageously and by the grace of God, they choose to remain, they need publicity and external, visible support. Whether in large and flourishing communities, such as in Lebanon or Egypt, or smaller, struggling Churches, they need the protection and encouragement of governments and people at home and abroad. and foreign popular expression. Without this they cannot live out their vocation as citizens of their native lands in co-operation with other religious groups.

During this advent season and Christmas, let’s renew our commitment to remember, pray for and speak out for the Christians in the Middle East.

