

Writing in the Sunday Times, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Anglican Archbishop in Jerusalem warn of a concerted attempt by fringe, radical groups to drive Christians away from the Holy Land - which takes place against the 'historic tragedy' of the Christian population's century-long decline.



Christmas is a time when we think about the land of the Bible. We hear readings and sing carols that name Jerusalem, Nazareth and Bethlehem. These are places that are familiar to billions of Christians, whether they have visited them or not. But we should not romanticise them - and especially not this Christmas.

Last week, leaders of churches in Jerusalem raised an unprecedented and urgent alarm call. In a joint statement, they said Christians throughout the Holy Land have become the target of frequent and sustained attacks by fringe radical groups.

In a joint statement they described “countless incidents” of physical and verbal assaults against priests and other clergy, and attacks on Christian churches. They spoke of holy sites regularly vandalized and desecrated, and ongoing intimidation of local Christians as they go about their worship and daily lives.

The Romanian Orthodox monastery in Jerusalem was vandalized during Lent in March this year, the fourth attack on that holy place in a single month. During Advent last December, someone lit a fire in the Church of All Nations in the Garden of Gethsamene, the place where Jesus prayed the night before he was crucified. Usually a place of pilgrimage for Christians from around the world, it’s thought the vandal took advantage of the lack of visitors due to the pandemic.

These tactics are being used by such radical groups “in a systematic attempt to drive the Christian community out of Jerusalem and other parts of the Holy Land”, the Jerusalem church leaders said in their statement.

It is for this reason that when you speak with Palestinian Christians in Jerusalem today you will often hear this cry: “In fifteen years’ time, there’ll be none of us left!”

This crisis takes place against a century-long decline in the Christian population in the Holy Land. In 1922, at the end of the Ottoman Era, Christians in the Holy Land were estimated to number 73,000; about 10% of the population. In 2019, Christians constituted less than 2% of the population of the Holy Land: a massive drop in just 100 years.

In Israel, there is some increase in the overall numbers of Christians. The imminent reopening of St Peter's Anglican Church in Jaffa, which has been closed for over 70 years, is encouraging.

But in East Jerusalem, the central place for pilgrimage and the site of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - where Christ is believed to have been crucified - there is steady decline. Church leaders believe that there are now fewer than 2,000 Christians left in the Old City of Jerusalem.

This is the land that 2.5 billion Christians worldwide recognise as the birthplace of the church. Yet Christians, who have been a continuous presence there for over 2,000 years, are too often obscured and even forgotten beneath the competing perceptions of the geopolitics of the Middle East. The Christian presence punches above the weight of its numbers.

A recent study by the University of Birmingham estimates that the tourism industry generated by the Christian heritage of the Holy Land brings over \$3 billion into the region's economy. The Palestinian Christian population is a highly educated population that contributes beyond its numbers to high-tech industries, hospitals and church-based schools. Christians are good news for the region!

Christians in Israel enjoy democratic and religious freedoms that are a beacon in the region. But the escalation of physical and verbal abuse of Christian clergy, and vandalism of holy sites by fringe, radical groups, are a concerted attempt to intimidate and drive them away.

Meanwhile the growth of settler communities, and travel restrictions brought about by the Separation Wall, have deepened the isolation of Christian villages and curtailed economic and social possibilities. All of these factors have contributed to a steady stream of Palestinian Christians leaving the Holy Land to seek lives and livelihoods elsewhere - a historic tragedy unfolding in real time.

It does not have to be this way. This trend can be reversed - but action must be taken fast. We encourage governments and authorities in the region to listen to church leaders in their midst: To engage in the practical conversations that will lead to vital Christian culture and heritage being guarded and sustained. The time for action is now!

Over the Advent period, it's tempting to be seduced by cosy visions of the Christmas story - twinkling stars, exotic visitors, a painless birth of a baby who doesn't cry. The reality would have been much different: this is a story of God's embrace of humanity in all its messiness.

The first Christmas tells us of God coming into our world among ordinary lives of human struggle. It foregrounds a refugee family, against the backdrop of a genocide of infants. There's not much about lullabies and cuddly farm animals.

So let's get real this Christmas. When we sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem", or "Once in Royal David's City", let's hear the voice of the church of the Holy Land - and thank them for their gift to all of us. Let's pray for their flourishing and their future: a future intertwined with the future prosperity and common good of all communities.

Woven through the first Christian story is a message of hope and of good news for all people - a small light that can never be put out. Whatever your religion or belief, may you know the peace and joy of the Christ-child this Christmas.

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