

David BALL

Liberation is Near: Discipleship in Lebanon Besieged

I wrote a song, Wounded Love, after my evacuation from Lebanon last summer during the Israeli invasion. I had worked in the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF) office until May 2005, and had spent the last months deepening relationships with Lebanese and Palestinians from all walks of life—from suburbs to refugee camps, ancient churches to student activists. My experience in Lebanon gave me a better understanding of Empire, and was a profound lesson in discipleship.

‘When our Hearts just Ache’: Compassion

On July 25, 2006, I was forced to leave the country that had welcomed me in flames, and the people I had grown to love in anguish, and it broke my heart. Truly, choosing to leave amidst war was the most difficult decision of my life and one that has challenged me as a Christian, as well.

In the month of July 2006, the swift vengeance of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) crushed Lebanon under its wrath, eagerly supported by Israel’s number one ally, the United States of America (USA).

In response to the Lebanese organization Hezbollah’s capture of two Israeli soldiers, the IAF pummelled the Lebanese people with thirty-three long days of brutal air strikes, several massacres now being investigated as war crimes, and thousands of tiny cluster bombs still killing Lebanese today.

In the name of those two soldiers, the Israeli government killed more than 1200 innocent Lebanese, dumped fifteen thousand tonnes of oil into the sea, flattened the densely populated poor suburbs of Beirut, and ransacked Lebanon’s already weak economy for decades into the future. It also reignited the passions of Israel’s sizeable anti-war movement, which sharply disagrees with the government’s policies of war and occupation.

To some, this will sound like a one-sided account of the war. Others might say that I do not go far enough in condemning it. But I went to Lebanon on a mission, on behalf of my church. Our understanding of mission is one of partnership and solidarity, arising from Jesus Christ’s call to bring good news to the world and all creation (Mark 16,15).

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MEMORANDUM

TO: J. SMITH

FROM: A. D.

SUBJECT:

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Solidarity necessarily requires an immersion into the struggles of another people, and out of this arises *compassion*—which literally means “to suffer with” that people in their time of need. Jesus Christ calls us to walk with the oppressed and to turn away from all the enticements of Empire. It is, as Ched MYERS writes, a call to discipleship that is particularly difficult for those of us bestowed with privilege.

“Sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, then come, follow me,” Jesus Christ tells the rich man, only to be rejected because he is blinded by attachment to wealth (Matthew 19,16–22).

“Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s,” Jesus Christ commands (Luke 20,20–26). Do not get sucked into the imperial dream or its illusory benefits. “And to God the things that are God’s.” For every challenge to repent of Empire, there is always an invitation to follow God’s path of abundant life.

When the Israeli invasion first began in mid-July 2006, we witnessed the mounting civilian death toll, saw pictures of maimed and dismembered children, and heard horror stories from our friends in the suburbs and South who were being severely traumatized.

‘When the Bombs Rain Down’: Witness

As refugees flooded my mostly-Muslim neighbourhood (one-quarter of the Lebanese population was displaced from their homes during the conflict), I struggled with how I should respond to all these events.

With continuing air strikes and rising suspicion of foreigners, I was too afraid to leave my house. So, when several church friends came to live with me, we prayed every night for an end to the invasion and for peace.

To pray like this, one cannot be neutral. Certainly, we prayed for the Israeli civilians terrified of Hezbollah missile attacks south of the border. But to truly name suffering means to recognize the vast disproportion of a modern, technologically advanced, massively U.S.-funded military pummelling a guerrilla-style army in civilian areas.

One cannot remain purely neutral without doing injustice to the sheer helplessness of the Lebanese population. So we prayed. By Sunday, the port near our church was bombed, and we invited those left of our congregation to our apartment.

We read the story of Jesus Christ’s disciples being nearly drowned when a storm threatened to sink their boat. They angrily demand why He does not seem to care. Jesus Christ calms the storm, but also challenges their lack of faith (Mark 4,35–41).

We set up a tiny little model of that boat in the centre of our prayer circle. Writing our fears and petitions to God on paper, we placed them prayerfully into the boat and handed them over to God.

As we did this, the earth trembled with explosions not far away, and yet strangely we did not feel afraid. Confronted with the reality of injustice and fear that makes our hands tremble for days on end, I grappled with a number of questions during that time.

The first question was whether it was enough to pray. One night, I truly realized the possibility of dying with all my friends in Lebanon. Despite my great fears, the reality of death had not sunk in.

An Israeli commander had stated that “nowhere in Lebanon is safe.” Shiite and Sunni family friends were urging me to stay with them during their ordeal, but their regions (and the roads to them) were being bombed all night long.

It would not have been safe to go at all. I was suddenly confronted with the gap between my call to follow Jesus Christ (which is my mission) and my will to survive (which is my fear).

My very best friend implored me to be with her family, despite the fact that their Shiite village supported Hezbollah’s resistance and therefore would no doubt be targeted. When I questioned the safety of their village, her reply truly challenged me: “Of course it is safe—we are here together.”

‘When all Hope Seems Gone’: Solidarity

Solidarity is not about certainty, or agreeing with everything about another. Rather, it is overcoming the border between yourself and those you are taught are less human, less safe, less worthy of your love.

It is also about facing and overcoming your fears. I discovered that, upon accepting the possibility of death, I had become less afraid and more able to help the refugees on the streets and hear their stories.

The borders we erect have created a global Empire based on fear, exploitation, lies, and extreme violence. This violence often manifests itself in things like the invasion of Iraq for its oil, or “emergency” U.S. weapons shipments to Israel during its Lebanon campaign.

Connected to this, there are also the killings of hundreds of human rights and church workers in the Philippines, because they are questioning our economic idols; for example, former SCM leader Roderick ASPILI was assassinated in November 2006 for his labour organizing and SCM work.

The violence is also hidden in the forms of grinding poverty, racism, AIDS, spiritual emptiness, and the lies that we who are privileged tell ourselves about our power. Jesus Christ died on the cross. He died a hundred times this week in Iraq. He will die, but He will rise again and again in his suffering people.

According to the Eucharistic liturgy, Jesus Christ’s death was “freely accepted.” But those crushed by the Empire today—the linking of economic, political and cultural powers into a system of domination and single logic of rule that destroys life—did not freely choose their death. Still death is not the final word.

In the words of Guatemalan poet Julia ESQUIVEL: “The Word awoke us from the lethargy, which was stealing all our Hope.” What is stealing our hope today? What is this “lethargy,” this spiritual and political apathy that keeps us bound in silence?

Ched MYERS reminds us that apathy comes from *a-pathos*—feelinglessness—and too often our silence at injustice is driven by a lack of feeling, or perhaps more accurately, a *fear* of feelings like despair, rage, vengeance and total loss, all of which are very understandable human responses to violence.

‘Our Fears so Deep’: Courage

I have seen war first-hand, if only for two weeks. How are we Christians to respond? It is not enough, in my view, to merely oppose war, or to advocate against particular wars. We must be willing also to face the storm swamping our boat and hold our heads high.

Times will surely come when we, those of us with privilege because of location, class, gender, or race, will lose the luxury to dissent without being assassinated or imprisoned like our sisters and brothers around the world.

At that time, will we still be followers of Him—or will we deny him like the Apostle Peter in the palace courtyard? The toughest challenge of Jesus Christ is not to which ethics or morality we follow, or what we say and do; the real struggle is in how much we are willing to risk our security, our comfort, even our lives, at the “time of trial” (Luke 11,4; 22,46).

In the words of Dietrich BONHOEFFER (*Letters and Papers from Prison*, 17), who was hanged by German Nazis for his resistance to Adolf HITLER:

“We have become increasingly familiar with the thought of death. We feel that we really belong to death already, and that every new day is a miracle. We still love life. We should like death to come to us, not accidentally or suddenly through some trivial course, but in the fullness of life and with everything at stake.”

‘Then the Morning Comes’: Prayer

My priest, Rev. Cathy CAMPBELL, spoke radically of hope this Advent season. Hope is not at all easy, she said, when we see dark clouds forming around us, and our ecological and social systems are collapsing: “Distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves” (Luke 21,25).

In fact, hope has nothing to do with optimism, she added. The Empire’s accelerated pace is destroying everything sacred, including the fabric of life itself. Hope is uncertain; hope is holding onto courage and the fullness and joy of life in such times: “Stand upright and hold your heads high, because your liberation is near” (Luke 21,28). This is the same “fullness of life” of which Dietrich BONHOEFFER writes—“with everything at stake.”

Hope is resisting with all our heart the temptations and seductions of power. It is about holding our heads high and walking forward in a time of darkness. As it was prophesied at Jesus Christ’s birth: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Luke 1,79).

This light—which is liberation—is beyond our grasp, but becomes possible with faith. Recalling the words of Archbishop Oscar ROMERO, who was assassinated by U.S.-trained killers in El Salvador for his prophetic opposition to Empire, the results of our efforts are beyond our reach: “We are prophets of a future not our own.”

I remember one terrifying night of air strikes and bombings in Beirut. As the sun began to rise, the bombings ceased and there was a great silence. And then a gentle song wove through the streets: *Allahu akbar!* God is greater!—the daily call to prayer for Muslims.

Lights turned on. Determined people emerged onto the fearful streets and walked to their holy places. One Muslim told me he rarely goes to mosque; but during the war, he was there every day, no matter what was at stake.

God is indeed greater.

Suggested Reading

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