

Bethlehem.

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark street shineth the everlasting light;
the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

A couple of weeks ago I saw the film **Open Bethlehem**, a film telling the story of modern day Bethlehem, the building of the barrier wall all around the town between 2003 and 2008 and the impact of this on the residents of Bethlehem. The film is made by Leila Sansour, a Palestinian film maker who grew up in Bethlehem, left it as a teenager and returned in 2003 planning to film a year in the life of this iconic town, little realising that she would be walled in like everyone else.

Bethlehem is located about 6 miles south of Jerusalem on the main route linking Jerusalem with Hebron and the Negev. It is a very ancient town – it's mentioned in the book of Genesis as the place where Jacob's beloved wife Rachel died in childbirth. Jacob marked her grave with a pillar and the writer of Genesis tells us 'It's there to this day' ...in fact Rachel's tomb is there and a place of prayer and pilgrimage today.

Bethlehem is the city where King David was born and started out as a shepherd boy. The prophecies about the Messiah are that he is to come from the line of David ...and as we just heard in the story about the wise men... that he will come from David's town of birth.
Bethlehem.

As the birthplace of Jesus, Bethlehem has had a special place in the hearts of Christians since the first century.

The current Church of the Nativity is one of the oldest Christian churches in the world and has been visited by millions of pilgrims over the centuries. I have been there on a visit to the Holy Land in 1996. It's part of the 'must do' itinerary.

In the 7th century Bethlehem was captured by a Muslim caliph and became integrated into the Arab-Islamic world. Nevertheless the majority of the population remained Christian, and over centuries Muslims and Christians have mostly lived peacefully side-by-side and respected each other's religion and holy places. Rachel's tomb, for example, is a place that is venerated by Jews, Christians and Muslims; Muslims regard the church of the Nativity highly and will go there to pray as they regard Jesus as a prophet.

Today Bethlehem has a strong Palestinian identity. It is surrounded by Jewish settlements on all sides ...and in 2003 the state of Israel started to build barriers between itself and the West Bank. Since 2005 the town of Bethlehem, a town of about 25000 people, has been surrounded by a 8 meter – 25 feet high wall – and it's completely shut in. The entrance gates are controlled by Israeli soldiers. In the process of building the wall, many Palestinians lost their businesses. If you want to enter or leave Bethlehem you need a permit.

Leila Sansour returned to Bethlehem in 2003 to make a film about her home town, and then the building of the barrier started within two months of her arrival. Her sister Carol persuaded her to start a campaign to save Bethlehem. They realised that the building of the barrier will be the death of Bethlehem as a viable town.

The **Open Bethlehem** campaign is designed to raise awareness of what's happening to Bethlehem and all over the West Bank. The aim is to promote global engagement with Bethlehem as a real and contemporary city in the Middle East. They want to encourage tour operators to continue to promote visits to Bethlehem and have created a network of passionate ambassadors for the city to promote the freedom of the city.

As Israel continued to build the barrier the campaign inevitably drew attention to the political situation ...the wall closed round Bethlehem; the city became a prison. Leila's sisters and many other Bethlehem citizens who could leave the town moved away.

Leila, who was only going to be there for a year, decided to stay, and to continue to document what was happening. It has taken until this December for the film to be completed and launched in the U.K.

I sat in the cinema and wept, wept at what has been happening in Bethlehem – at what it means for the people of Bethlehem, who are imprisoned in their own town; need a permit to work in Jerusalem, to see their relations in East Jerusalem or other parts of the West Bank; whose livelihoods have been cut off and destroyed.

I wept at what it means for Israel, the Jewish people who long for a safe country of their own, who are so afraid of their neighbours that they have to surround themselves with a wall – they, too, are dehumanised in this conflict.

I wept for the many places around the world where people's lives are marred by fear, violence and terror.

I thought how little has changed since the days of Jesus' birth when Palestine was under Roman rule, and Herod was so afraid of his power base being challenged that he ordered the murder of young children in response to the news of potential birth of the saviour king.

Although I left the cinema with wet eyes – I also came away with hope, fired up but Leila's courage and perseverance. Against all the odds Leila had managed to keep the **Open Bethlehem** campaign alive, and although it has taken nearly 10 years to bring out the film, she and her supporters have held on to the vision that Bethlehem, the iconic town in which Jesus was born, *one of the little clans of Judah* can be a doorway for global engagement promoting positive change and the vision of a lasting peace settlement between Palestine and Israel.

Leila Sansour speaks to me of Mary and the line in the poem by Stephen Cottrell which we heard earlier in the service 'how happy she who for all of us believed, strength of God in human weakness blending, tenderly the humble servant lifted from the foetal cry the fatal mending.

The Christ child is born wherever people hold on to God's vision of peace, love and justice for the world, especially for the oppressed and downtrodden, that wherever people trust **against all odds** in the smallest and most unlikely places, that God can use them, can use anyone, anyone of us to make a difference, to shine light into situations of darkness and to bring hope, healing and peace there, the God comes among us and is with us.

O little town of Bethlehem – may God's blessing be on you and all your citizens who long for freedom this Christmas. Help them to persevere and for us to be ambassadors for peace in freedom wherever we are placed. Amen.