



But they have brought it upon themselves

BY JOEL CARILLET

People say the darnedest things sometimes. I was in Thailand, enjoying lunch and a little fellowship at an international church affiliated with a conservative American denomination. It was my second visit here.

Four years had passed since my first visit, but I still remembered a couple of things from that Sunday. I remembered learning more about what the preacher was against than what he was for. And I remembered leaving thankful that I had not brought my Buddhist friend — which I really had wanted to do — because sometimes church can be one of the worst places to introduce another to Christianity. This morning was a new day, however, and I arrived with what I hoped were open eyes and ears, ready to learn and be challenged.

At the after-church potluck, I had already eaten two plates of spaghetti and was finishing my third and final chocolate chip cookie when I felt the urge to contribute to the conversation around me. The talk was about war, particularly about “our troops” in the Middle East. A young American woman sat beside her husband and told us that her dad was a civilian employee at an Air Force base in Florida, doing work he couldn’t really talk about. But, she said, he was motivated every day to do what he did because he wanted to make the world a more peaceful place.

AP Photo/Nasser Shiyoukh

That’s when the man next to me asked, “How does your dad think world peace will come about?”

The woman replied, “He knows there will never be peace. He’s a Bible-believing Christian and knows what God says: There will always be war.”

The conversation continued and, despite the fact that I was really enjoying the taste of homemade cookies after almost seven months without them (I was in the middle of a 14-month backpacking trip across Asia), I was getting a little bothered. I sensed the following unspoken logic in the conversation: We like the idea of peace, but since the Bible says there will not be such a thing, we don’t really have a calling to work hard for it. Nor do we feel compelled to understand the other perspectives out there that are at odds with ours.

I was also bothered because of the way they spoke about “our troops.” They did not speak about “our world” with the same sense of devotion or interest. My discomfort was not that they wanted to say “our troops” but simply that they did not have a similar vocabulary to speak about our world. The foundation of the conversation was incomplete and seemed doomed to bump its way down a narrow path, narrow in a sense that should have no place in a globally minded church.

Sincerely hoping to contribute constructively to the conversation, I offered to share my experience of sitting in a Palestinian home watching President Bush address the world the day we began the war with Iraq. I spoke of watching the president condemn Saddam Hussein for his abuses of power, for torturing his citizens, and more. My point was that as I listened to this that day in the West Bank, I sat next to a man who, as a teenager, was tortured in an Israeli prison, prayed to Jesus Christ, and even to this day is denied liberty by Israel, an American ally.

My hope was that the conversation would not be so black and white, so us versus them, so focused on America’s interest alone. What do we make of the fact that a fellow Christian was tortured by a country whose establishment in 1948 is

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considered to be a fulfillment of prophecy by many American Christians, particularly in denominations like the one I was visiting this morning?

The woman’s husband, a deacon in the church, simply said, “Whether we like it or not, God gave that land to the Jews and we all need to learn to live with it.” Yes, I thought, very easy for you to say because you do not actually have to learn to live with it as my Palestinian friend who was tortured does.

The deacon did not express sympathy for the Palestinian Christian who was tortured, nor did he ask any questions about him or any other human beings caught in the conflict. His response was entirely theological, the sort of theology that does not even attempt to connect to my friend, who suffers still.

I wanted to share another brief story, but when I went to speak I found myself suffocating. It was as if the room was void of oxygen and the muscles in my chest would not allow for normal-size breaths. For several seconds I looked at the table to compose myself and collect my breath, and then I continued.

I shared a story — and did it in less than 30 seconds, so as to respect their time — of a husband, wife, and their unborn child. At an Israeli checkpoint outside their village, while she was in labor and trying to get to the hospital, the soldiers on duty chose to drink their coffee rather than allow the desperate couple to pass. She gave birth beside the dirt road and her baby died in her arms. The baby was a girl and, according to the doctor who later examined her, she had died from the blunt force of being shot out of the birth canal.

This past year the deacon’s wife had given birth to their first child. I thought this story might move him, or that it would show him the complexity of a situation that is clearly not black and white.

His response struck me like a fist, not so much because of how he casually lumped

all Palestinians together, as if they were all terrorists, but because it was void of compassion. He simply said, “But they have brought it upon themselves.”

But they have brought it upon themselves, come to find out, is a sentence that can leave me speechless. Earlier that morning as I sat on the back pew this deacon had led us in singing and gave the closing prayer. And now, blinded by his theology and politics — hardened by his theology and politics — he could express no recognition of Palestinian suffering or the immorality of soldiers drinking coffee while the woman before them gave birth in the dirt to a baby who died.

Church can be a difficult place sometimes. It can even be suffocating. And on this day it left me speechless.

I left the table quietly, but I left enraged. And I left literally gasping for breath. I walked for almost two hours through the streets of Bangkok under the blazing sun. I walked past beautiful temples and sparkling malls, past graceful women and pattering tuk-tuks. But my eyes saw none of it. My ears were malfunctioning, too.

All I could see was a Palestinian mother crumpled beside a dusty road and screaming over her dead newborn, blood on her hands and legs. Beside her sat a Christian, dressed in nice clothes and finishing his spaghetti, calmly saying as he wiped the sauce from his mouth, “You brought it upon yourself.”

The woman’s scream shot violently through Bangkok all afternoon, and it wasn’t till late that night that I could hear or see much else. ❧

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