

PALM SUNDAY

Cardinal Pizzaballa appeals for hope in war-torn Jerusalem

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This Easter, like last year, will be an Easter of war. And despite the fears, the difficulties and, above all, the terror, many pilgrims did not want to forgo the chance to take part in the celebration of Palm Sunday, to relive the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem.

"This day is dedicated to you," said the Patriarch of the Mother Church, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, in his message for the Palm Sunday procession. "To you who, here in Jerusalem, keep alive the flame of the Christian faith and support the presence of Christ among us." But the Patriarch didn't want to forget those who were unable to attend. "Today our entire diocese, the Church of Jerusalem, is united with us and prays with us," he continued. "From Gaza to Nazareth, from Bethlehem to Jenin. Jordan and Cyprus are praying with us and, ideally, entering the holy city of Jerusalem with us".

The Israeli authorities have granted few permits to Palestinians from the West Bank: six thousand, for a stay of just one week. A much lower number than in previous years. "We must not be afraid of those who want to divide, those who want to exclude or take possession of the soul of this holy city, because Jerusalem will always and forever remain a house of prayer for all peoples, and no one will be able to possess it," the Patriarch continued. "As I keep repeating, we belong to this city and no one can separate us from our love for the Holy City, just as no one can separate us from the love of Christ."

The economic crisis and restrictions on freedom of movement are having a severe impact on Christians in Palestine. "I don't want to repeat the same old things," Pizzaballa continued in his message. "We know that we live in difficult times. But we cannot and do not want to stop at just saying how difficult these times are. Today we need to remember something else, what is most important. "We are here today, local Christians and pilgrims, all together, to say emphatically that we are not afraid. We are children of the light and of the resurrection, of life. We hope and believe in the love that conquers all".

At holy sites such as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem and the Church of Gethsemane, where the waiting time for a visit that should have taken only a few minutes could take between two and four hours, access is now granted in a matter of minutes. "So let us not be discouraged. Let us not lose heart. Let us not lose hope. And let us not be afraid, but let us look up with confidence and renew once again our sincere and concrete commitment to peace and unity, with firm trust in the power of Christ's love," Pizzaballa continued.

In the Holy City, unfortunately, hatred is everywhere. This year, for example, Christians and Orthodox are united on the same date to commemorate the death and resurrection of Christ. The same goes for the celebration of *Pesach*, the Jewish Passover, which commemorates the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt. Last year, and again this year, many Israeli families left an empty seat at the *Seder* table to remember

those who were killed or taken hostage on that tragic and chilling 7 October. These days, the anniversary evokes mixed emotions, especially for those whose family members are still in the hands of Hamas.

"Jerusalem is a city divided by violence, a city that promises the life of faith but causes the death of hearts, - said Father Ibrahim Faltas, Vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land . "You cannot get used to violence when you have the beauty of the Holy Places before your eyes. Those who live in the Holy Land cannot be neutral, absent or indifferent", he continued.

"Those who belong to Jesus will always be among those who build and not destroy, who know how to respond to hatred with love and unity, and who respond to rejection with acceptance. For Jerusalem is the place of Christ's death and resurrection, the place of reconciliation, of a love that saves and transcends the limits of pain and death. And this is our vocation today: to build, to unite, to break down barriers, to hope against all hope," concluded Pizzaballa. "This is and remains our strength, and this will always be our witness, despite our many limitations".

Meanwhile, the Palestinian economy has collapsed, with tourism providing work for at least 80% of the population, peaking at 90-95% for Christians. Newly renovated and newly built hotels have quickly closed, as have restaurants, bars, local craft and souvenir shops. Even tourist guides have been out of work for several months. In Jerusalem, however, many shops are open and it's not too difficult to get around. Israel, a country that has been at war for a year and a half, doesn't hide its serious difficulties. But the conflict cannot help but have an impact on the economy; it is the longest and most costly war in Israel's history. In addition, the call-up of reservists has resulted in a significant loss of labour, which has significantly reduced the productivity of companies. Day by day, peace seems further away, a mirage.

"We are losing hope ... we are really losing hope. This is my video, this is my face. Remember it," said Alexander Edan, 20, an American citizen, in the short video released just as Passover began and distributed by the al-Qassam Brigades, the armed wing of Hamas. Meanwhile, Israel continues to bomb the Strip. Al-Ahli Hospital, the only functioning hospital in the entire area and known as the Baptist Hospital, was bombed in the north of Gaza City while it was treating hundreds of people.

Late yesterday afternoon, Sunday, the Houthis fired a ballistic missile at Israel, which was intercepted. There are no reports of casualties or damage. Debris has been found near Hebron, Palestine.