

Portcullis House 19.05.2016

One of the questions we as members of the BP are often asked is: 'Why didn't I know about this?' I and the whole Project Group hope that some of you at least will have deepened their knowledge this evening, and perhaps even been led to re-evaluate long-held opinions.

If we did not know it already, it should now be crystal clear that the Balfour Declaration was born in controversy; it contains a contradiction, and its consequence has inevitably been conflict.

The Balfour Project is inspired by a longing for reconciliation. Members of the steering group have particular experience of reconciliation projects in Australia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland as well as Palestine/Israel. The Project has a deep concern for both communities there, and, let me add, has never in any way sought to be adversarial.

As a group, modest in size and almost entirely self-funding, we are deeply conscious of the weight of history throughout the Middle East, particularly as it rests on our country, Britain. Nowhere is this more true than in Israel and Palestine. We want to make this known, and to make a difference.

In Northern Ireland, Australia, South Africa, people have come together in the cause of a just peace. As a South African commentator wrote: **'Those who had always regarded each other as unspeakable eventually sat down to talk about the unthinkable.'** God knows, peace settlements in those places are far from complete, but they are beacons of hope in a very dangerous world.

One of the guiding lights of the Balfour Project was the late John Austin Baker, for several years Speaker's Chaplain and Rector of St Margaret's. He wrote,

'Politics and peace processes, even when conducted with integrity and the best of intentions, can take us so far and no further. True and lasting reconciliation depends on something more. It requires that we walk the costly road of sorrow and repentance.'

Those words take seriously the connection between pardon and peace. Maya Angelou, was surely thinking in similar terms when she wrote:

***'History despite its wrenching pain
Cannot be un-lived but if faced
With courage need not be lived again.'***

That is what the Balfour Project is about in relation to Israel and Palestine. We in Britain have a particular responsibility to take this very seriously: to inform ourselves about the history, pre- and post-Balfour, however painful we discover that to be, in order to determine whether Britain really does have a role to play in creating a just peace in Palestine and Israel, as a fresh beacon of hope for humanity. We believe that Britain could – and should – have such a role.

A Palestinian theologian reminds us that **'the only way to peace is through the door of justice'**. We believe that that justice must include all the peoples in the land in which the God of many names has chosen to be revealed.

Thank you for sharing this evening with us, and to the Members of Parliament, Tom Brake, Ian Murray, Richard Bacon and Philippa Whitford who have made it possible.

Nicholas Frayling.