


Christmas in the Holy Land: waiting for peace, keeping watch in the darkness of war, and being prepared to do good

The war in Gaza broke out exactly two months ago, on 7 October, following the terrorist attack by Hamas on Israel. The number of dead, wounded and displaced is rising by the hour and is now in the tens of thousands. A few days' lull in the fighting has not been enough to bring relief to the affected population of Gaza or to reach an agreement between Israel and Hamas on the exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinian convicts. At the same time, Sunday 3 December marked the beginning of the Church's Advent season, which leads up to Christmas and celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace. According to tradition, the Custos of the Holy Land makes a solemn entry into Bethlehem on the eve of the first Sunday of Advent.



, Vicar

of the Custody of the Holy Land, recounts in this reflection, published in full by SIR. **Advent is a season of anticipation of joy.** In the Holy Land it is a different time: it is a time of expectation of peace. The intense liturgical season of Advent, normally a time of high hopes and great intentions, unfolds as a paused, silent, unexplainable time. Since 1995 I have organised the entrance of the Custos according to the strict rules of the Status Quo. This year, for the first time, the civil authorities and ordinary citizens of Bethlehem and Beit Jala did not ask for permission to cross the wall to receive the Custos, who, accompanied by the Israeli police, will meet the communities of these two cities at the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Mar Elias. What was once an opportunity to cross the wall has turned out to be an opportunity that was turned down in order to avoid meeting the other side. 
In spite of the social and political difficulties, these last days in Bethlehem were filled with beautiful colours, with voices and people from different nations. There was an atmosphere of expectation, certain of the arrival of the Prince of Peace on Christmas Eve. We are always sure of His coming, but we cannot rejoice because we know that after seven days of truce, the fear has returned, the anxiety has returned, and we are bracing ourselves for dark days, a renewed despair because of the war that has ravaged the Holy Land for two months. But we must not lose the Hope of Life, which is sacred, holy and precious. Peace is the gift that every heart should always have. A pure heart can never imagine the utter evil of war. At this tragic moment, the children of the Holy Land convince me not to lose hope in the possibility of rebuilding a true and just world. They greeted the Father Custos in the Manger Square and welcomed him with an atmosphere of celebration that had not been seen for almost two months. My thoughts are with the children of Gaza, who have been deprived of everything, including meeting friendly faces to receive help, comfort and caresses. When I see the children running happily in the schoolyard in the Holy Land, when I hear them singing, when I read and perceive their feelings, when they smile with their hearts before smiling with their eyes, I am more and more convinced that we must raise our voices even louder to demand peace, truth and justice. I was in Italy again for a series of appointments, meetings and testimonies. At Tel Aviv airport there were few people, sad faces, many suitcases: the war has changed the lives of many, depriving them of stability, harmony and everyday life. It is a sad time, and we are not able to rejoice fully at what is the most beautiful time of the year for Bethlehem and for the whole world. The terrible images of war are etched in our eyes and hearts, but it is time to "keep watch", as we read in the Gospel for the first Sunday of Advent.



it is a matter of being ready to do what is good, to keep watch and see that Good has been done! We are called to love, let us direct this love to our neighbour by keeping watch over life! Let us keep watch in the darkness of war, and let us bring light in our care for the future of the world! Let us do this with the pure hearts of children, and let us not remain silent and dormant, but loudly call out for peace! "It is good not to do evil, but it is bad not to do good", Pope Francis has always shown us the way! Happy Advent to the world in search of peace! (*) Vicar of the Custody of the Holy Land

Ibrahim Faltas (*)