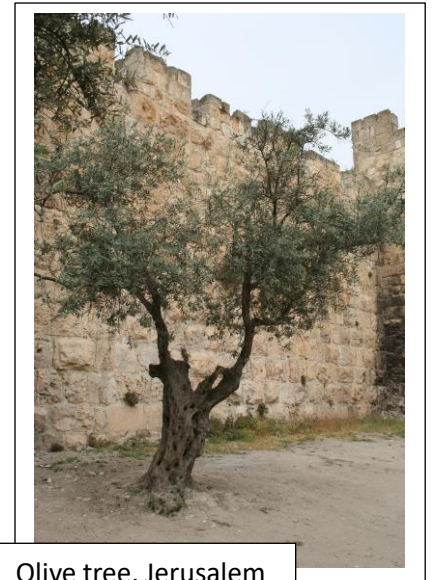


Holy Land

The news of Hamas' attack on Israel has taken the world by surprise. The brutal assault and the devastating reprisals leave Israelis, Palestinians and the rest of the world wondering 'What next?' If you are Israeli you will feel the dreadful fear of being surrounded by people who want to get rid of you. If you are Palestinian you will feel the dreadful fear of a neighbour occupying your livelihood. Both have a claim to the land we call 'holy'. It was like that in Jesus' day when the Romans were the occupiers. Jesus spoke the words of peace. 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall inherit the earth.'



Olive tree, Jerusalem

The conflict in the Holy Land has persisted since WW2. Despite peace-brokering efforts, the two sides remain entrenched in their own, individually justifiable, positions.

Conflict over land, and the right to live peacefully in it, has always been at the core of long-running feuds and wars. We have had plenty in our own history. The Northern Irish situation took generations to resolve, and the peace agreement remains fragile. Apartheid in South Africa ended when old enemies found a way forward together through mutual forgiveness. Indigenous communities, like the Māori, don't have a concept of 'owning' land – we are merely custodians of its welfare for future generations.

The way forward out of conflict is never easy, when deeply held convictions have to make compromises. So when we ask 'What next?', we need to recognise that fear and insecurity can make us defensively aggressive, but violence and counter-violence never works; that taking sides never helps. An eye for an eye only makes the whole world blind.

So what can we do? Pray for peace, encourage peacemakers, listen to both sides and understand their pain and fears. When we were in Jerusalem, our Palestinian Christian guide told us of the day he took his little boy to play in the park. The boy ran across to play with a little Jewish girl. Fearful of reprisals he ran to get his little boy and apologised to the girl's mother. She smiled and said – 'I long for the day when our children can play safely with each other – just like now!'

Mothers instinctively want their children to live in peace. The women of Ireland shouted for peace. The women in black at the Jerusalem Gate pray for peace.

As members of Mothers' Union, let us pray for the mothers of the Holy Land, and pray for the day when people will see God's love in the eyes of the people they fear and discover the joys of 'playing together in God's Garden'.