

10/12/2003

No room at the inn

Sharon Nelson

SHE longs for the right of return to Palestine. She is overcome with horror at the suffering of her people. She is barely 17 and she is Christian.

This Friday, Dana Emile Abu Sada will be speaking at 'Remembering Bethlehem', an event marking the ongoing anguish of the Palestinian people.

The talk is organised by the Spirituality Group of St Mary's Cathedral and will include scripture readings and prayer. (see box for details)

"I want [the audience] to know that there are also Christians there," she says.

"In church, people pray for so many countries around the world, but we never hear them praying for the Jews and Palestinians to find peace."

Dana, who is doing her 'A' Levels at Help Institute, has been living in Malaysia since she was seven. This week, she will be speaking alongside Tengku Iskandar of Just International and David Anthony of the Society for Christian Reflection.

This is the first open forum she is addressing but her passion for the topic makes her a natural public speaker.

The day before the interview, a nine-year-old Palestinian boy was reported to have been killed in the Ramallah raid. "Are you going to tell me he was a terrorist?" she says, with ringing passion in her voice.

Even the Geneva accord, a new unofficial blueprint for peace, she says, does not bring hope. "You had the road map, the Balfour Declaration, Camp David, promises of land and peace - all these things, but nothing."

The tone of fury and frustration: we are used to these searing sentiments from Muslims who have either lived under the oppression or who identify with the ummah. But Christians?

This, says Dana, is not a Jewish-Muslim conflict as it is popularly packaged.

"It is a holy place for Muslims, Jews and Christians."

One of these is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is built on what is believed to be Christ's birthplace. In April 2002, it was the site of violent unrest.

Israeli media says that military action was taken because priests and nuns were being held hostage inside by Palestinian terrorists.

A report in the Miami Herald, however, quotes a telephone interview with one of the clergymen, who says that the 240 Palestinians in the church ran in to escape Israeli fire.

"Of course if they say that there is a problem with the Christians, and the news goes to Rome for example, everybody will be against this occupation of Palestine," says Dana.

Yet during curfew, Christians are not allowed to attend church.

Muslims, she says, tend to be more well-informed about Middle East events.

Dana keeps in close touch with the issues through the Internet, eagerly scrolling her favoured websites for news (see box). She also corresponds with activists from around the world.

This strength of feeling is relatively recent. Dana did not always identify herself as Palestinian, even though tragedy touched her family.

Her father left Palestine at 18 to further his studies in Britain, and was not allowed to return. Her mother's family home was demolished and the

family fled to Jordan where Dana's maternal grandfather was later shot dead by Israeli soldiers.

Still, she felt removed until about two years ago when she returned to Jordan to do her 'O' Levels. Sharon made his widely-reported visit to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and as violence broke out, Dana watched her television set in horror.

"There was a reporter and a cameraman, and they both got shot. The camera fell to the ground so we could see everything ... I heard him scream "Help me!, help me!" The ambulance was nearby, but they were not allowed to help."

In school the next day, there were no lessons; instead the overcome students went on a peaceful march outside the U.N. building.

"I went back and told my father I was proud to be Palestinian," she said.

Recently she asked him if she could further her studies in England, so that she could work with the International Solidarity Movement: "I don't mind becoming a human shield."

Not surprisingly, he discouraged her from that idea, saying that she could help simply by spreading awareness.

Listening to Dana, it is impossible not to think of the late Edward Said, one of the most well-known spokespersons for Palestine.

Like Said, she is Christian; and like Said, she suffered personal loss.

Fiery and eloquent, a discreet cross adorns her neck, but nothing else - not her outrage or her distress - distinguishes her from fellow Palestinians, most of whom are Muslim.

The solidarity is as unbroken as a blank, smooth wall.

She is not, however, familiar with Said's work, finding inspiration closer to home. She admires former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's vocal stand on the crisis. She had made plans to meet the pro-Palestinian activist Datuk Dr Alijah Gordon while the latter was in hospital, but Alijah died before the meeting could take place.

She is also in close touch with Dr Ang Swee Chai, a Malaysian doctor who wrote From Beirut to Jerusalem based on her work in Palestinian refugee camps.

Self-assured, vibrant and persuasive, it is hard to remember that Dana is not even out of high school.

The language of the Middle East crisis has taken on a grotesque, volatile form of its own. Conscientiously rejecting loaded words, Dana charts a critical path of neutrality through the linguistic minefield. She is careful to use the terms "Zionists" and "Israeli government" instead of the blanket word "Jews".

She also strongly emphasises that there are many Jews who are pro-Palestine, such as Adam Shapiro, organiser of the International Solidarity Movement.

Her message, she feels, has special resonance for Christians.

"You can't say that these are Muslims getting killed so who cares? Even if that were true, you still have to support them. Your religion asks you to love everybody and to speak up.

"By keeping quiet, you are saying yes to the occupation, to the demolishing of houses, the raping of women, the detaining of men.

"For every one person who comes on Friday," says Dana, "millions of Palestinians are going to be very grateful."