



BETHLEHEM UNIVERSITY

جامعة بيت لحم

Office of the
Vice Chancellor

مكتب نائب الرئيس الأعلى

4 April 2021

Easter greetings to you, but this year again from the isolated and locked down little town of Bethlehem and not in Jerusalem! It is hard to believe that we have been locked down without students for over a year now! It was 5 March 2020 that we sent all students home and we have not had them back on campus since.

When I look back on the past year, there are many challenges that come to mind, but there have also been some wonderful opportunities provided for our students despite the restrictions. Brother Alejandro, who teaches in the Faculty of Education, could not arrange for his students to teach in local schools because of the unpredictable opening of schools, so because of contacts he has as a Brother, he organized for small groups of them to teach English online to students and adults in institutions around the world. It has been a wonderfully enriching experience for our students, but also for those whom they are teaching. One of the challenges our students faced in a number of countries was that there was no common language to work in, so our students had to devise ways to communicate with pictures, drawings, videos, etc. in order to help the students learn English. It was a wonderfully creative, enriching and life-giving experience for all involved. Such experiences help keep hope alive here!

That is what I have been focusing on during this Easter time – how suffering can lead to resurrection, how our students can creatively respond with a resilience which I find inspiring! We have been seriously impacted by the virus with quite a number of our students and employees being infected. Unfortunately, one of our faculty members, who had been sick with other illnesses, contracted the virus and died. We have had a number of parents and relatives of employees and students who have also died as a result of the virus. Our present lockdown was imposed because two weeks ago there was a significant spike in new cases and in deaths here in the Bethlehem Governorate. It is not clear yet what will happen when this time of lockdown ends. The vaccine is very slowly being made available to Palestinians, but there are difficulties in the just distribution of it!

The financial situation here continues to be a dominant issue. The arrangement the administration made with employees to withhold up to 15% of salaries for this academic year has been a great help in giving us time to work on the financial challenges we have. We are proposing to take a five-year period to gradually bring the University to a sustainable position. However, when the new academic year begins at the beginning of September this year, we return to paying full salaries and begin repaying the loan from the employees. It is going to be a challenge to meet these demands! With still no pilgrims coming to Bethlehem, there are significant unemployment issues with the students of so many families really struggling to pay their tuition. We have been fortunate in the response from supporters around the world who are prepared to assist these students and that is going to be a crucial need as we move towards the end of the academic year in June.

The implications of COVID-19 are widespread. The new nursing facility was supposed to be finished in August 2020, but because of lockdowns and difficulties in getting supplies, it is still not finished. We are aiming, at this stage, for a dedication of the building on 6 September 2021 when we hope the building will be available for use.

We are also involved in a whole-university review which is leading to a new structure that will, I hope, enable us to more effectively respond to the needs of our students and establish ourselves as a sustainable institution. However, it is a lot of hard work bringing about such a change! We have two consultants working with us on this until December.

Here in Palestine with hundreds of new cases of the virus each day, as well as many that are not reported, it is hard to see any immediate end in sight. That makes it difficult to plan in any realistic way, but we are hoping we will have students back on campus at the end of August for the new academic year. However, we will have to wait and see.

Against this background, and many other challenges, we take time out to reflect on Easter. The Brothers are again in Bethlehem and have arranged ceremonies in the community. However, our experience over the past year has taught us that life springs from death, that light rises out of the darkness and that hope pushes fear away. In the midst of all that, we are confronted with the mystery of the cross and Jesus' death. At the core of that mystery I have experienced a real call to stand with the Palestinians and not become hateful myself in that opposition to the injustices so many of them suffer, the incredible push by some Israelis to rip the land from Palestinians in some areas, to see the evil there and not become enmeshed in it. That is a real challenge and it is difficult to maintain in the reality of what I see happening. So, it is a matter of being aware of God's goodness and being drawn towards that while at the same time being aware of how I can be drawn into what I am opposing, of becoming a mirror image of that. That is the crucifixion for me, to be continually confronted with my own contradictions and to somehow hold those and stand in solidarity with the amazing Palestinians with whom and for whom I work! Keeping hope alive in such a context is crucial and Bethlehem University is a beacon of that hope especially as we reach out to support students in their need.

It is out of the rawness of that experience that resurrection comes. I see that around me in the resilience of people here as they face the reality of COVID-19, of restrictions, of unemployment, of occupation etc, and still they soften their hearts towards those with real needs. I see it in the compassion and understanding so many shows towards those who have lost loved ones, who have lost jobs, whose businesses have closed etc. I am indeed richly blessed to be able to stand with such people and to witness courage and resilience as human suffering is transformed by God's identification with it and, in Jesus, standing in full solidarity with those involved.

As I take time during this Easter break to reflect on this great mystery while here in Bethlehem and not in Jerusalem, I pray that wherever you are that you experience something of the peace and joy arising from Jesus' resurrection. Please keep us in your prayers as we move through these uncertain times. He is Risen!

Best wishes



Brother Peter Bray FSC, EdD
Vice Chancellor