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# Christians are under threat in the cradle of their faith



Having served as a priest in the northeast of England many years ago, I remember the cloudy days of January. Here in Jerusalem, while we enjoy a brighter and warmer climate, we know what it is to live in darkness. As Patriarch of Jerusalem I have the privilege of leading the Greek Orthodox church in the Holy Land. The first of my 140 predecessors was St James, the first leader of the church in Jerusalem and the brother of Jesus Christ. Along with a number of other leaders St James was martyred for his faith. As a community we have seen empires rise and fall. We have survived sieges, invasions, plagues and persecutions. And through it all, we have remained faithful to our Lord, because in the darkness we know that he is our light and our life.

In the Gospel of St John the Baptist we read that St John “came as a witness to the light” of Jesus Christ. As churches this has been our mission for two millennia. We are not simply the custodians of holy sites; we are living witnesses to God’s light.

As witnesses to the light we seek to be a blessing in the changing and challenging societies in which we live. We provide healthcare, education and community services. We look after the elderly, welcome refugees and care for the destitute, regardless of their faith, nationality or background. We welcome millions of pilgrims and preserve and serve Christianity's most holy sites. In all of this we direct people to the light of Christ.

Despite these good works, our presence in Jerusalem is under threat. Our churches are threatened by Israeli radical fringe groups. At the hands of these Zionist extremists the Christian community in Jerusalem is suffering greatly. Our brothers and sisters are the victims of hate crimes. Our churches are regularly desecrated and vandalised. Our clergy are subject to frequent intimidation. The sworn intent of these radical groups is to extinguish the light of the Christian community from the Old City.

A short walk from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, on the pilgrim route, stands the Jaffa Gate, the main entrance to the Christian quarter of Old City Jerusalem. To walk this way is to share in the journey of the Christian community; one is immediately surrounded by church groups from around the world as crowds of pilgrims process to worship at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the site of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection. On Christmas Day I am among those who pass through the Jaffa Gate as we travel to Bethlehem to celebrate Christ's birth.

It is at Jaffa Gate that an Israeli radical group is seeking to occupy two big buildings, acquired through illegitimate transactions. Quite disingenuously they claim that their physical presence in there will not affect the integrity of the Christian Quarter. However, we know from their previous actions at St John's Hostel, a site even closer to the Holy Sepulchre which was also deceitfully taken over by them some years ago, that this is not true. Their behaviour will be devastating for all Christians. Local families, who have lived here for generations, will be made to feel unwelcome in their own home and pilgrims who have longed to visit the birthplace of the Christian faith will have their experience diminished.

The change of status of the Jaffa Gate properties would not only be a misfortune for local families and the global Christian family but for the Holy Land itself. Jerusalem is home to three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and has long been an illuminating example of a mosaic community. It is the spiritual capital of the world, comprising a family of faiths, all of which enjoy a long and unique rich heritage. The beauty of this city rests upon its cultural and religious diversity. By working to exclude one community, the Christians, these radicals pose an

existential threat not only to the Christian family but to Jerusalem itself, a point upheld by so many of our Jewish cohabitants of the Holy Land.

We all share the vision that these radicals are not representative of the state of Israel or the Jewish people and that it is essential for the diversity and distinctive characters of all quarters of the Old City to be protected for the benefit of Jerusalem and the whole world.

His Beatitude, Theophilos III, is Patriarch of Jerusalem

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