

Considering the conflict that has characterised Bethlehem, the birthplace of Bethlehem ruined by political

BY STEVEN ODEKE

For close to four decades, Bethlehem has never really been at peace for a city befitting Jesus Christ's birthplace. Trapped in the Israel-Palestine decades-long-conflict, the city has been tossed around in the hands of Israelites and Palestinians. As such, one would wonder what Jesus Christ seated up there in the sanctity of heaven, makes of his birthplace.

Is he proud of what he sees happening in Bethlehem? Or being forgiving, he looks up to his father and asks him to handle the mess, as he did in Luke 23:34.

Control of Bethlehem has been such a contentious issue since time immemorial. At some point control was passed from the Ottomans to the British at the end of World War I. Then the Jordanians took over during the 1948 Arab-Israeli War before Israel captured the city in the 1967 Six-Day War. It is until the 1995 Oslo Accord that the administration of Bethlehem was handed over to the Palestinians.

And now that fires were recently stoked when Jerusalem was declared capital of Israel by US President Donald Trump. One can only imagine what Jesus Christ also makes of Trump, because such a move has been seen by many as having the potential to stir up the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Straddling the central West Bank about 10km (6.2 miles) south of Jerusalem, Bethlehem is a Palestinian city that has suffered the brunt of all wars waged by the warring parties. The city, supposed to be peaceful and a fountain of blessing, with roughly 170,000

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inhabitants today, is cut off from its sister city Jerusalem by an eight-metre high Israeli West Bank barrier.

And that barrier has fuelled the aforesaid conflict. The city supposed to be remembered for its holiest famous son and not clouded by the conflict has perhaps felt the burden of being Jesus' birthplace. Who knows?

Had Jesus been mortal, he would probably not have driven to his village to celebrate this Christmas in fear of the conflict. It is painful for any human being knowing their ancestral home is ravaged by war.

Luckily for Jesus, his emotions and feelings are concealed from us up there in heaven. All we know is that he has forgiven those that started this conflict right from 1948 after the declaration of the State of Israel propelled Arab armies to intervene on behalf of the Palestinian Arabs. He has forgiven those that have inflicted suffering throughout the years of this conflict. And hey, one can be dead certain Jesus has also forgiven Donald Trump for making those recent sensitive and bold declarations.

The recent declaration by the US president that Jerusalem



Joseph and Mary with Jesus in a manger. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of David

turns into Israel's capital sparked condemnation from not only the Palestinians and the Arab world, but almost the entire international community. Riots immediately broke out in Bethlehem.

A United Nations general assembly sitting on Thursday last week voted against the US move to recognise Jerusalem as Israeli capital. Palestinians have warned US president that changing the status of Jerusalem would hamper all efforts to end the decades' long-conflict.

They also have warned of mass street protests. Bethlehem has felt the fallout after seeing clashes in the Palestinian territories between stone-

throwers and Israeli soldiers who fired teargas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. Ten Palestinians are believed to have been killed by Israeli fire, most on the Gaza border and scores were wounded.

According to Al Jazeera TV, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was to have received US Vice-President Mike Pence, a devout Christian, in

Bethlehem, but cancelled the meeting after the US pivot on Jerusalem. The snub came as Abbas rejected Washington as a Middle East broker.

Giant countries like Germany and France have shrieked in angst at Trump's move though France voted in support of the US in last week's UN General Assembly. Analysts believe Trump's move could derail a developing Mideast peace plan before it even gets off the ground and infuriate key allies in the Arab world and in the West.

However, the American president being as obstinate and confrontational as he is, has not been moved by their protests. He has not lost his sleep.

Perhaps what is on his mind

now is the turkey Mrs. Trump will likely prepare for him on Christmas somewhere in Washington DC. It is known that Trump revels in such storms. He is the type that enjoys stoking fires when everyone is against it.

Of course Israel, being a close ally of the US, has welcomed the move and it will be popular with pro-Israeli evangelical Christian voters who make up a key part of Trump's base.

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lauded Trump for his bold move calling it a "historic day".

"Jerusalem has been the focus of our hopes, our dreams, our prayers for three millennia," said the prime minister.

"Jerusalem has been the capital of the Jewish people for 3,000 years.

So it's rare to be able to speak of new and genuine milestones in the glorious history of this city, yet today's pronouncement by President Trump is such an occasion."

Trump insists the move to recognise Jerusalem "a long overdue step to advance the peace process" between Israel and the Palestinians. Fine,



Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem

Jesus should have mercy on the people desecrating his home town.