

Tutu urges Jews to challenge oppression of Palestinians

By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | October 28, 2007

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who won a Nobel Peace Prize for his role in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, appealed yesterday to Jews to challenge what he described as the Israeli government's oppression of Palestinians.

In a lengthy and emotional address to a packed Old South Church, where the faint din of pro-Israel protesters could be heard through the stone walls, Tutu cited passages from the Hebrew Bible to argue that the God worshiped by Jews would champion the cause of Palestinians.

"Remembering what happened to you in Egypt and much more recently in Germany - remember, and act appropriately," he said, alluding to the enslavement of Jews in Egypt described in the book of Exodus, as well as to the Nazi Holocaust. "If you reject your calling, you may survive for a long time, but you will find it is all corrosive inside, and one day you will implode."

His remarks, to a congregation of about 850, created controversy even before they were delivered. A wide array of Jewish community leaders and organizations denounced Sabeel, the Palestinian Christian organization that put together the conference at which Tutu spoke, as anti-Israel, and rued Tutu's support of the group.

About 200 people protested the conference on Friday; yesterday, the Jewish Sabbath, the protest was smaller, with a few dozen people holding signs and shouting from the corner of Boylston and Dartmouth streets. The pro-Israel demonstrators said Tutu's comparison of Israel to apartheid in South Africa was unfair because Israel is a democracy where Arabs have rights.

"That conference is bad for peace, it's bad for America, it's bad for Israel, and it's bad for the Palestinians," Steve Grossman, a Democratic activist who is chairman of the Jewish Community Relations Council's Israel Action Center advisory board, said Friday. "Israel wants peace, regardless of the falsehoods and misrepresentations which will be heard at Old South Church this weekend."

Tutu, 76, was frail but defiant. After the conference, he joined a pro-Palestinian rally in Copley Square at which Israel was denounced as an apartheid state. Noting that the rally was sponsored by a group called Jewish Voice for Peace, he said, "You are sometimes vilified as self-hating Jews, but thank you for standing up for the truth."

The rally was attended by a few hundred people; hundreds more carrying peace flags walked by as part of a march against the Iraq war.

During his speech in the church, Tutu said the Israeli government is in some respects worse than the South African apartheid government, citing what he described as the Israeli government's use of "collective punishment" of Palestinians. At a press conference before his speech, Tutu criticized the Israeli government for brutality and what he described as "gross violations of human rights."

But his remarks inside the church were aimed directly at Jews. He said he was delivering "a cri de coeur, a cry of anguish from the heart, an impassioned plea to my spiritual relatives, the noble offspring of Abraham like me - please hear the call, the noble call of your scriptures, of

our scriptures, to be with the God of the Exodus who took the side of a bunch of slaves against the powerful pharaoh."

"Jews are indispensable for a good, compassionate, just, and caring world," he said. "And so are Palestinians."

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