

Twin tragedies at heart of conflict



Former university lecturer **Michael Laird**, from St Faith's Church, Havant, puts the current conflict in Gaza into historical context

THIS current conflict in Israel and Gaza is a story of two tragedies: first the Jewish, then the Palestinian.

The Jews suffered under a Christian anti-semitism which became virulent in the Middle Ages. They were expelled from England in 1290 and from Spain in 1492, from which many found refuge in the Ottoman Turkish Empire.

Conditions for Jews in most of Europe improved after the Enlightenment, and they made major contributions to modern civilisation. But by then, most lived in the Tsarist Russian Empire (including Ukraine, Moldova and much of Poland), where their position deteriorated.

From 1881 they were subjected to a series of vicious attacks (pogroms), which reflected dislike by locals with the connivance of the Tsarist authorities. It was this Russian persecution which gave the crucial impetus to the Zionist movement: essentially, Jewish nationalism.

The ultimate Zionist aim was to establish an independent Jewish state in Palestine – their ancient homeland – where Jews could feel safe from persecution. From the 1880s, Zionist pioneers started to settle in Palestine. Then came World War I, in which Ottoman Turkey joined Germany against Britain and France.

By 1917 the British Government were desperate for new allies, and thought that by offering Palestine

they would earn useful support from the large Jewish communities in the USA and Russia – and compensate Jews for the wrongs they'd suffered: a mixture of strategic calculation and idealism. Turkey was defeated, so Britain was able to take control.

The Palestine Arabs – about 90 per cent of the population, mostly Muslim, but with an important Christian minority – were not consulted about this, though the 'Balfour Declaration' included a promise to protect their rights while facilitating Jewish immigration. But the British struggled to square this circle, especially as Jewish immigration increased in response to mounting anti-semitism in central Europe in the 1930s.

Policy changed in 1939 as war loomed and Britain needed good relations with the Arab states. So strict limits were placed on Jewish immigration, which Zionists saw as a betrayal. Extremists took to anti-British terrorism, led by Begin and Shamir – destined eventually to become Prime Ministers of Israel.

After the War, the Zionist cause enjoyed widespread international support following revelations about the Holocaust – though the Arabs pointed out they were paying the price for European anti-semitism. The British tried, but failed, to find a compromise solution, so referred Palestine to the United Nations.

On 29 November 1947 the UN General Assembly voted for

partition, giving the Jews 56 per cent and putting the Holy Places under UN trusteeship. Those in favour included the USA and the Soviet Union; Britain abstained, seeing it as unjust to the Arabs and, like Pilate, washed their hands of the problem to withdraw in 1948.

This set the stage for the first Arab-Israeli war. Israel was invaded by the Arab states, but the Arab armies were small and divided, while Israel got funds from US supporters and arms from Czechoslovakia. Jordan held East Jerusalem and the West Bank, Egypt the Gaza Strip, while Israel took the rest – and triggered the flight of over 700,000 refugees: an incomprehensible disaster for them. So the victims became the victimisers.

By 1967, Syria, Egypt and Jordan were threatening Israel with war. But the Israelis launched pre-emptive strikes and in six days conquered the rest of Palestine. After the next war (1973), Egypt (and later Jordan) made peace. But the Israelis planted settlements in the occupied territories, despite their illegality under international law.

An Israeli-Palestinian agreement was reached at Oslo in 1993 which offered hope for peace, but it was effectively aborted by extremists on both sides – Israeli nationalists led by Netanyahu who wanted the whole country, and Hamas which rejected the Israeli state. As we have seen from recent events, the impasse continues...