



## AS IT IS

# Bethlehem Leaders Say Christmas Will 'Not Be Canceled'

December 01, 2020

Bethlehem could have an unhappy Christmas. Just 12 months ago, the Palestinian town was celebrating its busiest Christmas season in 20 years. This year, there are few visitors. Hotels that were adding new areas in 2019 are now closed because of the coronavirus crisis.

But town leaders say the traditional birthplace of Jesus will go ahead with its celebrations.

“Bethlehem is going to celebrate Christmas. And Christmas will not be cancelled,” said Mayor Anton Salman. Workers behind him were putting up a large Christmas tree in Manger Square.

“This Christmas from Bethlehem there will be a message of hope to the whole world, that the world will recover from this **pandemic**.”

The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Pierbattista Pizzaballa, recently tried to improve spirits, saying that Christmas **preparations** had already started.

Father Francesco Patton is the Custodian of the Holy Land. He launched the seasonal celebrations last weekend. He led a service in a near-empty Church of the Nativity.

“This Christmas will be less **festive** than usual as there will be restrictions, I suppose like any other part of the world,” Pizzaballa said in an interview with a Catholic news service.

“Maybe the civil law will **forbid** us to celebrate as we want; the pandemic will **impose** restrictions, but none will stop us from expressing the true meaning of Christmas which is to make an act of love.”

Rula Maayah is the Palestinian Authority's **tourism** minister. Maayah said this year was especially difficult because it followed record tourism in 2018 and 2019. This year, there has been very little foreign tourism. Fewer Christian Palestinians are coming as **pilgrims** too.

Tourist guides and local shop owners say the pandemic's effect on the worldwide economy has also hurt Internet sales. They usually increase during the holiday season.

Manger Square normally has an active, exciting build-up to Christmas. But the plaza was almost empty in November. Many shops were closed, and small stores were selling just a few objects.

On Nativity Street, Michael Canawati's store is usually popular with visitors. They buy key chains that have images of Jesus or Nativity scenes made from Palestinian olive wood.

But Canawati has not opened his shop in weeks. He finds it difficult to pay his employees.

He was also forced to permanently close his second store in Jerusalem.

"We are at a dead end. The shop is full of **merchandise**," Canawati told the Reuters news agency. "The whole world is in the same problem that we are in. We put some **promotions** (online) for Christmas...and still nothing," Canawati said.

Elias al-Arja is head of the Arab Hotel Association. Al-Arja noted that Bethlehem and the world faced the same problem.

"I have worked in tourism for 30 years. We have had ups and downs because of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but never anything like this."

I'm John Russell.

*Rami Ayyub reported on this story for Reuters. John Russell adapted it for Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.*

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## Words in This Story

**pandemic** – *n. medical*: an occurrence in which a disease spreads very quickly and affects a large number of people over a wide area or throughout the world

**preparation** – *n.* the activity or process of making something ready or of becoming ready for something

**festive** – *adj.* cheerful and exciting : suited to a celebration or holiday

**forbid** – *v.* to order (someone) not to do something

**impose** -- *v.* to cause (something, such as a tax, fine, rule, or punishment) to affect someone or something by using your authority

**tourism** -- *n.* the activity of traveling to a place for pleasure; the business of providing hotels, restaurants, entertainment, etc., for people who are traveling

**pilgrim** – *n.* someone who travels to a holy place

**merchandise** – *n.* goods that are bought and sold

**promotion** – *n.* something (such as advertising) that is done to make people aware of something and increase its sales or popularity

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