

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021

Four times I have had the privilege of going; and on each of those occasions I have come back so enriched, challenged and changed. I am speaking of my pilgrimages to the Holy Land, the land of Israel-Palestine, the homeland of our Lord Himself, the land of which we read in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

There are, of course, four Gospel accounts of the life of Jesus, and someone has called the Holy Land “the fifth Gospel”, and rightly so.

To have gazed upon the excavated ruins of the simple home of Mary in Nazareth, where the Angel Gabriel appeared to her to tell her that she had been chosen by God to be the mother of the Saviour – Nazareth, now the biggest Arab town in Israel, but at the time of Jesus consisting of no more than 300 villagers.

To have shared a Communion Service on the Shepherds’ Fields overlooking the town of Bethlehem; to have knelt in the tiny Grotto of the Nativity where Christ was born; to wander through the streets of Jericho, the oldest inhabited city in the world, and stop beneath the sycamore tree where Zacchaeus had taken up his place to spy Jesus; to have wandered through the excavations of the tiny fishing community of Capernaum on the shore of Lake Galilee, Capernaum, where you can see the home of St Peter and stand in the ruins of the synagogue where Jesus preached; to touch the ancient olive trees in the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was arrested; to walk the Via Dolorosa through the narrow streets of the ancient city of Jerusalem, following the route that Jesus took carrying His Cross from the Judgement Hall of Pontius Pilate; to enter into the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and place your hand into the place in the rock where the Cross had been erected, and to see the empty Tomb – no words can adequately do justice to describe the sense of holiness and the nearness of God in each of these sacred sites. It is all deeply moving.

O, how I would love to return some day, God willing!

And what tragic scenes that we are witnessing just now as Jews and Arabs tear themselves apart in conflict, as so often in past years. So much needless bloodshed and horror in the land which is so loved by Christians, Jews and Moslems.

One of the many places that we visited was Al Shurooq School in Bethlehem. Al Sharooq is Arabic for “The Sunrise”. The school was founded by a Palestinian Christian couple, Basil and Helen Shehadeh. Basil died a few years ago now, but Helen, herself blind from birth, teaches and nurtures twenty blind and visually impaired children from all over the West Bank, mostly Moslem children whose parents are very poor. Helen and her wonderful Staff prepare the children for mainstream education. What a happy, loving and compassionate environment. The School receives no money from the State and depends on donations from local Christians. And for many years now, several congregations in the Church of Scotland have been very generous.

How moved we were when a class of eight year olds sang for us, in English, “We shall overcome someday!”

The children are all boarders and their Moslem parents are delighted that they are taught the stories of Jesus and His Love, for they are witnessing that Love in action.

Helen is an inspiring lady. She is an Elder in St Andrew's Church of Scotland in Jerusalem. If she wants to go to Church on Sunday, she has to apply weeks in advance for a pass, and sometimes, for no reason given, she is refused by the Israeli authorities.

Bethlehem is surrounded by a twenty-six-foot-high concrete wall that the Israeli government built to prevent Palestinians from leaving the West Bank and entering Israel. Bethlehem has been turned into an open air prison. The only access is through two gates in the wall for people and one for commercial traffic, all controlled by the Israeli military.

This has resulted in many Christian families moving out of Bethlehem, and it is of great concern that someday, if the political situation is not resolved, the Holy Land may be without a vibrant growing Christian community in the town of Jesus' birth.

There are 200,000 Arab Christians today, out of a population of 6 million, most of whom are Jews and Moslems.

And in Jerusalem and Tiberias too, there the Church of Scotland has a vital presence – the congregation of St Andrew's Church, with its beautiful guest house attached, welcomes pilgrims from all around the world. The church building, a little jewel, was built as a memorial to all the Scottish soldiers who had lost their lives in the battles for Palestine. Every Sunday morning, a faithful congregation of many nationalities worships there. When the Minister pronounces the Benediction, he is standing on a piece of marble from the island of Iona, and so too when he stands behind the Holy Table to celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. The Scottish connection is very real in more ways than one!

So, we must indeed pray "for the peace of Jerusalem", as the bombs fall on Gaza and Tel Aviv. We must pray for our fellow Christians who are trying to live out a life of peace and reconciliation in such an appalling situation of enmity and hatred and division.

This conflict is not a conflict between two equal sides. It is an occupation by a powerful military state, armed and supported by the West, against an impoverished, stateless and displaced people.

Land theft, racism and physical violence has been taking place for years. Every day, Palestinian lands are being confiscated for the sole purpose of expanding the existing and building new Jewish-only settlements, in total defiance of a prohibition by the United Nations.

At the very heart of the Gospel is reconciliation. The Founder of our supreme Faith was the Man for others, the Man who broke down walls, who restored fractured relationships, who forged peace, who told us to love our enemies, who lived and died and rose again to bring us to God, the Father of the whole human family.

The Holy Land needs our prayers that people will learn to live together, regardless of race or creed.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister