

Less than two weeks ago, Su and I were standing just below the monastery on the Mount of Temptation, the site on the edge of Jericho traditionally associated with today's gospel reading. We looked out over the dead sea, the rather scruffy town of Jericho and across into Jordan.

Today's readings, set for the beginning of our Lenten journey together, are all about making God our first priority, and inviting us to trust that God will in turn make us, if you like, his. But, we're led to understand, don't put God to the test, you just have to trust.

It's tempting to wonder how that's working out for the people of Palestine. On our second full day in the country, soon after I had preached and delivered a cross of nails to St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem, we were taken to meet a man in the area of Silwan, just below the old city, whose house had been demolished by the municipal authorities not just once, but twice - and who had just been served a demolition order for the portakabin that he had put up on his land for him and his wife to live in. At the end of Ramadan, the JCB's will arrive, destroy the remainder of his property, and he will be homeless, and be sent a bill for thousands of dollars to pay for the demolition, on the pretext that the house was illegal, despite being in his family for over sixty years.

I have developed a visceral reaction to the sight, or even the thought, of a JCB. A British company, owned by a British multi millionaire, whose products are widely used across the world to demolish the homes of vulnerable minorities, and which are increasingly used as symbols of power by nationalist parties, including in this country.

Our time in Palestine was typified by poured out laments of those we met at the injustices meted out to their communities on a daily basis by the occupying forces, or settlers. It was a little like pressing a button, and an hour later the person was still talking, pouring out their anguish. We met those working with communities and schools especially in and around Bethlehem and Ramallah.

We also met with two Israeli men leading a Christian outreach to addicts and sex workers, mostly from former soviet union countries, on the streets of Tel Aviv. Having welcomed us into their well used soup kitchen, they took us out on the streets to witness for ourselves the broken lives of those Jewish people who find the dream of living in a Jewish state has not worked out so well for them. We then went for coffee together, and eventually the conversation turned to the situation in the country. One, originally from Lithuania, and the other, originally from Russia, lived in fear of Palestinian attacks. Asked about the deaths of children in Gaza since October 7th 2023, one said he couldn't even think about them, because he was just scared for the life of his own two year old daughter. They used the phrase 'wild dogs', who need to be penned and controlled.

This is a country in the grip of fear. I have often felt this on previous visits, aware that many Israeli's are fearful of their Arab neighbours, and the desire of some - a minority, we might believe - to see Israel wiped off the map. It is an existential threat, but given real purchase by the terrible October 7th attack. There are complexities behind how to understand that attack which we can discuss during our post service coffee if you would like to do so.

There is also fear from the Palestinians, in their case based on the reality of daily injuries and deaths, imprisonments and a thousand curtailments of freedom and quality of life, from limitations of movement to denial of water and power, not just in Gaza but throughout occupied Palestine. They are the human beings who are treated like dogs, constantly being whipped, experiencing the cumulative impact across the whole country as apartheid and genocide, the systematic attempt to oppress and even to eradicate an entire people from their land on the basis of their identity.

What on earth does it mean to walk through this land, as a follower of Jesus? And what can we learn from it, in our daily lives here in Coventry, or wherever we have come from this morning?

In the middle of our visit, we had dinner with two peacebuilders. Ittay is an Israeli Jew who was born in Jerusalem, grew up in Australia, and returned to Jerusalem a few years ago after a career

as a high school teacher. He runs an organisation called Kids for Peace, and has written an outstanding book called the *Holy and the Broken*, speaking with real wisdom into the immense difficulties of discovering common language and a shared basis for building a culture of justice and peace in Israel and Palestine. Daniel is a Palestinian Christian with Israeli citizenship, one of four sons of Salim, the founder of Musalaha which is a member of the Community of the Cross of Nails, an organisation originally working to bring together young Christian and Jewish Israeli's and Palestinians. He has contributed to a book edited by his brothers John and Sam called *The Cross and the Olive Tree*, which explores the implications of a theology of liberation for the Palestinian situation.

It wasn't the easiest conversation, despite having four peace builders around the table! Perhaps one reason is that we all found ourselves united around a cause - the end of the occupation - but had different interpretations of the cause and its reason, and how to address it. And if we are not careful, those different approaches can make us distrustful of each other, even fearful.

I'm told that the spiritual teacher Gerard Hughes learned on his Walk to Jerusalem, that for him, it was important to live not for a cause, but to live for God. That the small things we can do will become part of God making a difference. To live not for a cause - however worthy, however inspired - but to live for God. This is the only way we can live in the midst of the pain of the world, whether in Palestine and Israel, or the rest of the world. It does not mean closing our eyes to the suffering around us: quite the reverse, for as we live for God, God will direct our eyes to the plight of the poor, our ears to the cries of the broken. But it means we are seeking to join God's response to the cause that confronts us, because it confronts God all the more. God is the one who truly understands. It is God's cause, not ours. It is we who are called to join God, not God who is called to join us.

This is the fundamental meaning of today's gospel: even Jesus, anointed by God at his baptism, is led by God to the fundamental choice of whether he will seek to follow, serve and trust God, or whether he wants God to follow, serve, and trust *him*. Jesus will need food to do his mission - so why not use his powers to make bread? No, he says, I will not subvert how God will provide for me in God's own way. Jesus will need to know that God will back him up - so why not prove that to himself and others by throwing himself off a cliff, to demonstrate that he is invincible? No, he says, I am called to *trust* God not to *direct* God. And lastly, and perhaps most subtly, Jesus will need to have power and influence in the ways of the world to achieve his God given task. No, he says, I will not compromise my values no matter how noble the end. I serve God, and God alone.

Had we listened to the Old Testament reading set for this morning, we would have listened to the account in Genesis of the Garden of Eden, and the disobedient desire of Adam and Eve to know good and evil for themselves. There are many ways of understanding that story, but one is that it is the temptation to put ourselves in the place of God, making ourselves the ultimate arbiter of what is right and what is wrong - and inevitably leading to further bad choices, leading humanity towards life denying *self* serving, rather than life giving serving *God*. The passage from Romans describes how that flow of disobedience, which has characterised humanity ever since, is reversed in the person of Jesus, who chose to put his ultimate trust in God knowing that it would lead to the cross - but through the cross, to life for him and all people.

This Lent we are called to walk, in person or in Spirit, through the immense challenges of the world. Allowing the dust of Coventry, and the hope our predecessors have found here, to mingle with the dust of Palestine and other places. This place where Jesus has walked with us and our forebears has become a sign of the resurrection and reconciliation which we share, a place where we are called daily to pray and trust God, not with our eyes closed but with our eyes and ears wide open, offering ourselves to God to be used in his work of bringing love, hope, justice peace and reconciliation to a world in desperate need.

*Now to the one who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Eph 3. 20,21*