

2023.05.21 Sermon

Jerusalem Sunday

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You may remember me telling the story once before of my visit to the oldest Palestinian refugee camp in Israel – Deheish, (Dai-esh). I’m there with most of the clergy from the Diocese of Saskatoon. In order to get to Deheish we have to pass through a checkpoint. These are the instructions we hear before our bus gets in line: Have your passports out and ready. Do *not* speak to the soldiers. Do not try to engage or give any eye contact. Don’t be friendly. And keep your cameras and phones tucked away out of sight. It was the quietest I ever for heard our energetic and talkative group.

Once in the camp we are welcomed warmly, and receive a talk from a young man, a social worker who works with Palestinian youth at risk. He tells us the history and context of the community. This place was founded in 1948 when they were removed from their homes, houses inhabited for hundreds of years by successive generations of family, and placed in refugee camps in tents. They call that time ‘Mekva’ – the catastrophe. Where they once lived is now a National Park. The houses still there – empty, their olive orchards gone wild, an empty land. *His* house is still there but he is not allowed to go there. And the Israeli soldiers? They are free to enter ‘the refugee camp’ (which is actually a small city), at any time, to arrest anyone, to shoot anyone...

When the time for questions comes I have one. I want to know – what are the big blue, black, sometimes green ‘boxes’ that I see on the rooftops. ‘Water containers’ comes the answer. I’m puzzled – clearly they’re not going to catch any rain off the roofs – they’re in the midst of a five year drought. ‘Where does the water come from?’ ‘Ah – when the Israelis turn the taps on we fill the tanks.’ ‘When are the taps turned on?’ I want to know. ‘Twice a month.’

Our second visit of the morning is to an Israeli settlement for Jewish immigrants from around the world. Everywhere there are green lawns with sprinklers in action.

And yet. And yet. There are so many people there working for peace, for justice, nurturing hope. In another refugee camp is The Alrawwad Center for Culture and Arts, a non-profit organization committed to teaching young Palestinians “Beautiful Resistance”, to helping them feel proud of who they are through music, drama, photography, the arts, and some social services. Their vision is to empower women, youth and children, and to build partnerships based on respect of human rights and values, and conservation of Palestinian traditional culture and environment. They describe themselves as the “home of hope, dream, imagination, and creativity.”

And among our Christian sisters and brothers in the Holy Land? And just as an aside, you do understand that there are Christian Palestinians, right? That among the ‘camps’ there are Palestinian Christians as well as Muslims – you got that? There’s St Philip the Evangelist in the Gaza, St Philips in Nablus, St Andrew’s in Ramallah to name a few of the parishes.

In the entire Anglican (Episcopal) Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East, which includes Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, there are 7000 members formed into 30 parishes. This is the outreach ministry they provide – 20 educational institutions provide learning opportunities for 6400 Arab children. Healthcare institutions include homes for the elderly, the Princess Basma Center for Disabled Children, clinics and hospitals. The Princess Basma Center now has a partnership with the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario to do research and treatment in the area of autism. In Nablus, a city of 300,000 people, there are only 800 Anglicans. But the Diocese runs a first-class hospital specializing in neurology and urology, as well as general medicine, obstetrics and orthopedics. They're a vibrant faithful community offering a bold witness to the compassionate love of God in action. And they need to know that they're not forgotten, not ignored, but recognized and valued as part of our oneness in Christ.

So today we pray for them. And maybe some of you will join the Companions of Jerusalem who do more than prayer.

Doesn't it make our challenges look small in comparison? And yet, here we are, with the challenges we do get to live with, live into and make sense of. Maybe... we can take inspiration from that small tribe of Anglicans in the Holy Land, who look constantly outwards into their world to see where they are most needed, where the love of God needs to take root and flourish. Because isn't that the most important aspect of our journey as church? To find the places where there is an absence of love and bring it there. Just as so many of you already do here on Salt Spring – Helping people learn how to read at the library. Serving lunch at the United Church on Fridays. Helping tourists find services, housing, places to eat. Serving on committees and boards throughout our community in order that we can be the most light-filled, justice-grounded, love-inspired island possible.

So when we look to the future of our parish we already know what matters, what counts, right? At Synod on May 12 and 13 the theme was "The Future is Bright." And it is – if we commit ourselves to that. If we see that our work in the world is really just like the work of Christians in the Holy Land – to show up, to bring our hearts and our best selves to the work, to serve and minister in a million different ways. That's who we are. I know that's who each of you is. Patricia Kirkpatrick, Prof of OT at McGill, pondering on the gifts she received from being in the Holy Land as she realized, *"We are here to support and encourage one another in steadfast loving kindness to incarnate Christ's love in all our seemingly insignificant ways."*

'Our seemingly insignificant ways'. So this is what I say to you. Never underestimate for even a second the power of steadfast loving kindness to heal, to uphold, to encourage, to enliven, or to empower... those who need it most. Together we are a force to be reckoned with. Together, this church, this parish, has what it takes to move into the future in a new way, never forgetting for a moment what's most important: we are here to be the hands, heart, and voice of God, of God's loving kindness wherever we are, wherever we go. It's a no-brainer. We've got it. We're on track. Amen?

AMEN!