

Reflections on Ramallah – February-March 2019

Below is a selection of reflections written by Giles to the congregation of St Philip and St James Church, Cheltenham during his stay in Ramallah.

Arabic and English

St Andrew's Church does not stand out, architecturally speaking. As one moves uphill on the main road it stands to the right, nondescript save for two main doors in a compound of stone. Behind those doors however is a vital gathering point for locals and pilgrims alike. Here, the Episcopal community binds together. Here, the pilgrims gain an inkling about the situation their fellow Christians live with every day. The Church hall is small but has a warmth to it evenly matched by the insistence of the congregation to indulge in another post-service sweet and strong coffee. When pilgrims do come, Father Fadi delivers the service in a bilingual format. Arab, then English, Arab, then English is spoken. The momentum however never falters even as words are repeated across the language barrier. Fadi's passion requires no translation. His evocation of the Gospel, his commitment to the community and love for those who arrive from near and afar comes across without reservation. His sermons reach deep and find a place of relevance and depth, whether it is loving enemies even as they storm the gates or acknowledging and accepting one's own weakness. His energy doesn't falter whether he is addressing a few in a Bible study or a full congregation. He handles interruption with grace and not a member of the Church is forgotten. The rest of the community are curious about those who come to visit, and it makes them happy to converse, encouraging the learning of their language as they speak the English they know with courtesy. With Fadi at the helm, St Andrew's stands as an example of how Arabic and English can come together to create a vision of unity. For a newcomer arriving in a foreign country such as Palestine, language can be a worry. But many are willing to try out some Arabic - to show appreciation of their hosts. Coming to St Andrews, listening to a sermon, seeing the situation first hand, and engaging with the people who live here is, after all, making use of a different language which does not need to be spoken to be heard. The language of empathy.

The Unscripted Path

A key difference between the Palestinian way of life and the broader Western way of life is to do with forward planning. Life in the UK, major political upheavals aside, can be planned weeks, months even years ahead with at least some guarantees of certainty, allowing many of us to have a fixed idea of where we'll be at any given time. That isn't to say everything is scripted. Anything can go wrong at any time, but the Western mindset is often that it should be scripted and that unexpected divergences are unwelcome stains on the calendar-planning that makes up our daily existence. In Palestine such certainty does not exist. Coming in and out of Ramallah via Qualandia checkpoint demonstrates this all too well. The waiting time can vary between an hour and four. Sometimes people are outright turned away, herded to another checkpoint point where even there they may be refused and forced to go back. Life here is planned one day at a time and in response, the people here make do with the absence of control. It often means that a journey on the road doesn't have a set time, merely an estimate. It means work plans can alter depending on a sudden influx of other needs. It means

that on some days nothing constructive is done and on other days an entire week's worth of urgent work requires urgent completion. Work deadlines vary, tasks need finishing but often not to a specific time, because anything can happen. Life in the West Bank is akin to improvised theatre. There can be anxiety adjusting to the lack of a script, but there is also an energy which can be found that once harnessed can empower the willing through the lack of certainty. Every day offers a new opportunity for those willing to seize it, and those who are willing to be patient with the absence of timetables. Even though the Palestinian people do not have the script to their own lives, that doesn't mean they don't put forward just as much energy and passion into living. They all navigate challenges in an environment where vital supply can be cut at any time from the street sellers to the rectors to the hotel-owners. God never sends out a calendar before He makes a move, He does what He will and it is up to us to roll with it. And in response, The Palestinian people work to the best of their ability to meet the challenges. They may have no warning as to what may come their way, but they will make the time when it is needed and acclimatise when it is necessary.

The Occupation Hazard

It starts with a bang like clapping thunder. It's difficult to tell where it's coming from exactly, but it's close. The air tightens. Something feels wrong. As the noise continues the local news is updated. It is happening just down the road. The Israelis have come, and they've taken someone. They've surrounded their home and taken their vehicle, just outside the Arab Bank. Rocks have been thrown, and in return there is gunfire. It's an apt example of the balance of power and violence that is a daily occurrence for the locals. Ramallah isn't under the same level of siege as say, Gaza, but the occupation does not hesitate when it decides to come in force when it wants to. It quickly becomes advisable to stay inside. Luckily for us we are in a building facing away from the street, and therefore, with patience, we are unlikely to witness the disturbance. Those I work with are definitely fazed, but this has happened many times before. Their concerns are less for their lives and more practical measures. They are worried about getting their food and picking up their children from school. The best option is just to sit tight and wait it out. And wait it out we do. Footage comes in as journalists get up close with the military truck that has a local's car loaded onto it. Two people have been taken. It is revealed later that it is a lawyer this time. Why he has been taken is not made clear, they find no need to make a statement. Within an hour or so there is little evidence that any disturbance has occurred. Life returns to normal. The coverage continues, but it does not mention the name Israel at any point. Instead it refers to: 'The occupation' which cuts far quicker to the heart of the matter. This city, so close to Jerusalem one could barely tell where one ended and the other began if there wasn't a checkpoint, is under close scrutiny. Whether there was any point to taking a Palestinian may not even have been the point. It serves as a reminder of the balance of power. And because it has to, or nothing will get done, this incursion soon becomes just another topic of the day.

Into the Wilderness

Between Jerusalem and Jericho lies the wilderness of the Dead Sea valley. Famous for hosting a lengthy philosophical debate between the Son of God and the Devil, this stretch of desert is the lowest place on the planet. Wandering over the hills are children who move from rubble site to rubble site. The walls of the occupation are left behind in favor of older stone predating the conflict. The mountains behind Jericho, the oldest city in the world, melt into the sky itself. In the midst of the wilderness is a stone arch, beyond which is a path which

leads down into a valley. Donkeys and salesmen line the entrance as the descent begins, and all breath is taken away at the sight of St George's. Here, no word but Biblical is appropriate for the sight ahead. The monastery has been erected out of the side of a canyon wall and a river exists entirely from recent rainwater. The rest of the world seems to fade from memory as one embarks upon the desert trail which leads past the monastery and alongside the river for the next couple of hours. Caves, trickling waterfalls and wild flowers dot the landscape as one traverses stones and steps in the march towards Jericho. Goats move as specks on the sides of the mountains. If one can gain enough space to be alone on this path, then stand still and breathe. As Christians we spend our lives looking for God in a Church, in a hymn or in a prayer. All are valid in their own way. But, even if it's only once, try finding Him in the majesty of the desert path marked with crosses by the dedicated and carved by the passage of time. Try hearing Him in a river that flows only from the mercy of a falling sky alone. The road to Jericho evokes a land's history, a sense of timelessness and a driving push to reach a greater meaning. It will not bring salvation to everyone as they march beneath the beating sun or cross the waterways. But to some it may bring a clarity that cannot be found anywhere else on Earth. As one makes their way into Jericho from the desert, finding refreshment, bicycles and solace in the familiar, never forget the uncanny world where a God was tested, and the willing continue to follow in His footsteps.

An Ecumenical Matter

Lent is traditionally a time associated with deprivation and fasting but in the Holy Land it also serves as a time of unification. Every Tuesday, the local Church denominations come together in one venue, which alternates every week for an Ecumenical service. Though the first week is cancelled by the Melkites, the second is hosted by St Andrew's and is presided over by a Catholic priest. This small Episcopal church which often is half full now overflows with a diverse clergy. Pilgrims from England rub shoulders against the Catholics, the Orthodox, Melkite, Coptic and local Episcopal as a number of priests and congregation members take turns to deliver the sermons and readings. The entire service is in Arabic and doesn't have the same available translations as regular services, but the spirit of community is easy to spot. Throughout the evening the numbers continue to climb, which puts just a little more pressure onto those preparing the falafel sandwiches and tea to be consumed after the service ends. Outside a procession of blaring horns lights up the main road. Another convoy is moving through Ramallah with Palestinian flags flying from the car windows. It isn't clear what the cause of this uproar is. For once it isn't a wedding causing a commotion on the streets. Once the last hymn is sung the entire St Andrew's hall is filled and the feasting commences. Pilgrims move through the crowds and acquaint themselves with a variety of denominations, using the short time they have to get the best lay of the land. Most of the faces are unfamiliar but the stories they tell share the same traumas and frustrations those in the Episcopal community have relayed many times before here. Priests of all the various Churches face the same dilemmas. They can leave, they can be put in positions of academia or influence elsewhere and leave behind all the woes of holding their congregations together. But they choose to remain in Ramallah and provide hope for those who require it most. The weeks to follow will see the congregations attending services in the Catholic and Orthodox churches and it is likely that congregations will grow stronger during this time. Christians may be a minority in Ramallah, and Palestine as a whole, but when they come together, they're able to endure through any ordeal. Lent began with one man in isolation, and now as

we remember that, we ensure nobody is isolated here as we face the wilderness. It is a privilege to be among all those gathered here.

Outro Piece #38: *To Whomever Follows*

So not long after I got back from Palestine a couple of my older American cousins announced they would be heading out to the Holy Land. To give some context they're Texans, lovely people with prayers in their heart and all the goodwill that the Bible Belt can provide, as well as some of the problems. They expressed their enthusiasm to see every Holy sight, to walk the path of Jesus and I cannot bear them any grudges for the experience ahead of them. I do however worry it will be like many other experiences. They will take their pictures, pay their way to a Holy moment and move on to the next without taking in the surrounding context. Going to the Holy Land is an experience which can mean many different things. You can go and find nothing but religious bliss and maybe even touch the face of God, given the tone of some Americans I don't doubt they managed this on a daily basis. On the other hand, you can go and find nothing but trauma, rubble and salt rubbed into the wounds of two peoples by death, division and horror. It's easy to choose one or the other as a filter for the intoxicating and often bewildering world of the Holy Land. Yes, there is a lot of beauty in the River Jordan but if Jesus were to be baptised now, he could easily walk fifty feet and step on a landmine. Yes, Gaza is a horror story and so much of the land is under the kind of slow siege nothing else in the "civilised" world would suffer, but wallowing in misery accomplishes nothing and the people there know it. Palestinians ask you to trust in the Lord and report what you see. They ask you, through me in this case, to find the way to see both the beauty of a struggle and the price that struggle brings to its people. Between the piles of rubble, flowers grow. Between the checkpoints a living is made and children find the means to play. It is not a hopeless situation. It is not a land without love. It has so much to offer, and all I can say is that it is the only time I would ask a Christian to walk by sight and not by faith. Because you need to see it. We all need to see it. So, in conclusion, to whomever follows I offer these final words. For every sight you lay your eyes upon, look upon it three times. Look for the beauty, look for the pain, and look a third time and you will find both, intertwined and inevitable. And then, you will have read the fifth Gospel.

- Giles Allen-Bowden