

PARTNERPLAN

Muriel Pearson - Israel June 2024

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Dear Friends

I came back to Israel/Palestine at the beginning of February 2024, having been in Scotland since October 14th 2023. I had not been idle while at home: connecting with partners in Israel/Palestine, participating in online worship with the congregations of St Andrew's Jerusalem and Tiberias, writing material for Holy Week (Stations of the Cross in Time of War in Gaza) and speaking to congregations and presbyteries in Scotland. Unfortunately, I was called home again because my Dad was in his last illness, and so it wasn't until mid-April that I returned to Tiberias with very little sense of what I might be able to do, with the rumble of war in the north as well as the humanitarian catastrophe of Gaza and the West Bank.



The Scots Hotel in Tiberias has been hosting Israeli evacuees since the beginning of October 2023. They call them 'Guests from the North', which gives a real insight into the care and compassion with which they have been welcomed, maintaining respectful boundaries and enabling the staff to do the excellent job expected of them. Some have now left and made other arrangements. Living in a hotel, even a very nice hotel, is difficult. Our staff, made up of Christians, Muslims and Jews have had to cope with changing circumstances, huge uncertainty and holding together as a team in the face of the polarisation which has divided the country.

Tabeetha School, a remarkable community of Christians, Muslims and Jews continues to help young people enjoy and explore difference and not merely fear it. I love going there as chaplain and engaging with the young people and staff.



The congregation in Tiberias has always been small, but regularly boosted by pilgrims. There have been few visitors for almost a year now. We have been worshipping in a hybrid way, using Zoom to connect Jerusalem and Tiberias and people spread around the country. It works pretty well, but is more difficult for those attending in person. Nevertheless, there is a real sense of fellowship, and Zoom allows some discussion and reflection which draws disparate people together. Two weeks ago, I was Zooming on my own from Tiberias when a woman came in a few minutes late. At the end of the service

I noticed her face was running with tears. She had been very moved by our song choices and the prayers and a sense of God as love which pervaded the worship. She told me she was from Taiwan and had been in Jerusalem for 2 months studying the Hebrew Bible with a Messianic rabbi. She had become completely overwhelmed however, and felt she had to get on a bus and get away, without knowing where she was going. She felt she was suffocating, as someone who was heartbroken about the suffering of the Palestinians in Gaza; among people who seemed not to see Palestinians as human at all.

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As she walked from the bus station to downtown Tiberias she helped a blind man cross at the traffic lights. He was there at the next lights and she helped him again. He was American. 'Where are you going?' she asked. 'St Andrew's Church,' the man replied. 'There's a service there at 10am.' 'I'll take you there,' the woman, Joyce, said.



They didn't find the church, and so Andrew, the blind man turned back. Joyce continued walking along the front by the Sea of Galilee. Then she looked up and saw the sign for the church.

That afternoon I went looking for the blind man, as he had been looking for us. I was able to take Andrew and Joyce to visit Capernaum and the Mount of the Beatitudes later in the week.

Joyce had no idea that 20% of the population of Israel is Arab or Palestinian, or that 2% of the population are Christian and trace their roots back to the early church. She flew home to Taiwan encouraged, fired up to learn more about Palestinians and the Nakba and with a story to tell about how a blind man led her to church.

Meaningful encounters like this happen all the time.

I have been keeping in touch with partners in the north such as Sindyanna of the Galilee <https://www.sindyanna.com/> and House of Grace in Haifa. <https://house-grace.org/> Like the staff at the hotel, they are reluctant to talk too openly about the situation and what they fear might happen. There are still Arab Israelis in detention for liking the wrong Facebook post. People are tired and there is no end in prospect.



But people adapt. I've joined an online group using nonviolent communication to empathise and really listen to one another, in Arabic, Hebrew and English. It is challenging when someone says something you profoundly disagree with not to try to argue, but NVC has you really listen to the unmet needs of the speaker and try to feed them back. In my first session a young mother from Gaza, who had sought out internet connection to join us, spoke of how she'd moved her 4 children 4 times and how when they went to bed she always wondered

if that night would be their last. An older Israeli woman shared her deep frustration that Israel is accused of crimes against humanity but Hamas seems to her to be let off. That was a harder comment to find compassion for.

I have been very moved by the work of Maoz Inon, whose parents were killed on October 7th, and his friend Aziz Abu Sarah. They are both entrepreneurs in the tourism industry, one Jewish Israeli one Palestinian Israeli, and have turned their business acumen to peacebuilding. You can watch their recent TED talk here:

https://www.ted.com/talks/aziz_abu_sarah_and_maoz_inon_a_palestinian_and_an_israeli_face_to_face?delay=2m&subtitle=en

Maoz and Aziz met Pope Francis recently. The peace movement in Israel is very small and marginal, although there are growing demonstrations against the government and calls to negotiate hostage releases. Maoz and Aziz and others are amplifying the call for peace with justice. Organisations like Rabbis for Human Rights are highlighting the increasing settler violence and impunity when property and people are attacked on the West Bank. Partners such as Tent of Nations <https://tentofnations.com/> are reporting increased encroachment on their land. A new caravan for settlers is right against their fence and a road for settlers is being bulldozed across The Nassar family's land.

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It has not been possible to visit even Bethlehem in recent months because of insurance costs, but things are in a bad way, especially in Jenin in the north of the West Bank where the IDF has been destroying houses, shooting on sight and detaining without charge. Whole Bedouin villages have been displaced near Hebron. Many are unemployed, not able to farm or tend their flocks. Tourism has collapsed. One young person, Layan Nasir, a member of the Anglican church in Birzeit, is being held in prison in Israel and so cannot be visited by family or even her lawyer. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/13/shhh-or-ill-shoot-you-family-of-jailed-christian-woman-tell-of-israeli-raid> The most recent statistics are that there are 3,660 Palestinians currently held without charge in Israeli jails. What we can do seems insignificant. But you might want to write to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office about this one detainee. And pray for all.

Meanwhile I have two tasks which seem out of step with the times. One is to rejuvenate the content of the Visitors Centre and Museum at the Hotel. If you were ever a volunteer here or if you have ancestors who pioneered at the Scots Hospital or in the schools I'd love to hear from you. The second is to write a business plan to turn the wilderness around the church building here into a lush and shady garden which attracts pilgrims to pray and reflect and assimilate all they've seen and heard, listening for God's voice. I have been blessed with knowledgeable companions and hope there will be more news about this as the business plan develops. These projects seem out of step, but they are important commitments in both looking back at the Church of Scotland's legacy and looking forward to a role in holding a place for peace with justice in this divided and hurting land.

My prayer remains the Christian Aid prayer:
Pray not for Arab or Jew, for Palestinian or Israeli,
but pray rather for ourselves,
that we might not divide them in our prayers
but keep them both together in our hearts.
When races fight
Peace be amongst us
When neighbours argue
Peace be amongst us
When nations disagree
Peace be amongst us
Where people struggle for justice
Let justice prevail
Where Christ's disciples follow
Let peace be our way Amen.

Prayer points:

1. Pray for all those involved in brokering a cease fire, and pray a cease fire comes soon.
2. Pray for all who have been injured or bereaved or made homeless by the war.
3. Pray for release of hostages and prisoners of war.
4. Pray for all who seek to remain 'humankind' when there is fear and generalisation about people who are different.
5. Pray for peacebuilders like Moaz Inon and Aziz Abu Sarah and prophets like Rev Munther Isaac.
6. Pray for all staff in our hotels and school and the students and their parents. Although our influence is small we have about 260 people whose livelihoods are with us and whose families depend on us.
7. Pray that I and Stewart, my colleague, will be able to prioritise our work and feel we are making a real contribution.

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