

PARTNERPLAN

John McCulloch - Israel May 2019

c/o St Andrew's Scottish Guest House
PO Box 8619
1 David Remez Street
Jerusalem 91086, Israel

Inhabiting the Shadows.



Torn from home

(National Holocaust Day - Thursday 2nd of May 2019)
Jerusalem

Rev Dr John McCulloch

'My yesterday's walk with me. They keep step, they are grey faces that peer over my shoulder'. (William Golding)

'These fragments I have shored against my ruins'. (T.S. Eliot)

Where is Mother? (Halina Olomoucki)



I awoke on the 2nd of May 2019 to an unseasonably dark sky for this time of year, which weighed heavily on the horizon. Some hours earlier, a sand-storm from the Judean desert had blown dust into the clouds, which had then turned to rain, covering everything in a thin layer of ochre-coloured raindrops.

Jerusalem was eerily quiet as I headed to St Andrews Scots Memorial Church of Scotland, and climbed the church tower to lower the Saltire to half mast, in remembrance of all who had suffered the horrors of the Holocaust. The Church is situated in West Jerusalem, so our immediate neighbours are mostly Jewish and Israeli, in addition to some 1948 Palestinian citizens of Israel, who have always lived here.

Later that day I was to co-lead a reflective commemoration of the Shoah with some Jewish friends and other members of the public in St Andrew's church, and so I spent part of the morning in silence, reflecting on one of the darkest episodes in human history, trying to order my thoughts and put to one side the other pressing demands of the day.

As I sat in the church that grey morning, I recalled how some years ago I had walked through Auschwitz on a cold winter's day. I had stayed the night before in a room above a jeweler's in the old part of the town of Osweicim (the Polish name for Auschwitz).

The next morning, I remember heading out along the river to the Auschwitz and Berkenau camps. I spent the morning walking silently through the abandoned prison shacks and gas chambers..., the

PARTNER PLAN

site of possibly the worst genocide to have happened on European soil, a stark reminder of the inhumanity and evil which fellow human beings can inflict on the other....

I felt a mixture of nausea, profound sadness and horror, struggling with the theodicy questions of old, of where was God in all of this...

As I walked in silence, I wanted to honour the memory of all who had suffered there. I thought that our only response could be one of committing ourselves to standing up against injustice, wherever we see it, as the Holocaust was only possible because many normal human beings obeyed orders without questioning, sometimes out of fear, sometimes out of ignorance, and sometimes out of hatred, which usually comes about through the dehumanization of the other.

It is true that more crimes have been committed in the name of obedience than in the name of rebellion. As RD Laing has shown, human agency is capable of committing the most horrendous of crimes when capitulating without question to orders; especially when they come from above.

Our duty as human beings must always be to question, to not genuflect to the systems that seek to coerce our wills and close us off to the suffering of others.

As these memories were going through my mind here in Jerusalem, on this day of commemoration and lament; a message flashed up on my phone. It was from the Bedouin village of Um Al Khair, stating that the Israeli Civil authorities, flanked and protected by IDF soldiers, had demolished several structures in their village. Here I was sitting in St Andrew's church in Jerusalem on National Holocaust Day, preparing myself for the afternoon, when I heard of the tragedy facing my Bedouin friends of Um Al Khair.

The community of Um Al Khair is a ramshackle conurbation of make-shift shanty dwellings, on the other side of the perimeter fence that separated it from illegal Israeli settlement of Karmel. You can see in the picture below the settlement houses in the background, and the tents where the Bedouins live in the foreground.



Um Al Khair make-shift habitations in the foreground, Karmel settlement behind.

Um Al Khair has already lived through several nightmares, as Israeli forces have razed homes to the ground, and demolished a community centre and children's playground.

Please see:

<https://palsolidarity.org/2016/04/house-demolitions-in-um-al-khair-leaving-childrenhomeless/>

As soon as I heard of what was happening, I got in the car and drove down through the South Hebron Hills to be in solidarity with my friends of Um Al Khair, aware that I needed to be back in Jerusalem a few hours later to host and welcome our Jewish friends to the church. As I drove along route 60 through the West Bank, a landscape scarred by the structural injustice of occupation with illegal settlements on practically every fertile hilltop; my heart was hurting for my Bedouin friends. At the same time, my mind was thinking about how some hours later I would be listening to the children and grandchildren of those who had perished in the death camps of Auschwitz-Birkenau, of Bergen-Belsen, of Buchenwald, Chelmno and Dachau.

PARTNER PLAN

By the time I arrived at Um Al Khair the army had left, and all that remained were the tyre tracks of military vehicles in the dusty wasteland. Some of the young children rushed towards me to greet me 'marhaba!' they said smiling, and then asked me when I would bring my children back to play with them. I said that we would be back soon, after Ramadan had ended, and that my children always loved coming here.

As I sat in one of their tents and drank sweet mint tea, I heard of how the Israeli military had arrived earlier that morning. Although this is a depressingly regular occurrence for the inhabitants of this village, no matter how often it happens, it is always a terrifying experience for all, and especially for the young children, as they watch their livelihoods being crushed under bulldozers, some of their family hurt in scuffles as they are arrested and taken away.



As I sat there and listened once again to the stories of demolition and violence; I knew that a few hours later I would be back in Jerusalem, listening to stories of suffering on the other side of the wall. It felt as if I was inhabiting a world of parallel shadows, that existed within the sphere of each other, and yet that remained distanced and occluded from each other.

Some writers use the memory of Holocaust to explain and sometimes even to justify the injustice of military Occupation in the Palestinian Territories. Such historiographical sleight of hand needs to be seen for what it is: a deeply offensive affront for the memories of those who died in the Nazi death camps; whilst showing a callous disregard for the suffering of Palestinians today. As Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote:

PARTNERPLAN

A person can only be born in one place. However, he may die several times elsewhere: in the exiles and prisons and in a homeland transformed by the occupation and oppression into a nightmare.

I am aware that in writing about my Jewish and Bedouin friends at the same time, some may be critical and accuse me of presenting this asymmetrical conflict as one with two equal sides. Nothing could be further from the truth. I write about both these communities in this letter because I was with both these communities on the same day.

Being a minister in the Church of Scotland here means that you are invited into many different spheres. There are times when I speak with politicians and Church Patriarchs, other times I am in Gaza with those who have lost everything in the conflict, other times I speak with IDF soldiers and Israeli settlers; other times with rabbis and displaced Bedouins. Behind each story is a human being, made in the image of God. Encountering individuals from every corner of this tragic and intractable conflict, is both a huge privilege and responsibility. But the biggest responsibility is to never dehumanise the other, but to always hear listen to their story; not in terms of justifying or normalising the tragedy here; but to recognise our common humanity, and to strive for an end to injustice and to the systems that perpetuate it; both here in this land and across our divided and unjust world.

Injustice happens because violence becomes normalised. Inequality becomes normalised, and individuals get caught-up in the structures that ensure that it continues this way. And most of the time, we do not question.

It was Isaac Newton who said 'We build too many walls, and not enough bridges', and father Henri Nouwen who wrote that 'One of the main tasks of theology is to find words that do not divide but unite, that do not create conflict but unity, that do not hurt but heal'. The Jewish political theorist (and erstwhile lover of Martin Heidegger) Hannah Arendt, once said that 'Forgiveness is the key to action and freedom'. But forgiveness can only come when justice is done.

On Holocaust Memorial Day, I inhabited a space of shadows. I lamented the memories of those who had been so cruelly sent to the gas chambers in the 1940s. I lamented all those who are victims of violence and war in our world today, in Yemen, in South Sudan, in Gaza, in Ukraine and so many other places around the world. And I lamented my Bedouin friends who were once again facing losing the little they have; which felt even more poignant, given that it was being carried out by Israeli military forces on National Holocaust Day.

In this context it is easy to lose hope, and I do not judge any one who does. But we must always strive to be renewed by love and hope, like the protagonist Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who after a conflicted life, finds hope and reconciliation with the other:

They wanted to speak, but could not; tears stood in their eyes. They were both pale and thin; but those sick pale faces were bright with the dawn of a new future, of a full resurrection into a new life. They were renewed by love; the heart of each held infinite sources of life for the heart of the other.

John McCulloch