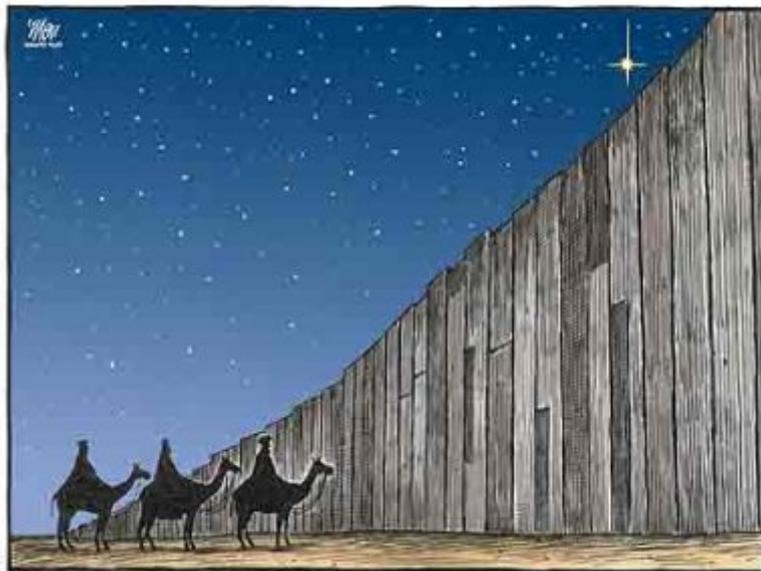


PARTNERPLAN

# John McCulloch - Israel January 2020

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## Epiphany from Behind the Wall John McCulloch



*Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty (Thomas Merton)*

During this season of Epiphany, as we are invited to reflect on how God is revealed and manifested in our world, it can be easy to fall into despair. At a time when the dividing walls of fear, exclusion and injustice across our fragile world seem ever more intractable, it is difficult to believe that God's kingdom can be established in such a world as ours.

Holding on to hope, when society at large is walking away from church, can be a struggle. These challenges are felt as acutely here in the place of Christ's birth, as they are back home in Scotland. The Christian communities across the Middle East, and within Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories are dwindling. Here in Bethlehem and its sister towns of Beit Sahour and Beit Jala, where in the 1960s Christians represented 86% of the local population, it has fallen to around 12%. Many Christians have taken the difficult decision to leave family and friends behind, and to start anew in a place where they can live freely and in dignity. The military occupation is now in its 53rd year, and is becoming more entrenched. The situation in Gaza, as we all know, is even worse. Christians number around 800, from a total population of 2M, and are trapped in a situation of chronic privation and suffering.

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It is in this context, that The Church of Scotland here in the Holy Land tries to contribute in some small way, standing with those who are working for peace and justice across the deeply entrenched socio-political and religious divides.

Although our contribution here is small, and Christians constitute a minority; the message of Epiphany reminds us that God-incarnate was made known to the world in vulnerability. The wise men who came from the east did not come to a military garrison or well-guarded palace, but to a stable. It is easy to gloss over this, given the familiarity of the story; but this is a transformational and 'epiphanic' moment in the course of human history. It invites us to imagine a different kind of world, where wealth, power, status and privilege are not accepted as normative, in a world where so many have nothing.

The apostle Paul understood how God's kingdom is born in weakness. Following his conversion on the road to Damascus, he gave up power, position and a belief in violence as the solution; to become a 'prisoner of Christ'. He had to be blinded to an old way of thinking, so that he could see the world through different eyes. His epistles, which as we know, were the earliest new testament writings (predating the gospels), understood how the *evangel* of God's kingdom subverted power, wealth and worldly status through weakness:

*For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. But God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. (1 Corinthians 1:25, 27-28)*

Here in the place of Christ's birth, it is at times difficult to hold on to hope, both in terms of the decline of the church, and the political situation here and across the Middle East region as a whole.

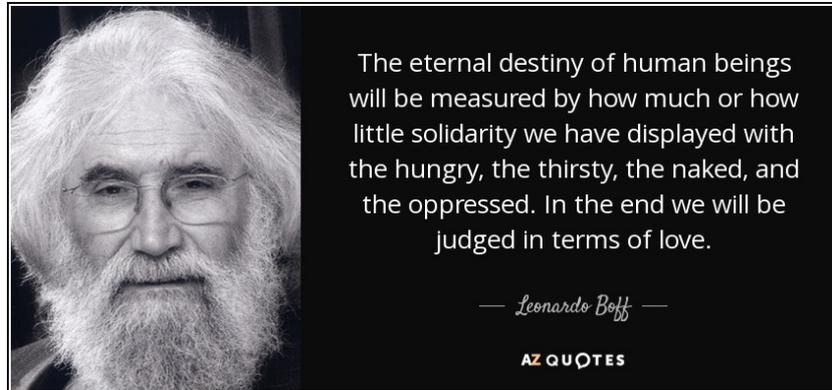
Although the church here is small, and the structural injustice of this land is deepening from year to year, it is important to remember that God's kingdom, insignificant in the eyes of many (leaven in bread, mustard seeds), is still at work.

There are signs of hope here, in the very place where God took on human flesh, through those who are working to bring light through the cracks in the wall, like **Wi'am**, which offers a space for conflict transformation, restorative justice, and mediation (<http://www.alaslah.org/>). The Nassar family at **The Tent of Nations**, who continue to plant trees and cultivate their land whilst surrounded by encroaching settlements (<http://www.tentofnations.org/>). The **Al-Shurooq School for the Blind** ([www.nsfvh.org](http://www.nsfvh.org/)), helping some of the most vulnerable children from Bethlehem and beyond. Other Church of Scotland Partners and friends working in the Bethlehem area include the **YMCA Beit Sahour**, with its Rehabilitation Centre, advocacy and community projects (<https://ej-ymca.org/>). The **J.A.I.**, Joint Advocacy Initiative, which advocates for peace and justice within the occupied territories ([www.jai-pal.org/en/](http://www.jai-pal.org/en/)); **Bethlehem Bible College**, which trains and equips local Palestinian Christian leaders (<https://bethbc.edu/>). **L'Arche Bethlehem** (<https://larchebethlehem.org/>), which continues with Jean Vanier's vision to offer care and dignity for those marginalised by society because of disability; and to embody what Henri Nouwen exemplified when (in his own words): *I moved from Harvard to L'Arche, from the best and the brightest, wanting to rule the world, to men and women who had few or no words and were considered, at best, marginal to the needs of our society.*

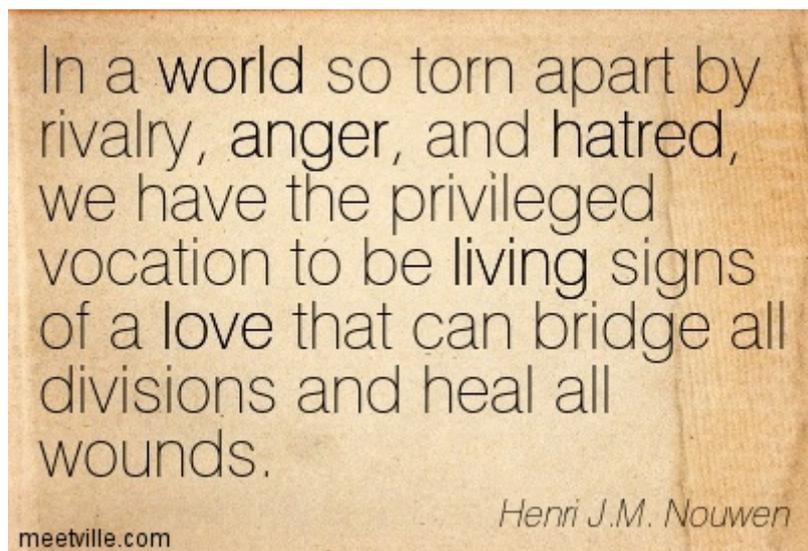
This is just a brief conspectus of some of the Church of Scotland partners and friends here in Bethlehem. They are all part of God's upside-down kingdom, where hope, renewal and justice for our suffering world is not handed down through political top-down structures, but is birthed in communities of compassion, who like our saviour, embody healing and love.

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We are called to be a church of Matthew 5 & 25, which follows in the footsteps of Christ, standing with all who are marginalised, occupied, crushed, put-down and considered weak and insignificant, in a world intoxicated by cravings for power, wealth and success.



May we be such communities, both here in the Holy Land and back in Scotland. May we not give up, but complete the task we have been entrusted with. Martin Luther King Jr once said that hope was defined 'as the final refusal to give up'. May we not lose hope, for *God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.*



**John McCulloch**