

PARTNERPLAN

Kate McDonald - Israel October 2017

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Dear Friends,

It has now been several months since I was with you in Scotland. How the time has flown! I wish first of all to thank each and every one of you for the warm welcome you gave me when I was home on deputation. I was humbled by the hospitality you offered, the effort you put into arranging a full and diverse schedule of speaking engagements, and the encouragement and prayers I continue to receive. It was such a blessing to be able to share food and fellowship with you and to finally have faces to put to the names of so many of you who have corresponded with me over the past two years that I have been Mission Partner here in Tiberias. I also found it touching to see my partner letters hanging in your churches. I am a dreadful correspondent, but resolve to be better! For those who wish to read slightly more frequent reflections from me, please do have a look at my blog: revisedontology.com.



Mt Bental

Though I felt very much at home in Scotland, returning to Israel/Palestine at the end of June also felt like a return home. And by comparison with deputation, life in those first few weeks was quite quiet! During the summer months, the heat is so intense, life slows down considerably. Tiberias was in the midst of a heatwave in those first days, with temperatures nearly hitting 50C, so it was a bit of a shock after the coolness of Scotland.

One of the first bits of 'work' waiting for me when I got back was supervising the hard landscaping of the side garden at the Scots Hotel. When the hotel was being built nearly 15 years ago, graves were discovered on one

of the plots, and as it is not permitted here to disturb graves, work had to stop, and the ground has lain derelict ever since. However, over the past months, we have decided to develop the land into a garden (it used to be an orchard, so really it's returning it to its original use), including a labyrinth. Though we were not digging into the earth, merely adding boulders and soil to it to level the slope, the work nonetheless had to be supervised by me, the General Manager of the hotel, a representative from the antiquities department, and a member of the religious authorities. For two days in scorching heat, we sat and watched the garden take shape. But both the antiquities and religious representatives were grateful that the Church was taking it seriously and treating the area with respect. It was a reminder that sometimes simply being present can be a significant witness.

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I also had visitors throughout the summer staying in my guest apartment. Most of them were volunteers with the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel, but I also had a couple of families of clergy from Scotland and New Zealand visiting. I always enjoy meeting new people and hearing what brings them to this land and how they are experiencing life here.



Church renovation

The most significant change at the moment has been the start of the renovation of the church building. The contractors moved on site on 1 August, and thus far, we are on track to be back in time for our Christmas celebrations. It has been exciting to see the building slowly transformed! During the renovation, we have been meeting for worship in one of the meeting rooms at the Scots Hotel. It's not an ideal arrangement, but the congregation is patient and the staff have been incredibly helpful in setting the room each Sunday. The change of location means that we are getting fewer visitors because folks aren't just 'passing by', but we all know that when we are back in the building, we will

have better resources to be able to continue our ministry of hospitality to the local community and those from further afield.

Just as work was starting to pick up again — everyone was back from summer holidays, school was starting, pilgrim groups were returning — the Jewish holidays started. First was Rosh Hashanah, New Year, which I spent with a member of the congregation on her kibbutz. We



Rosh Hashanah

watched the sun set on the old year over Mt Tabor; it was incredibly moving reflecting on all that has happened in the past months in life, in ministry, in this land, and in the world. After, we had a lovely meal with other members of the kibbutz, sitting outside in the cool evening, enjoying entertainment provided by the children. This weekend (29th & 30th September) is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. There is no driving on the main roads, and much of the country falls silent as observant Jews spend the day fasting. I remember thinking last year it was like an entire country observing the Great Silence of a monastery, again quite a powerful experience.

Now that the weather is starting to cool (to the mid-30s!), I'm trying to get out and about to visit some of our partner organisations and also to explore the northern part of Israel more. I have a visiting minister from Scotland staying for a few weeks on study leave, and he and I traveled to the Syrian border last week. On Mt Bernal, there was a signpost that showed we were almost exactly at the midway point between Tiberias and Damascus, and once or twice, we could hear the rumble of fighting in the distance. We spoke to a couple of United Nations workers there as well. Their job is to keep watch over the demilitarised zone, where there is often activity from the rebel forces in Syria. Just the next day, in that area, an allegedly Iranian-made surveillance drone belonging to Hezbollah and heading towards the Golan Heights was shot down by an Israeli missile. It's a

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sobering reminder that chaos and violence is literally right next door, and it breaks my heart to think of all the suffering.

I have tried since deputation to be more intentional about taking a day off each week, and while there are some weeks when a morning by the pool with a novel is just what I need, other weeks I need a bit more activity, so I've started hiking parts of the Israel National Trail, which stretches from the green and forested northern border with Lebanon down through the Negev to Eilat on the Red Sea. When so much of the land is now dry and barren and desperate for rain, it does my soul good to get up early and walk along (and sometimes through!) the northern streams, hearing the sound of water rushing over the stones.

It is one of the strange paradoxes of living here, that one day I can be out enjoying the beauty of the land, walking the paths near the source of the Jordan River, and the next, hear evidence of death and destruction. One morning I bear witness to the laments of those who experience discrimination, and that afternoon, stand in the midst of joyful celebrations of others who feel they have found security after millennia of persecution. A paradox, yes. But also a privilege.

And through it all, I remember that this is also the land where Christ walked, where members of the Body of Christ still walk, amongst all the complexity, seeking peace, justice, mercy and truth.

Friends, thank you once again for your prayers and the many kindnesses you have shown me. In the coming weeks, I would be grateful for your specific prayers for the following:

- For me, as I continue to seek God's image in all whom I meet and recognise them as the beloved children of the God I serve.
- For the congregation of St Andrew's Tiberias, as we move through this time of transition while the church is being renovated and explore together how best to embody a ministry of hospitality to the local community.
- For our Jewish neighbours during these Days of Awe and the upcoming celebrations of Sukkot.
- For the olive farmers preparing for the harvest, especially those in the West Bank who face daily struggles to access their land because of settlements, military roads, and road blocks.
- For all who live in Gaza, as they face increasing cuts to power and diminishing resources.
- For all people of this land who desperately long for peace.

As you pray for me, please be assured that you are also in my prayers. May you know God's presence and guidance in your lives.

Every blessing,

Kate



Israel trail early morning