

PARTNERPLAN

Stewart Gillan – Israel December 2023

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Dear Friends



St Andrew's Jerusalem, our doors open, Saturday 2 December 2023

I write from Jerusalem, giving thanks for your prayers for journeying mercies, and for the life and work of St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias. It feels good to be back, if only until 27 December, when I return to my family for the balance of the Christmas season. A season we observe not in celebration this year, but in lament and hope with Christians in Palestine, Israel and Gaza.

The door of the Guesthouse – now trading as St Andrew's Scots House Hotel – is open, no small thing under the circumstances. It is a tribute to Lilian, our manager, and those members of staff still able to come to work. From Suha, our sou chef, I learn that they are coming in from Beit Hanina, Safafa and Isawiya, and

have their own cars. One member is able to walk it from the Old City. The majority however live on the West Bank, from which they have not been allowed to travel since the war began. All are having great difficulty making ends meet.

A conversation some weeks ago between the manager and Orly, a Jerusalem based news producer for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, led to a number of Australian journalists staying at the Guesthouse, and the reopening of the Hotel. It has been good to meet them, share meals together, and hear their stories of what it is like to be covering this war. Some have been here since the day after 7 October and seen grisly sights in the immediate aftermath of the Hamas attacks; others have arrived only recently, spelling their colleagues. It is fair to say that getting the story out day by day requires of them a shrewd sense of what is possible, a well-honed suspicion of all official lines, and robust stamina of body and mind.

That said, they love our roof, which offers them a perfect view of the Old City for live crosses. One of their stalwarts, global affairs editor John Lyons, reports he is taking a harder line against the bombing of Gaza since its resumption, wondering out loud in front of the camera how long the United States, Israel's closest and most powerful ally, will be able to sustain its current level of support. A question that takes the measure of leaders on all fronts. Wherein does true human security consist, we ask, as we continue to pray for a ceasefire and a negotiated end to this war.

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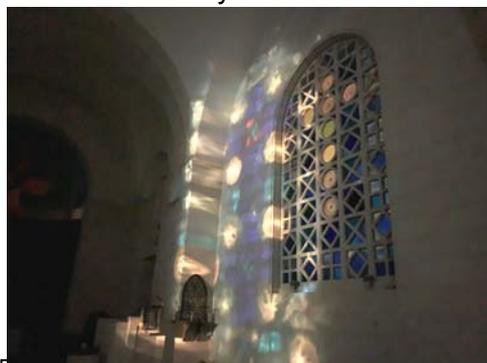
Asking for a tour of the Church, the journalists – Riley, West and Adam at that point – were struck by the memorials to Scottish Regiments that fought in WW1, and our commemoration of the war dead. This led to stories of their attendance at the burials of a large number of Israeli soldiers who have died in the current war, and to interviews they have done with Palestinian survivors of the Israeli bombing of Gaza who have lost loved ones. And between stories, many silences as we made our way around.

On Sunday, 3 December, the first in Advent, I met with three members of Rabbis for Human Rights for a different tour of the Church. Led by Anton Goodman, their director for partnerships, we considered their request that St Andrew's host an interfaith event around the theme of light shining in darkness, planned to bring together representatives of the three Abrahamic faiths for prayer and a lighting of lights. Usual issues like seating capacity, sound, heating, Kosher and Halaal hospitality, required answers but were not difficult in themselves. The key question was and is: who will be able and willing to attend of the three faiths, given how things sit. Celebration is not on for any of us, even in our own houses. Is any coming together possible? We have agreed to proceed with an event sombre in tone, with prayers, a lighting of lights, and music led by Jewish, Christian and Muslim participants. Sabeel has come in, and Praying Together in Jerusalem, which has been bringing all three faiths together weekly since the war began. Please be in prayer for the prayers (!) if you are reading this before 12 December. And afterwards too, come to think.



Thinking back to my recent time out in Scotland, I give thanks for the opportunity to worship with Greenbank Parish Church Edinburgh on 19 November and St Giles' Cathedral on the 26th, and bring the message. So many members of the congregations related stories of their visits to the Holy Land over the years and involvement in the work of justice and peace. At Greenbank, welcomed by the Rev Julia Cato, I focussed on the Apostle Paul's call to put on breastplate of faith and love, and the helmet of hope in salvation. It a time of war it is a riveting call, giving rise to the question: what armour is love? We are being called to put on Christ, we agreed, and get stuck in. In Giles', welcomed by the Rev Sigrid Martens, we heard in Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats a call to repentance, in tuner with the Call for Repentance that issued by

Palestinian Christians to western Churches and theologians in October, after the war began. A call to reject antisemitism and anti-Palestinianism with equal vigour. A call that has since been symbolised by the image of baby Jesus amid the rubble and broken stones of Gaza, a nativity scene created by the Rev Dr Munther Isaac and his congregation at Christ Church, Bethlehem.



Light shining in darkness, Christmas Eve 2022, St Andrew's Scots Memorial Church Jerusalem

This Christmas we greet the birth of the Christ Child as one who comes to us in extremis – naked, exposed, hungry, cold, displaced. Our song of praise is one of love expressed in sacrifice, the presentation of our bodies and souls as a living sacrifice, our reasonable service of worship as the Apostle Paul has it, the primal doxology of our faith.

Stewart