

PARTNERPLAN

John McCulloch - Israel April 2021

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The point that prophetic imagination must ponder is that there is no freedom of God without the politics of justice and compassion, and there is no politics of justice and compassion without a religion of the freedom of God.

(Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*)

As I parked-up at the Erez crossing (the only civilian entry point into Gaza) it was much quieter than usual. With Covid, Gaza has remained all but closed to the outside world, except for the occasional humanitarian worker or diplomat being allowed to enter. I had not been back there in over a year, and as I walked through the long, caged corridor between Israeli and Hamas security (see picture below), I wondered what the situation would be like on the other side.

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When I reached Hamas security, they asked me a few questions (probably more out of boredom than anything else, as I was the only person crossing) and welcomed me to Gaza with the customary *ahla-wa-sahla*. A few minutes later I was met by my driver, from the Near East Council of Churches (the main Church of Scotland Partner based in Gaza City). Traffic was quieter than usual, and as we wove between street vendors, vegetable stalls and horse drawn carts, a pervasive sense of hopelessness hung heavy in the air.



According to the World Food Programme, around 70% of Gaza's population suffers from food insecurity, although with the effects of Covid contributing to the further collapse of an already imploding economy, some are saying that the figure is approaching 80%. With a high population density (2M living in a stretch of land roughly the size of the Isle of Jura), and chronic poverty with all of the associated psycho-social ramifications, I have never seen Gaza so desperate. According to UNICEF, only 4% of Gaza's water is fit for human consumption. With Covid now spreading amidst an already impoverished community and with hospitals struggling to cope (there are only around 120 to 150 ventilators for the entire population), they feel abandoned by the world, their own leaders and by hope itself. The only silver lining in terms of Covid is Gaza has a very young population (half are children), and therefore less vulnerable to its effects.

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Any faint glimmer of hope is to be found in the people those who are doing all they can to help the most vulnerable, trapped in this narrow strip between the Mediterranean Sea, Egypt and Israel. The Church of Scotland's partners on the ground are doing all they can to bring healthcare, vocational training, psycho-social support to those traumatised by conflict and crushing poverty (if you are a child of 12 you will have lived through three wars: (2008-09) Operation Cast Lead, (2012) Operation Pillar of Defence, (2014) Operation Protective Edge).



In this context, our friends at the NECC, Arab Ahli Hospital, the women's cooperative in the Nusairat Refugee Camp south of Gaza City, and many others, are working hard to alleviate suffering and provide hope for a better future against all odds.

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I won't detail here all the valuable work that each of our partners do, as I have covered this in previous reports on Gaza (all of which are available on the World Mission webpage of the Church of Scotland).

It was wonderful to spend time with Bishop Alexius (Greek Orthodox) and Father Gabriel (a Catholic priest from Argentina) and hear how they are helping the small Christian community to remain in Gaza. Many of the Christians have left, and it is so important for the dwindling community that is left to remain in Gaza and continue to be a witness for hope and peace amidst the worsening situation.

During this season of Easter, we are boldly reminded that the the kingdoms of injustice of this world will only be defeated by a re-ordering of our broken world, coupled with the power of forgiveness and outpoured sacrificial love, which seeks for the redemption and healing of both oppressor and oppressed.

The kingdom of God stands in opposition to the kingdoms of this world whose systems of economic injustice and normalized violence, crush the poor and the oppressed. But most of our world is living in Holy Saturday, where all hope has died.

Alan E Lewis in his book *Between Cross & Resurrection: Theology of Holy Saturday* writes:

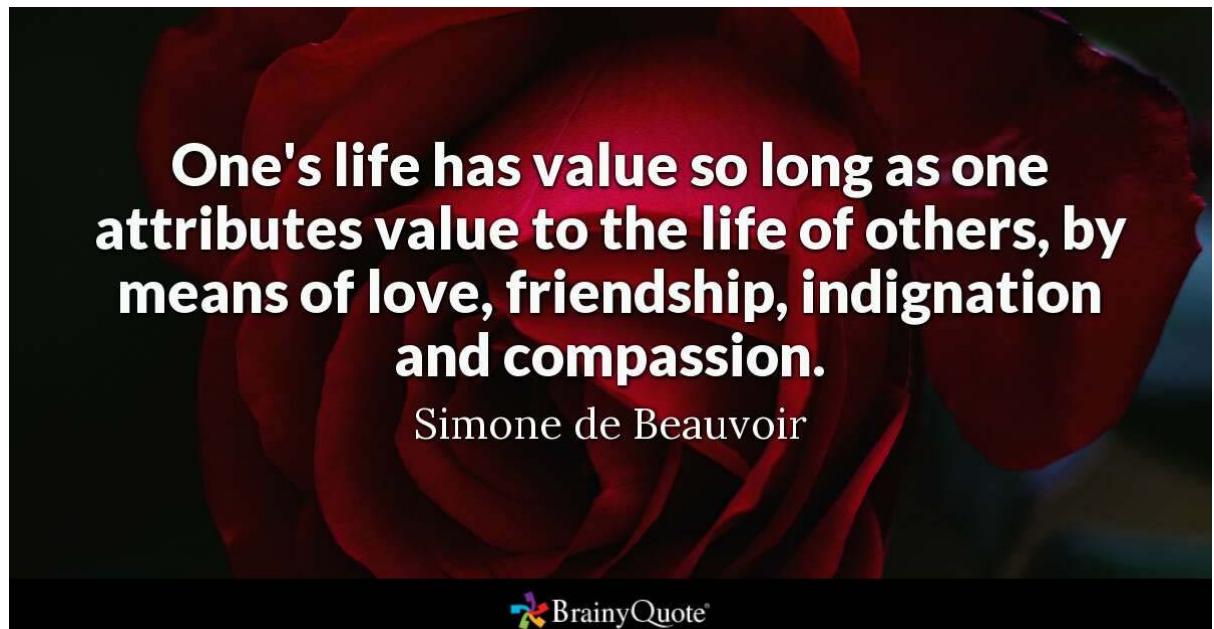
What, in fact, could be more "political", a more complete and basal challenge to the kingdoms of this world, to its generals and its lords, both to those who hold power and to those who would seize it, than one who says his kingdom is not of this world, and yet prays that the kingdom of his Father will come and his will will be done on earth. This is an aspiration for the world more revolutionary, a disturbance of the status quo more seismic, an allegiance more disloyal, a menace more intimidating, than any program which simply meets force with force and matches loveless injustice with loveless vengeance. Here is a whole new ordering of human life, as intolerable to insurrectionists as to oppressors. It promises that forgiveness, freedom, love, self-negation, in all their feeble ineffectiveness, will prove more powerful and creative than every system and every counter-system, which subdivides the human race into rich and poor, comrades and enemies, insiders and outsiders, allies and adversaries.

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Conclusion

I would like to conclude this letter by saying thank you to individuals and congregations across the Church of Scotland for your generosity. During this trip, I was able to take much needed donations for the Church of Scotland Partners in Gaza. I want to express a special thanks to Greenside Parish Church Edinburgh, for their incredible generosity (again!) towards the Christian hospital in Gaza City, which could not have come at a more needed time. They asked me to pass on their profound thanks.

Thank you all for your continued prayers and support for the mission of the Church of Scotland in the Holy Land.



**One's life has value so long as one
attributes value to the life of others, by
means of love, friendship, indignation
and compassion.**

Simone de Beauvoir

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John McCulloch