PARTNERPLAN

Stewart Gillan – Israel
August 2025

St Andrew's Jerusalem
PO Box 8619
Jerusalem 91086, Israel
SGillan@churchofscotland.org.uk

Words are Not What Come First
Stewart Gillan, Mission Partner Jerusalem

Writing for worship in Jerusalem – prayers, sermons, reflections, time with children when children are present – was already a stern discipline before the Hamas attacks of 7 October 2023. It has become a weekly reckoning. The situation, and the vicarious stress that comes with it for preachers and leaders in prayer, exerts constant pressure. It will break your head and your heart if it you let it, in ways that can be good or bad. That is, if our calling is to further the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ, so to participate in the pathos and salvation of God, we are going to be and feel broken to some extent most of the time. It is good, however, not to allow the breaking to happen beyond one's capacity to retrieve oneself, or to open oneself in extremis to the Holy Spirit for retrieval, and/or to cultivate a constructive friendship with a trusted colleague. A necessary collaboration all round. It is not unlike writing for worship for in Scotland, then, or anywhere else.

Our congregation at St Andrew's Scots Memorial Church Jerusalem is small these days, with no pilgrims and few visitors to swell its numbers. Yet it remains a diverse fellowship in challenging ways. Our people are drawn from both sides of the wall, the separation barrier between Israel and the West Bank begun in 2002 that controls the movement and (un)employment reality of Palestinians, a defining fact and major symbol of occupation. One of our elders is the sister of Daoud Nasser, leader of the Tent of Nations farm; two others have in their extended families people who were called up to serve in the IDF after 7 October. Our online community, linked to the in-person services by zoom, is located primarily in Israel, north and south.

Our services conclude with the celebration of the Sacrament of Holy Communion most weeks. When in-person services are not possible, our online liturgy has an extended time of sharing after the hymn that follows the sermon/reflection, which we call 'Hearing the Word together.' Over many months trust has been established to a surprising degree, and it has become a rich time of personal storytelling in which fears are voiced, understandings tested, answers to questions sought, and faith shored up. It is not a post mortem on the sermon, which is seldom mentioned, but can interact with the biblical readings in ways that tell you that your direction of travel was at least in play. It happens during in-person services as well, though for a shorter length of time.

Rereading that summary, it seems too smooth. Some examples might give you a better sense of things, one concerning a sermon, the second a prayer.

With regard to the reading of biblical texts and writing of sermons, I seek to strike a balance between suspicion and affirmation, or trust, in that order. Easier said than done. The story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet with expensive nard in John 12.1–8, the gospel reading for the 5th Sunday in Lent on 6 April, presented difficulties and opportunities. How to read it? And how to preach it, that the radical nature of the text itself, calling us to change, come through? A herstory of the gospel, it

presents an account of the only anointing for burial that Jesus was to receive – his risen body not available to be anointed by the women who came on Easter morning. Was my focus to be on Mary's intimate, extravagant act of devotion? Or on Judas and his condemnation of her action in the putative name of the poor? Or on the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus, who by his presence embodied and proclaimed resurrection from the dead even from the road to the cross? These formed part of my treatment of the text, in the event, as did a tracking of Jesus' feet, still smelling of perfume as he rides down the Mount of Olives to the Temple, last supper, Gethsemane, Pilate, and the cross itself.

But where to take it? By the Friday I had begun to focus on the reality of death, impending death, and dead bodies that mark our time. I thought of the bodies, in uncountable numbers, still waiting to be discovered under the rubble. Who will anoint them, I began to wonder, if ever they are to receive an anointing? The question came suddenly, but not from nowhere, and gave me a way to get at the question of the dignity of the dead, and of those left for dead in Gaza.

But the prospect of introducing the question in a sermon made me think again of how I was framing it. For there were and are Israeli bodies in Gaza. Their return to their families is demanded as often as is the return of living hostages. The question of anointing held for them as well, and affirmed their dignity.

In the end I preached the need for the bodies of all killed on and since 7 October 2023 to be anointed, spiritually if not physically, affirming their human dignity and worth, equally, in the sight of God and of all people. Going back to 7 October, and looking at the continuing horror of what has happened since, the bodies of over 1,200 Israelis and over 54,000 Palestinians came into view, using then-current numbers. As did the bodies of those who almost certainly would be killed in the days to come. Finally, to make sure we owned the question, I asserted that we were all interested parties, mortal and embodied as we are. With an equal right to be honoured in life and in death, based on our creation in the image and likeness of God.

On prayer, our practice is to sing a prayer of peace between the movements of the Prayers of the People. This in Arabic, English and Hebrew, though the translations between and among them are not exact. St Andrew's is the only Church in Jerusalem that does this, as far as I know. Beginning with the 'Ya Rabba,' the words are:

> *1. Ya rabba ssalami amter alayna ssalam, ya rabba ssalami im lah' qulubana salam.*
>
> *2. God of peace, in your wisdom give us the will to seek peace; God of peace and of healing, fill with your peace every heart!*
>
> *3. Ho Adon Sar-Shalom, ta belibenu shalom; ho Adon Sar-Shalom, ten be'artsenu shalom!*

One Sunday in the season of Easter I prayed for those facing ethnic cleansing in Gaza. Following the service, one of the worshippers wanted a word. Why had I used such a term? Was it not the case that people were leaving Gaza voluntarily? Silence was the best I could do for three or four seconds. I was dumbstruck. It hurt. I respect the person and am grateful for their presence and faithfulness. Recovering, I knew what I wanted to reply, but also that I had to pitch it in pastoral and not polemical tones. I wanted to ask how it could possibly be seen to be voluntary when Gazans had been under assault for 20 months by air and land, ordered to move in their hundreds of thousands from north to south and east to west to avoid IDF ground offenses, in a state of trauma and increasing malnourishment, their food aid weaponised, with the threat of annexation hanging over them. I said far less than this, but stated my reasons for using the term 'ethnic cleansing' in the prayer and for resisting the view that any evacuation of Gazans could be called voluntary.

We agreed to disagree, and to keep praying for peace.

What to make of all this? You'll have your own answer. One thing allow me, the observation that words are not what come first. Presence does, and the words we find to say, or which come to us, come from presence. God's own in the first place, in Christ, the living Word we seek to embody and proclaim.

Thanks,
Stewart

This document also features in the August issue of Ascend

121 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4YN
T: +44 (0)131 225 5722 E: FaithAction@churchofscotland.org.uk
Scottish Charity Number: SCO11353