

PARTNERPLAN

John McCulloch - Israel December 2019

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Advent Message from Gaza John McCulloch



A prison cell, in which one waits, hopes... and is completely dependent on the fact that the door of freedom has to be opened from the outside, is not a bad picture of Advent.

(Dietrich Bonhoeffer)

There are times in life when you come face to face with human suffering, and your heart weeps, as you know that this is just one of many similar stories, and anything you do to try and help just feels like a miniscule drop in a vast ocean of injustice.

Our transit through the Gaza border crossing some weeks back was one such moment. We had just got through the Hamas checkpoint on our way back into Israel after three days in Gaza. We were waiting on a bus to drive us through the security buffer zone to Israeli Security. It was on the bus that we met 9-month-year-old Sajida and her grandmother.



Sajida is suffering from leukaemia, and needed specialist treatment in a Jerusalem hospital. We spoke with the grandmother in our broken Arabic, as she told us a little more about the situation. A few moments later Sajida's mother came onto the bus, to try and feed Sajida with a syringe, and to say goodbye, as she and her husband had not been granted permission from the Israeli authorities to travel with her to the hospital. This is why Sajida was travelling with her grandmother. The grandmother told us that this was her first time in Israel for 30 years, so she was in some trepidation about what to expect.

One of the reasons why Israel does not grant many parent's permissions to accompany their children, is so that they don't remain 'illegally' within Israel or the West Bank. With an economy that has collapsed and is on a life-support machine, 94% of the water unfit for human consumption, severe malnutrition, no work, and a population of around 2 million, imprisoned in a space of similar size to the Isle of Jura with little or no hope for the future; it is hardly surprising that many Gazans would want to escape the conditions they are enduring.

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Earlier this year, *The Guardian* published an article by Oliver Holmes & Hazem Balousha entitled 'A Jerusalem hospital where Palestinian babies die alone'.

Whilst Israel claims that more permits are being granted to parents to accompany their children, Holmes & Balousha state (in the article below), that according to the Israeli charity (and partner of the Church of Scotland) Physicians for Human Rights Israel (PHRI): '7,000 permits were issued for minors from Gaza last year. Less than 2,000 permits for parents were granted, suggesting most children travelled without mothers or fathers'.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jun/20/a-jerusalem-hospital-where-palestinian-babies-die-alone>



Annette spoke with the mother, and told her that we would help Sajida and her grandmother through the checkpoint with her bags, and drive her straight to the hospital in Jerusalem. The grandmother told us that she would have had to get two busses, which would have taken over 2 hours and used up the scant money they had. Rev Angleena Keizer (a Methodist Ecumenical Associate with St Andrew's Jerusalem & Tiberias), sat next to the grandmother and Sajida on the way to Jerusalem, as tears ran down her face at the injustice of a situation where parents are separated from their children.

We do not know whether Sajida survived and was re-united with her parents. We do not know whether she made it back from Jerusalem into Gaza. Sajida is just one of many children, victims of conflict in an unjust world.

As we made our way through security, I handed my passport to an Israeli official I have gotten to know a little over the last year and a half, as she has happened to be on duty several times when we have been through the Erez Crossing. She smiled at me, and asked how our trip into Gaza had been. They know that The Church of Scotland visits the Christian communities of Gaza, and supports the work of the Near East Council of Churches who provide medical care, vocational training, psychosocial support for children and a whole range of other vital community support initiatives. I replied, 'the trip went well thank you, how are you?'. She then said 'It is good what you are doing. We are all human beings'.

I was struck at her warmth, her humanity. It reminded me that we must never fall into the trap of dehumanising people here, regardless of which 'side' they happen to be on in this deeply asymmetrical and intractable conflict. It reminded me of how as individuals we get caught up in the systems of an unjust world. We are participants in the structural injustice of a world where power, wealth and inequality are propped up through military might that ensures that these structures do not change.

As I reflected back on this encounter on the Gaza border, I thought about Advent, about what it means to hold on to hope, in such a world as ours... A world into which our saviour was born as a vulnerable baby, like Sajida, with the threat of death hanging over him from the day he was born.

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Our Advent hope comes to us again and again, to remind us that the God of Peace identifies with the broken and suffering of this world; reminding us that our God comes to humanity as a vulnerable baby.

*But He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My **power is perfected in weakness.**"*
(2 Corinthians 12:9)

John McCulloch

