

Sunday 13th September: Elspeth Strachan

Thank you very much for inviting me to preach today. It's lovely to see so many friends! I'm here today because I've recently come back from three months in Bethlehem where I was part of a World Council of Churches programme called EAPPI - the Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel ... the Ecumenical **ACCOMPANIMENT** programme.

Our gospel reading today told the familiar story of the journey to Emmaus where two disciples *accompanied* one another at a time of great sadness and upheaval, but suddenly discovered that the stranger who had joined them on that sad journey was the risen Jesus. I'd like to tell you a little about the accompaniment that I have been both *giving* and *receiving* in the West Bank on what has been at times a very sad journey... but one which also had surprising moments when I too suddenly discovered Jesus in the face of the stranger.

First of all let me tell you little bit about the programme. EAPPI came to birth in 2002 as a result of an appeal from the Heads of Churches in Jerusalem. The appeal was for support and protection from fellow Christians across the world and the World Council of Churches took up their cause. It sent out groups of people to places where the difficulties caused by the occupation were greatest - East Jerusalem, Hebron, Jericho, Bethlehem and a tiny village called Yanoun. In Yanoun EAs are present 365 days a year at the request of the villagers because the presence of EAs protects them from the aggression of local Israeli settlers. Those who go out with EAPPI are called Ecumenical Accompaniers - EAs - and since 2002 over 1500 people have gone to do this work. That's the work I did. I was an EA and my task was fourfold: to offer protective presence; to work as a human rights monitor; to support both Palestinian **and** Israeli peace groups; to become an advocate, especially at home, for an end to the occupation of Palestine.

At the heart of the programme is the passage from Micah that we all know so well - "What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?" As some of you know, I spent two years in Galilee 25 years ago working for the Church of Scotland, and while I was aware of increased tensions and the injustices of the occupation, I confess I didn't do much about it. In the past year or so I have really felt challenged by that Micah passage "What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?"and so I was thrilled and honoured to be accepted on to the EAPPI programme. Its vision is a future in which the occupation of Palestine has ended and both Palestinians and Israelis enjoy a just peace with freedom for Palestinians and security for Israelis, based on international law.

Some of you may wonder if the programme takes sides. Well the answer is – NO! It does not take sides, but it does practise what it calls **principled impartiality**. That means that while it doesn't take sides, neither is it neutral. It is firmly against the abuse of human rights on both sides. Israel's human rights were abused during the Gaza war when rockets were fired at them indiscriminately; Palestinian rights were abused in Gaza too. But EAPPI doesn't work in Gaza, it does work in the West Bank and there, sadly, Palestinian human rights are abused every day.

As EAs our job was to *accompany* vulnerable people and communities, talk with them, be with them in the struggles of their daily lives, experience with them what it is like to live under the Israeli occupation, both as occupied *and* at times occupiers. We spent a weekend for instance with some Israeli families from Haifa who felt in the dark about how their government was treating their Palestinian neighbours, despite their Rabbi being a member of Rabbis for Human Rights...and Palestinian families from Bethlehem who would have loved nothing more than to have been allowed to go to Haifa - just for the day!

It is so easy to feel despair when we think of Israel and Palestine, to feel completely helpless in the face of such a long term occupation. It was heartbreaking to hear a few weeks ago about little Ali Dawabsheh and his father (and now mother) who were killed by extremist Israeli settlers. A Palestinian teacher friend of mine, Soha, knew and studied with Ali's mother who is also a teacher. Everyone condemned this act of arson, even the Israeli government, but settler violence such as this is sadly only too common. We came across violence often. Let me give you some examples...

- As an EA I met a family who had had their olive groves burnt by Israeli settlers because they were too near settlement ground, even although the settlements themselves had been built illegally on this family's land.
- My team met an elderly couple whose car had been stoned by settlers because they were using the same road as them, injuring them and their grandchildren.
- Four times a week our Bethlehem team stood at the checkpoint on the separation barrier between Bethlehem and Jerusalem where men queued from 3 in the morning to get to work. It's impossible to

describe the degradation of these checkpoints. Men and women are herded like animals behind locked turnstiles in metal structures for all the world like cages. They are regularly turned back with no explanation and have to reapply for permits that take months to come ...if at all.

It is all so complex and the extensive abuse of human rights is almost impossible to understand. So many people I met - Israeli and Palestinian - spoke of their complete lack of hope. BUT, I find that, despite it all...I am not left without hope. To put it positively, I do have hope. Just the other day someone asked me for the best and the worst of my experience and to my surprise I found myself saying the Bethlehem checkpoint for both. How could that be?

As I've said it is a very dark place, full of degradation and injustice, but yet it is also somehow full of light - the light of friendship, solidarity, black humour, tolerance, empathy, understanding... that Palestinian men and women show each other every day as they watch out for one another on that sad journey through turnstiles. From 4.00 – 7.00 in the morning, my fellow EAs and I stood regularly to monitor the checkpoint and act as a protective presence. It's an exhausting experience for people going through and weariness and resignation can often be found on their faces. But... as we and they exchanged early morning greetings of '*sabah hilhair*' '*good morning*', there were moments of real meeting, of warm exchange, of actively smiling together into the despair and inhumanity and darkness of the system. And these moments gave me hope that the common humanity that we all share - and that is exemplified in Jesus - might yet rise above the cruelty of the occupation.

That common humanity was everywhere to be seen ...in the street vendors who sold breakfast to people who had been up since 2 - and gave us free coffee for our bit of the journey, in Clare from the Israeli organisation Machsom Watch who came every Friday, knowing her presence would help people get through, in Sister Donatella who, with fellow Christians, including us, walked and prayed for peace along a bit of the 8 metre high wall every Friday without fail. In the overwhelming hospitality of the Palestinian people who would cry out to us, every day - Welcome to Palestine, and offer us coffee.

So many signs of hope., so many people in fact *accompanying* one another in peace on what would otherwise be an unbearably sad journey. So many people in whose faces I could see Jesus. One of the main tasks of an EA is to tell the stories of the people we met, not to be experts in the Middle East or to come up with solutions, but just to listen. I heard many stories from both Palestinians and Israelis, many involved in peace work - and again and again Desmond Tutu's song came to mind:

Goodness is stronger than evil
love is stronger than hate
light is stronger than darkness
life is stronger than death

There undoubtedly is evil and hatred and darkness and death on both sides and it **is** possible to give in to depression just as the disciples on the Emmaus road were in danger of doing. But as they walked along that road, supporting each other and sharing their stories, Jesus *himself* drew near and warmed their hearts. Our job as EAs was to accompany people as they coped with the misery of occupation, but daily I felt that so often **we** were the ones being accompanied by the people of Palestine - Muslim and Christian - who were being as Christ to me and to each other in their humanity and search for peace, in their hospitality and welcome and warmth.

But they **need us** - as we were constantly reminded They need us because as members of the international community we have power and influence that they do not have. They need us to act for them. I would say they need us to be as Christ to them as the hymn we just sang says. How can we do this? How can we be as Christ to *them*? Well there is a lot we can do and I am going to speak more about all of this after the service, but let me end with one or two very practical things - for instance, we can become informed about what is happening in Israel and occupied Palestine,; we can write to our MPs and MEP when action is needed. It DOES make a difference. We can go to Palestine and Israel and find out for ourselves - or become an EA I highly recommend it! We can give a donation to peace work, in particular EAPPI, but above all we can PRAY! St Teresa of Avila reminded us that:

Christ has no body now, but ours.
No hands, no feet on earth, but ours.
Ours are the eyes through which he looks
With compassion on this world

When we think of the daily suffering that we hear about and see in the Middle East - and in particular in Palestine, the land of Jesus' birth, what a challenge that is! Christ has no body now, but ours. Amen