

Friends of the Holy Land – 10th Anniversary Celebration
Temple Church, London – 14 October 2019

Dear Friends

For the past twenty three years my grandparent's mahogany fruit bowl has sat on the coffee table in my lounge. It's not filled with apples or oranges, but pebbles gathered from the seashore of Galilee. I like to think that perhaps, just perhaps, the Lord Jesus walked across at least one of them, resting His foot as He called His first disciples. In a former parish, I once preached about my hope for this bowl of pebbles. Later that week, a parishioner who was a geologist called to the presbytery to reassure me that it was at least not impossible.

As Christians, we have an intrinsic desire for connection with the Land of the Lord Jesus. It matters to us because it's where our Saviour lived, walked, preached, healed, forgave, died and rose. We go to see what He saw, to stand where He stood, to sail where He sailed, to pray where He prayed. My little pile of stones is a tangible link with the stone rejected by the builders, the keystone who is Christ, the cornerstone of our salvation. (cf. Mt 21:42)

But this powerful connection with the Holy Land and its Holy Places has another vital dimension through our connection with the Christians who live there today. Our brothers and sisters in the Land of the Lord Jesus are, with us, living stones, being built up into a spiritual house. (cf. 1 Pet 2:5) Yet their earthly foundation is unsteady.

Our relationship with the Holy Land is not one of tourism, or even just of pilgrimage, vital though that is. Our relationship with the Holy Land is one of collaboration. We are actively committed to supporting the disciples of the Lord Jesus who, living in His homeland today, face the threat of extinction. To say this is no exaggeration. *'I call you friends,'* said the Lord Jesus. (Jn 15:15) Like never before, Christians in the Holy Land need our friendship. Not a passive, sentimental friendship, but an active apostolate of solidarity that seeks not simply to sustain a Christian presence, but enable it to flourish.

This time last year, with others gathered here today, I was in the Holy Land and saw for myself the direct impact made by the *Friends of the Holy Land*. In Beit Sahour, near the Shepherds Fields, close to Bethlehem, we visited the *School of Joy for Slow Learners* - a wonderful descriptor, I think, for the whole life of discipleship. We are all slow learners in the Gospel's school of joy.

Fr Mamdouh Abusada and the school staff provide an indispensable education for former street children, children with special needs, children who have been mistreated, children who, because of their challenging personal circumstances, cannot find a place in the state school system. The *Friends of the Holy Land* has supported the *School of Joy* since 2011, and because of that the number of both pupils and teachers has increased. Without discrimination, the School provides essential food, education, healthcare, and skills for work to Christian and Muslim children and young people alike.

What struck me forcefully visiting the School of Joy was not merely the dedication of the staff despite the obviously limited resources, but the self-evident love of Christ alive in the place of His birth. Supported by people in the United Kingdom, many of whom might never actually set foot in the Holy Land, the heart and hands of the Lord Jesus are loving and serving still. In simple terms, this is what collaborating in the active apostolate of solidarity looks like. And it really is a place of joy.

The second project I experienced first-hand was *St Martha's House* in Bethlehem. Founded in 2009, this day centre cares for elderly Christian women, many of them widows, others with children who have now left the Holy Land in search of better opportunities.

St Martha's is a place to gather and chat, to share food, to receive support and find friendship. It is, as I discovered, also a place for dancing, with the aging community not only nimble on their feet, but very persuasive in making bishops don a fez and join the dance. Supported by the *Friends of the Holy Land*, this too is a real expression of collaboration in the active apostolate of solidarity in Land of the Lord Jesus.

In 2014, our Holy Father Pope Francis visited the Holy Land for the first time as the Successor of St Peter. In the Church of the Holy Sepulchre he said: *'we pause in reverent silence before this empty tomb in order to rediscover the grandeur of our Christian vocation: we are men and women of resurrection, and not of death.'*

Without any political agenda, for the past ten years the *Friends of the Holy Land* has given hope to vulnerable Christians in the Land of the Lord Jesus. The challenges to the continuing presence of Christians in the Holy Land cannot be underestimated. But a difference is being made. Even the tiniest pebble can make ripples in the water. The projects supported by the Friends of the Holy Land are, as we speak, touching peoples' lives and shaping the future. In all of this, in all our collaboration in the active apostolate of solidarity, the grandeur of our Christian vocation is to be people of hope, to be men and women of resurrection.