

PARTNERPLAN

John McCulloch - Israel November 2020

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Israel

From This Broken Hill

*From this broken hill
All your praises they shall ring
If it be your will
To let me sing.
(Leonard Cohen)*



This photo of St Andrew's Scots Memorial Church and Guesthouse in Jerusalem, is taken from an angle that you are probably not used to seeing. The main entrance and terrace are on the other side of the building, adorned with its gardens and unparalleled views over the Old City of Jerusalem.

This southern facing side of St Andrew's Jerusalem is a protected nature reserve, and in the spring is covered in red Anemones and Ranunculus flowers, growing amongst the thistles and long grasses. Swallowtail butterflies and Skylarks are some of the species found on the hill. In the autumn, when this picture was taken, the hill is covered in Sea Squills, an ancient medicinal plant believed to have healing properties.

But there is much more to this hill than immediately meets the eye; for many believe that this is the hill where Abraham and Isaac left their donkey and servants, as they walked towards Mount Moriah, which is now known in Jerusalem as the Temple Mount.

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Genesis 22 *Some time later God tested Abraham. He said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he replied.*

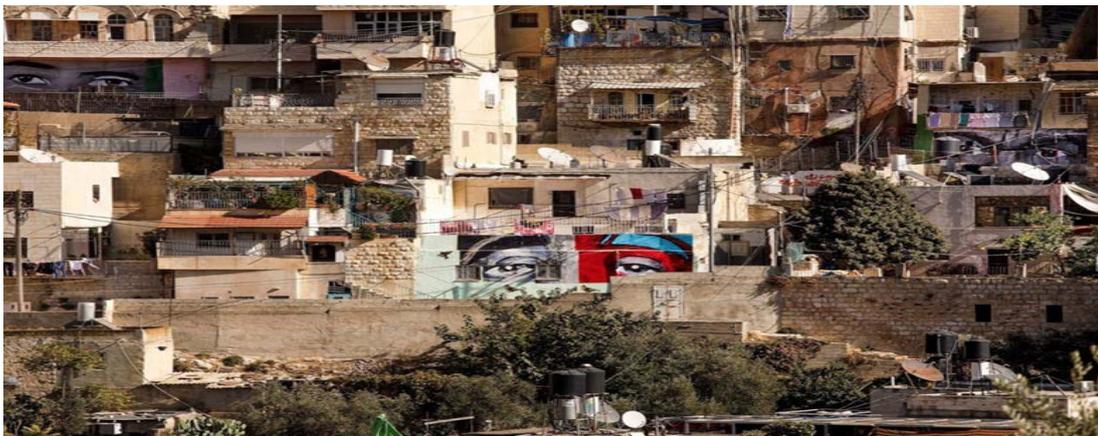
2 *Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."*

3 *Early the next morning Abraham got up and loaded his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about. **4** On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. **5** He said to his servants, "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.*

To get to the Temple Mount you would need to descend into the Hinnom Valley, known in ancient times as 'Gehenna'. This is the word from which we get the word 'hell'. The valley of Gehenna was the place outside the city walls where the rubbish was burnt. It would have been a place of perpetual fire and thick smoke. It is also believed to be the place where the Canaanites would sacrifice children to the fire-god Molech. Child sacrifice was of course an abomination in the Hebrew religion, and prohibited, as clearly stated in Leviticus 18:21 'Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the Lord'.

The binding of Isaac is therefore completely at odds and out of kilter with ancient Hebrew religious practice, and it is recorded in Genesis 22 for good reason. The sacrifice of Isaac is ultimately a public rejection and repudiation of child sacrifice. In a context of syncretic religious practice, it would not be uncommon for the gods to demand child sacrifice. But God intervenes to stop Abraham in his tracks, just as the knife is about to descend upon his son, and thus differentiates himself from the Canaanite gods who demand child sacrifice. Later in the prophetic tradition, blood sacrifices are progressively denounced in all their forms.

The binding of Isaac is the last time in the Hebrew Scriptures that Isaac and Abraham are mentioned together. Some scholars believe that it was the last time they saw each other, and that Isaac wandered off after his face-to-face encounter with terror on Mount Moriah, to never return to his father's home. And who could blame him? This is backed up by Genesis 22:19, when it says that Abraham returned alone *So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.*



But there is another view from this hill on which St Andrew's Scot's Memorial Church is built. As you look east towards the Old City and the Jordanian hills, across the Hinnom valley you will see the neighbourhood of Silwan.

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A few days ago, on a hot and dusty afternoon I walked from the church down through the Hinom valley and into the neighbourhood of Silwan. It is a fifteen minute walk, which takes you from West Jerusalem to Occupied East Jerusalem. As I walked through its narrow streets, and chatted to some of the street vendors in my basic Arabic, I asked about the situation in Silwan. For some time now, tensions have been running high in this neighbourhood as Israeli settlers have moved in and taken over properties, with the long-term strategy of driving the local Palestinian population out. Ateret Cohanim is a far-right Jewish settler organisation that aims to evict Palestinians from their homes. Amidst the Palestinian homes you see Israeli flags, indicating where settlers have been able to move in, either through underhand third-party sales, or other means.

As I drank coffee and chatted with the street vendors, I looked up at the houses above us, and saw some of the murals painted by Palestinian artists onto the walls of many of the buildings. They depict eyes that are staring back at you. It is an attempt on behalf of the Palestinian residents of Silwan to say, we are here. We are looking at you as you occupy us and try to drive us from our homes. As one resident put it, *The staring eyes say to people we see them, and they should see us too.*



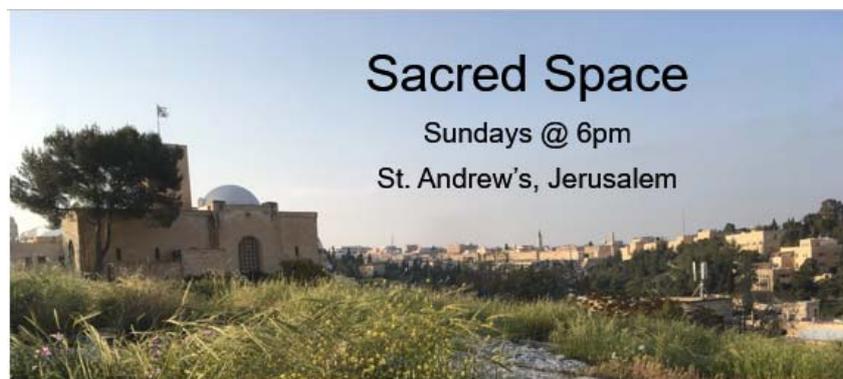
I walked back to the church, and onto the hill as the last rays of sunlight paled behind the horizon. I thought about St Andrew's Scots Memorial, and how it sits on the hill where East and West Jerusalem meet, from where you can see Silwan, the Old City, and the separation barrier in the distance. I thought about Abraham and Isaac, and how the journey that they made to Mount Moriah was a journey through hell itself. And I thought about Christ's journey to Jerusalem, to the place of suffering and rejection, where he was crucified by the empire of the day, outside the city walls, condemned as a criminal and a subversive, dying on a Roman cross.

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This is a topography and landscape of despair and hope. It is a place of death and resurrection. But as I stood on the hill by St Andrew's Scots Memorial Church, I thought about how do we, as a church, see our surrounding world? And how does the surrounding world see us?

During this time of global pandemic, when many church buildings remain closed, there is an opportunity for the church, wherever it finds itself, to become deeply missional by focusing on what lies outside of its walls.

Some time back we started an evening service called 'Sacred Space', and after a conversation with one of my Jewish friends on Holocaust Memorial Day (where we had hosted a memorial service in St Andrew's Church –you can read about it in my partner letter no 9 on the CoS website), we sang Leonard Cohen's song 'If it be your will', and adopted one of its lines as a theme for Sacred Space.



*"If it be your will that a voice be true
From this broken hill I will sing to you"
L. Cohen*

Breathe. Listen. Learn. Sing.

אלל מרחב בה - כלל מוזמנלם - All are welcome

The reason why I left academia and followed a call into ministry, is because the central message of Christianity is that we worship a God who has entered into human suffering. A God who knows what it is to be acquainted with grief. A God who enters our broken world, to heal it from within.

May we have the eyes to see our world and each other as God sees us. And may this transform our mission in the world, which is the purpose for which the church exists, to be God's healing hands and feet, in such a world as ours.

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I leave you with a quote from Pope Francis, who reminds us of what the church's mission should be. It is quoted from his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium*:

The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”.[26] This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and celebration.[27] In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers.[28] It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented.¹

John

¹ http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed 30/10/2020)