

Morningside

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## The House of Grace

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So much of our visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories was shocking and depressing. I have made several visits and each time I return I reflect that things are worse than they were the last time I was there. Of course it is thrilling and moving to sit in the Garden of Gethsemane and read the story of Jesus last night, praying that God would take away from him the cup of suffering he faced – while all the time, a few yards away Peter and James and John snored all through the night. Of course it is beautifully moving to sing favourite hymns on board a fishing boat moving noiselessly across the Sea of Galilee in brilliant sunshine. But it is deeply, deeply depressing to see the suffering of the Palestinian people and feel able to do nothing about it. While illegal Israeli settlements steal more and more Palestinian land, while the siege of Gaza continues after ten years of blockade, when the United Nations remains powerless to enforce its resolutions, where is hope to be found?

Jamal Shehade is tall, handsome, articulate, deep and totally inspiring. There were 29 of us from the church of Scotland, making our pilgrimage over the last two weeks: and everyone of us found our time with Jamal one of the highpoints of the tour. As he told us the story – the story of his father and his mother and his brothers and sisters and God we knew we had found hope, real, living hope. I have met Jamal several times before – he and his family and their project are partners of the Church of Scotland - but I become a better person every time we meet.

It begins with his father, Kamil Shehade. He was some man. He grew up in downtown Haifa and was a bit of a hothead: angry with the

government, impatient with the church, bursting with energy. The bishop sent him off to Canada to study for a year to calm him down: that didn't work! When he returned full of energy for – he did not know what – in his life, he met Agnes, a Swiss teacher living in Haifa. Two weeks after they married he had his idea and he suggested to Agnes that they open their house to two young men he had met – ex-prisoners if you please – to come and live with them. Two weeks after they met! Of course she said ...yes! And for forty years since their home has been called The House of Grace. And a House of Grace is exactly what it is.

Jamal speaks very tenderly and very proudly of his father: and as you hear of Kamil's energy and enthusiasm and total commitment to his obedience to the call of Jesus to serve the most vulnerable it is Agnes you begin to admire! Because their family home has never been empty since. Two ex-prisoners became three, then one moved on, but gradually others came. Living in the family house, eating the family meals. Soon the bishop gave Kamil and Agnes the key to a deserted church, to see what they could make of it. The idea was that the bishop would come back for the keys after five years. That was in 1982, and somehow the bishop keeps forgetting! The building has been restored – of course by ex-prisoners. It is sometimes used still as a church, but mostly it is filled with all sorts of people and programmes aimed at turning round the lives of young men who have done wrong.

Programmes and projects are important, but the key to the House of Grace has always been welcoming the men into the Shehade home as members of the family. Jamil tells people. "I grew up playing with thieves and former drug addicts. My first babysitter was a murderer." Would anyone in their right mind bring up their children like that? Well, Agnes and Kamil did, and the result is their eldest son Jamal who, as I have told you before is tall, handsome, articulate, deep and totally inspiring.

But all good things, especially good things which depend on one very charismatic person, come to an end. So when Kamil died in 2000 it was clear that the whole enterprise must close. Except that was not clear to Agnes Shehade, immigrant Swiss teacher that she was. Now a single mother with five children to bring up, she took on the role of director of the House of Grace: and the energy and enthusiasm and Christian commitment have never faltered. All over again “inspiring” is the word. Has she failed her children? All I can say is that four of her five children are now involved full-time in the House of Grace, and the fifth is a teacher in the very school for children with special needs in which her mother came to work when she first arrived in Haifa from Switzerland.

These days Agnes is no longer the Director, a role which Jamal now fills. There are sixteen beds in the House of Grace, and they are always full, with a long waiting list. People stay for nine months, and then they are still involved with the House of Grace for a year after that. Does it make a difference. Not every resident turns his back on crime: but seven out of every ten do. Seventy per cent are never in trouble again. By comparison in Scotland we think we do our best to reduce re-offending; and the figure is also seventy percent. Except it is seventy percent the other way round. Seventy per cent of Scottish ex-prisoners will re-offend and will return to jail . the House of Grace works like nothing we have in Scotland.

How does it work? There are rehabilitation programmes, counselling, opportunities for volunteering as leaders in boys’ clubs, that sort of thing. These are professionally led and properly accredited and they make a difference. But programmes like these don’t explain the House of Grace. What explains its success better is dignity. The whole atmosphere is about treating ex-prisoners with dignity. That is what happens when they are welcomed into the Shehadeh home, eat every day at the huge family table, act as baby-sitters for the children. You may call that silly, but it works. But that doesn’t explain it either.

I think the only way you can explain it is by talking about Christian faith. The House of Grace is the result of taking seriously the words of Jesus; and it continues to be sustained by the promises of Jesus. Kamil Shehade believed that Jesus meant it when he said “whatever you do to the least of these, my brothers and sisters, you do it to me”. He believed that in serving ex-prisoners year after year he was serving Jesus Christ. Very few of us have that kind of faith: but when you meet it, or even, as this morning, when you hear about it I hope you can recognise it as the genuine article.

It is very difficult to be a Palestinian in Israel, and even more difficult to be a Christian Palestinian. Christian Palestinians in Israel have very few friends. So I want you to picture Jamal Shehade standing in the middle of this church which has been restored by the hands of him and his brothers and a whole procession of ex-offenders, speaking of his family and saying “We are proud to be Christians. Our Christian faith gives us hope. It gives us hope when everything looks so miserable for Christians in Israel; and it gives us hope when it is difficult to see any good prospects for the men who come to share our home. It is our Christian faith which gives us hope. We never give up our trust in God”.

Jamal Shehade is tall, handsome, articulate, deep and totally inspiring. I am very proud that the Church of Scotland supports the House of Grace. The next time you ask if you get value for money from what you give to the church you might remind yourself that a little part of what you give goes to Jamal’s work: and when it is spent it makes the world a better place.