

Jerusalem to Gaza

Acts 8:26-40; 1 John 4:7-21

Before these bitter days for Israel-Palestine, the road from Jerusalem to Gaza was a well-travelled route down near the eastern end of the Mediterranean, a highway for merchants and armies avoiding the arid mountainous interior, though the road itself travelled through areas of desert as it left Jerusalem and swung down to Egypt, Ethiopia and beyond. It was a strip of land fought over by Canaanites and Israelites, and saw the advancing armies of Assyria, Babylon, Greece and Rome on its dusty wilderness roads. In that difficult terrain, it is an accessible route, though a desert road.

Today it remains desert-like –the Mediterranean on one side, the arid mountains on the other, pockmarked by a few Israeli settlements until you get to the barbed-wire frontier and concrete checkpoints between Israel and the Gaza Strip.

At the checkpoint you walk through a mesh enclosed corridor, no more than four feet wide, under the watchful eyes of the Israeli Defence Force until you arrive at the outskirts of Gaza. It's a fifteen-minute walk, unpleasant and slightly unnerving. Then, for me at least in 2018, a jeep dodged the shell-pocked roadways into Gaza city itself. It was a possible journey six years ago. No longer. What were streets with houses now so much rubble as the ruined roads and the houses and hospitals along so many of them, and in other parts of the Gaza strip, are bombed back into the desert from which they sprang millennia ago. The people dispersed, forced out, or buried in makeshift mass graves as we saw in the news last week. Underneath where you might have travelled there are still the warren of hidden tunnels, where it may be that Israeli hostages are kept still, after their abduction last October by Hamas.

Jerusalem to Gaza, brutalized all over again in this C21st by warring factions whose hardness of heart, whose narrowness of vision, whose desert of the soul blights the lives of Palestinians and Israelis on both sides of this ongoing bitter divide.

Jerusalem to Gaza. "This is a desert road", the Book of Acts tells us. Today it is a road marked by war and fear. Just a few weeks after the resurrection events, a chariot trundled along. In it an Ethiopian eunuch, a relatively high-status foreign official who had been to Jerusalem to worship. As he travelled he read out loud from the Old Testament book Isaiah. He read about the lamb that was to be shorn, a prophecy about Jesus and His death. Scholars have pointed to the poignancy that this man, probably castrated, shorn, as a young slave in the Ethiopian court so he would be safe to work with women, is reading about the lamb that was shorn and cut in a different way. It is an unsettling but thought-provoking parallel.

On this desert road, this is a story of reaching out. Jesus had commanded His apostles at the beginning of the Book of Acts to go out and share the good news in Jerusalem, and in Judea and in Samaria, but also, 'to the end of the earth'. Peter and John spoke out in Jerusalem. After the martyrdom of the deacon Stephen the Jewish Christians fled the city and go into the surrounding countryside northwards. Here Philip, moving south, with the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, enables the Christian message to travel into Africa.

On a desert road where nothing would normally grow, we see and hear the spreading of life, of good news. More than that, of teaching and recognition and welcome and inclusion. It is another instance of what the Christian faith is meant to do – to reach out, without judgement, and to welcome in.

The Bible often tells us about people who are insignificant in the eyes of the world but who are royalty in God's eyes. This story could easily be the opposite. Here is a man with a royal job in a

worldly court who could have got the impression from the Bible that he was unwelcome in God's presence. As a eunuch that would have been the case according to Old Testament law.

But here comes Philip, one of the apostles, pointing the Ethiopian to a better understanding, helping him see that he could stand with Jesus: for this they have in common, both were denied justice, both were 'humiliated', both were 'shorn', but both would have a place in the household of God, regardless of their status in the world, or the way the world looked at them.

Through the Holy Spirit the grace of God, the welcome of God, the inclusion of God transcended the old laws. Those who might have been judged to have no place are given a place. In a week when the inhumane Rwanda deportation of migrants act became law, this Bible message about how we include people, from Ethiopia, from Sudan and South Sudan, from Afghanistan and from other places, sits as a clarion call to what the legislature in Westminster has enacted. Whatever your views or politics, I don't think the Bible's message of hospitality and inclusion could be much clearer. The Ethiopian is hospitable to Philip, welcoming him into his chariot off the desert road. Philip tells the Ethiopian about the hospitality of God, welcoming *him* into the Kingdom of God. Philip does not question the eunuch's social status, national affiliation, ethnicity, gender or sexual condition. Philip's pastoral concern is to teach the eunuch that Jesus' understands the humiliation of being 'shorn', and that God's Kingdom through faith is open to him, and to all. There is nothing to prevent the eunuch from being baptized, there is nothing to prevent, in the eyes of the Holy Spirit, to continue the process of tumbling down the walls of prejudice and prohibition that stand in the way of welcoming all God's children. They are blown away by the breath of God's Holy Spirit, and another man who felt lost and humiliated was found and restored in the wideness of God's grace in Jesus Christ.ⁱ

On a desert road, Jerusalem to Gaza, where nothing might be presumed to grow, we find an enactment of what the First Letter of John talks about. *"Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God...for God is love."*

Which has left me thinking about the desert roads in our world and in our lives today. Is it possible that there is any love on the Jerusalem to Gaza road this morning? Last Friday in Glasgow Father Gabriel from the Holy Family Church in Gaza spoke of the loss of 30 Christians from a community of 1,000 in Gaza, amongst the 34,000 killed, and at least 77,000 injured amongst a community of 2.3 million people in "the largest open air prison in the world". He highlighted the active role of the Christian community in Gaza, running schools, hospitals, clinics, care homes open to everyone. The Moderator of the General Assembly and the Roman Catholic archbishop of Glasgow and called again for an immediate ceasefire to bring an end to violence and allow for people to rebuild their lives and seek justice and reconciliation. Despite everything, Christian love is being carried out practically. The media in Scotland, again, has ignored the Church's voice on this matter. Desert road.

Groups across the UK continue to advocate for the rights of immigrants and their humane treatment however they arrive in our country. The Rwanda Bill enacted last week, justifiably criticised by human rights organisations, churches and faith communities, the House of Lords and many others, represents a desert road through the heart of our nation. It was ironic that the Bill was debated on St George's Day. St George is supposed to be of Greek heritage with a Palestinian mother; a soldier in the Roman army, living and working in Europe and the Middle East. He is the patron saint of Ethiopia, Palestine, Georgia, Beirut and England. If he arrived on a boat across the Channel today, he would be deported to Rwanda. Desert road.

What of the state of Scottish and wider UK politics last week? Good people working away steadily completely overshadowed by the posturing and the tantrums. Is our nation being best served when so much is out of focus and out of kilter and tiredness and lack of vision engulfs us. Desert road.

What about our own lives. Are we aware of a desiccation in our commitment and our faith? Spread too far over too much ground, or not spread at all and stagnating when others buckle under the pressure of too many commitments? Desert road.

Jerusalem to Gaza was a desert road. There was much that was wrong and unhealthy at either end of it. But on that road, an outsider chanced upon a man of faith, who took the time to share his beliefs, and talk about what made for a good life, and mentioned the name of Jesus, and performed a baptism as water was near to hand. On the driest of desert roads, water may yet be found, and new beginnings offered. On the desert road, for all God's children, we must still love one another. And change and growth will come.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Thomas G Long, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, p458