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# Stewart Gillan – Israel May 2025

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## The Sharp Edge of Holiness

Rev Dr Stewart Gillan,  
Mission Partner Jerusalem, May 2025



Dear Friends,

The sight of Pope Francis' plain-deal coffin set amid the architectural splendour of St Peter's and the liturgical finery on display in its Square at his funeral lives on in the memory. Its otherness, its holiness, honed against the dissembling hypocrisy of some and open hostility of others who had gathered to pay their respects, proclaimed a humility of spirit and of strategy that cut through all virtue signalling.

As I listened to the coverage, my mind returned to the Requiem Mass for Pope Francis celebrated in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem two days after his passing. In a spirit of

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thanksgiving, His Beatitude Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, led prayers for the eternal repose of the Pope's soul, proclaiming the resurrection of our Lord ten feet from the entrance to his tomb. It was there that the altar had been placed, laid simply with white cloth and bowls containing wafers. When the sacrament had been consecrated, it was the Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Adolfo Tito Yllana, who brought the bowl of wafers in our direction. Four days before, he had been one of thousands blocked by police from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the Holy Fire ceremony of the Orthodox Church, its most sacred ritual.

Many were remembering that in his Easter address, only three days before, Pope Francis had pressed Israel and Hamas to 'call for a ceasefire, release the hostages, and come to the aid of a starving people that aspires to a future of peace.' He had kept up a daily telephone contact with Holy Family Church in Gaza, we learned, deeply appreciated by its members and all those sheltering within its walls, some 500 people – whose homes had been destroyed, severely damaged, or had other people living in them by now, according to reports received from Palestinian colleagues.

Condolences followed in the Latin Patriarchate, where I, following forty minutes of conversation-rich queuing, brought greetings on behalf of St Andrew's Church of Scotland Jerusalem & Tiberias, assuring Cardinal Pizzaballa of our prayers through these days of trial, united as we are in the Spirit of God, in the name of Jesus Christ. As I left, I found myself praying that Pope Francis' wide embrace, from prisoners to presidents, would be granted a long legacy. That it would continue to guide and inspire the Church, the body of Christ in the world, crucified and risen, in its witness to the truth, justice and healing of Christ.

Why might it not? Focussing on Jerusalem, I must return to Holy Saturday. As mentioned, it was marked by sharp conflict as Christians sought and were denied, in their thousands, access to the Old City to receive the holy fire, symbolic the resurrection of Christ, following its emergence from his tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Speaking of it with our reception manager at the Scots House Hotel, he directed me one of our accountants, a Scout Leader, to hear what had happened to his Scouts on Holy Saturday.

'Every year it is bad,' he said. 'This year was the worst. Unbelievable. It was miserable.'

He had been at the New Gate with his young family. 'The police blocked us. They were even blocking priests! Here, I can show you.' We watched a video showing two priests being pushed back. One of the priests, dressed in black with a long white beard, managed to get past the police by ducking down, leaning forward, and twisting his way in.

They got as far as Christian Quarter Road, but were blocked while still a long way from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Not wishing to endanger his family, the Scout Leader did not push it.

He then said: 'A Scout officer, one of the Greek Patriarchate Scouts, had a gun pointed to his head. This was on the roof of Holy Sepulchre.'

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Continuing, he said, 'It started on Thursday night. We were going, the Scouts, from Gethsemane to Gallicantu. At Zion Gate the Israelis who were there started spitting on us and shouting abuse. We started to pray louder. The police came and started pushing us and then they attacked us. They said: any person who shouts will be struck. I said, 'Then stop those at Zion Gate, they are doing the shouting!'

The actions of soldiers and police on Holy Saturday, using force to refuse Palestinian Christians entry to worship in the Old City on the Saturday of Holy Week, was widely condemned by Church Leaders and by diplomats present for the ceremony, some of whom had themselves been blocked at one stage from entering the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The freedom of Christians to come together in worship in Jerusalem during Holy Week, like the freedom of Jews to gather to celebrate during Passover, and the freedom of Muslims to come together in prayer and fasting during Ramadan, is at the heart of the recognition of sacred sites and spaces in the City. To deny this freedom to Christians is to consign our holy sites to the status of points of archaeological interest, or, worse, of 'facts on the ground' seen to be in need change, as the aggressive push continues to annex the whole of the Old City and East Jerusalem for Israel.

As coverage of the funeral continued, the Pope's coffin front and centre, I saw a statement from the Rev Dr Munther Isaac of Bethlehem decrying the hypocrisy of world leaders who had gathered, paying lip service but not respect to the Pope, sticking to generalities about peace and the poor. His post condemned them for their silence on the Pope's commitment to the people of Gaza and to ending the war. Such silence betrayed their complicity in the destruction of Gaza and killing and displacement of its people.

In her own Easter message, given at sunrise on the Mount of Olives, Lutheran Pastor Rev Sally Azar had spoken of the pain of her people at Easter.

I think of us Palestinians today—women, men and children, who walk with grief in our bodies. We, too, know the sour taste of violence, occupation, loss, exile. We know what it is to look for peace and see only tombs. To search for justice and see only stones rolled into place.

She then spoke of the sweetness of the power of resurrection, declaring, 'But this morning, Mary becomes our witness. This city becomes our witness. And Jesus—risen and radiant—becomes the first fruit of a promise that cannot be stolen or buried.'

Returning to Scouts, when the Pope's funeral was over, his coffin on its way to Santa Maria Maggiore, an interview in Saint Peter's Square with teenaged Scouts, girls and boys, revealed their strong connection with the one they called Papa Francesco. 'He changed our view of the pope, from someone who is higher than us to someone who is as human as us.'

Not long after, his remains were welcomed at Santa Maria Maggiore by those whom he had chosen to bid him a final farewell, drawn from the poor and homeless of Rome, and from migrants and refugees in Rome, with whom he had formed a working relationship during his papacy.

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This of course made for a good deal of nervousness in leadership circles in his Church, and still does by all accounts as Cardinals turn their attention now to the question of his successor. By the time you read this I expect we will know their name, and have a clearer sense of what to expect regarding Francis' legacy.

Why should we care? The question of a leader's legacy in the Church is related to that of Jesus himself, we might agree, a question that searches us all. Prompting the thought that Jesus was not an easy experience for his own followers. Nor were they for him. Only with difficulty did they make it from the cross to the empty tomb, having scattered at Jesus' arrest. Scenes of his resurrection appearances to them in Jerusalem witness to their fear and doubt, yet also to a reigniting of their faith, having received from Jesus the Holy Spirit.

The portal through which they recognise the risen Jesus is provided by his wounds. 'He showed them his hands and his side,' we are told (John 20.20). Thomas' doubt, and then belief, is focussed on these wounds. They send us back to the violence of the cross, even as his risen body itself testifies to the power of resurrection. The humanity of Jesus is not eliminated by the resurrection; he continues to be incarnate in this world, in solidarity with a broken and suffering humanity, Jew and Gentile.

It is this Jesus who – assuring us that he still *is*, and that he is still *for us* in all our difference and difficulty with each other – calls us to himself, and sends us out as his Father sent him. Out to engage in the risky work of holiness – binding up the broken, speaking truth to power while vulnerable to that power, seeking to engage our higher faculties in the making of peace. God being our helper, having initiated the divine-human relationship at creation and rebooted it countless times since, sealing it in Christ.

In Pope Francis we witnessed both cross bearer and care giver. Let us give thanks for him, and take heart from his tough-old-bird faith and his witness to our Lord's disarming love and healing justice.

Grace and peace to you all,  
Stewart