

> Gaza Peace Pilgrimage

Shawn Whelan and Tim Budge offer stories, in words and photos, of their experience of the Pilgrimage shared on Ash Wednesday, 14th February

To describe the experience, I can't do better than to quote Jessica Morrison (adapting for the distance I personally walked, while others walked anything from one section to the entire route):

Ash Wednesday was a profound day for me, as I walked two thirds of the distance from Gaza City to Rafah, mapped over Melbourne's suburbs. I walked alongside people who wanted to add prayers, lament and tears to their outrage about the horror being inflicted on the people of Gaza. Christians of many flavours, Muslim, Jewish and atheist folks wept together as we heard stories of Palestinians both here and in Palestine. We shared anguish about such immense suffering.

The thing that most struck me, was that I didn't feel on the fringes. Horns continually honked in support, we were welcomed in a Catholic School, in churches, a Mosque, and in public spaces. Our day concluded in St Paul's Cathedral - the church perhaps most associated with Empire. And in that vast hall, during their Ash Wednesday service, our calls for ceasefire and end to the occupation were read out and affirmed.

We are in the midst of the darkest night, but freedom is coming.

One of the aims of our walk was to raise money for Gazans seeking refuge in Australia, so if you can help, please contribute at <https://chuffed.org/project/gcpnaarm>.



Our route, compared with Gaza.
Some peace pilgrims walked the entire 34km,
as many refugees from Gaza City have done.

Shawn Whelan



Outside Epping Station at sunrise



We received hospitality and solidarity at several churches
and at the North Carlton Mosque.



We heard from Palestinian Christians,
in person and via their written stories, at an Orthodox church
where many Melbourne based Palestinians pray.



The pilgrimage ended at St Paul's Cathedral, where those who hadn't already taken ashes could do so.

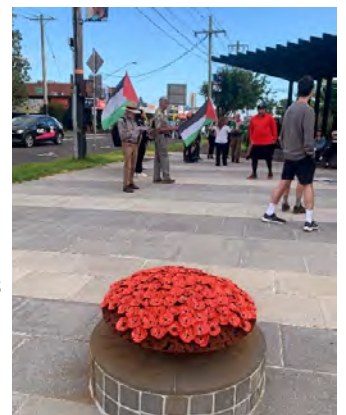


It started off light-hearted, almost like a reunion. A bunch of 40 rag-tag pilgrims with different signs, Palestinian flags and lots of familiar faces; people who have walked for social justice for a long time. It was also a great idea, to walk up to 40km, marking the distance from the North to South of Gaza and to do it on Ash Wednesday. Brunswick Uniting Church was well represented. As we walked through the Northern suburbs, there were lots of encouraging toots from cars and positive comments from passer-bys and shop-keepers. The local state Member of Parliament, Bronwyn Halfpenny joined for a few kms as did some people from Ged Kearney's office.

At Thomastown, we stopped at the local war memorial and Rev Alex Sangster and others led a moving liturgy. Recognising that Palestine was one of the places where allied troops fought and died, it felt restorative. "Lest we forget!"

All Saints Anglican church in High St, Preston welcomed us in, gave us coffee and food and anointed foreheads with ashes. Outside the Aboriginal Advancement League in Thornbury, we sat on the grass, sang songs and were reminded of how dispossession and colonialism rob people of land, lives and hope. The mood was perhaps becoming more sombre.

At the Saint George Antiochian Orthodox Cathedral, we gathered around the front steps and a young Palestinian woman gave a personal insight into the complexities of being a Palestinian these days. Then we heard stories from Christians in Gaza, of houses bombed, of 300 people living for weeks at the Church of Saint Porphyrius in Gaza City, which then itself was bombed. The story seemed bleak and hopeless, because life there has only got worse since those words were written. And I was reminded of how I had visited that church in 2018, I'd marvelled at its history and noted Gazans' pride in this place of worship. Some 1600 years after its establishment, parts of it have collapsed under IDF attacks as has most of Gaza Strip.



In those words about the conflict in Gaza, outside a church in Thornbury, I was reminded of Gazan friends, people whose homes I had visited, who had provided feasts, whose children had circled the table shyly and who had shared delightedly in the beautiful Palestinian food provided for me as a guest.

I have not heard from those friends since October. Nor have I heard of others; patients, staff and volunteers of the al Ahli Anglican Hospital who helped with my research and whose lives once revolved around women's health organisations. There has been nothing, no news, a scary silence.

Into that silence I have inserted images of bombed houses and apartments, of killed and injured family members, of displacement, of hunger and fear. Probably, many of my friends were forced to walk from Gaza City to Rafah to escape the initial wave of destruction. And still they wait and try to escape the next, inevitable wave of bombs.

At that church in Thornbury, I was reminded deeply of abandonment, of how our government, much of the world-wide church and so much of public opinion has abandoned the people of Gaza. "It's complicated", " Hamas started it", "If only they would not use violent language". In any other country and conflict, the language would not be so careful, or so accommodating of an aggressive military force. Somehow, Gazans, including my friends, have brought this on themselves.

In that moment on the walk, with a deep sense of grief, I was reminded of the Garden of Gethsemane: abandonment, betrayal, aloneness and the spectre of death looming ahead. Where does light and freedom appear in all of this? I am not sure. Somehow, it broke through in the Easter story, will it also happen in Gaza? Are we ready for it? Does our sense of our own place in the world allow for solidarity, for prayer, action and hope? Do we have the courage to see this conflict as the possibility of a breaking open, in the same vein as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the sudden release of Nelson Mandela, the courage of Rosa Parks tipping the balance for Civil Rights in the USA? This is our moment to align with the arc of justice, but only if we have the courage to refuse the abandonment of the people of Palestine, to embrace solidarity and to see the possibility of the light of the Gospel story in the Holy Land in the 2020s.

Tim Budge

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