

My reading of late has been quite disturbing to the point of wanting to avoid it if I can – two books in particular which I've been given and recommended to read - one you've already heard me quote from 'The Interrupted Life' of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish girl who discovers God, or who is discovered by God, in all the trauma of a wartime Amsterdam whose Jewish population is being deported in a very systematic way, one train load of a thousand people a week to camps further east, and ultimately to the centres of liquidation in Poland – half guessing their fate but so often holding on to the hope that things can't really get worse than they already are. And the other book, just started, of, one might say, its analogue - the story of Israel today and of two men: one Palestinian Arab, the other an Israeli Jew, both living in or near Jerusalem but unused to meeting except as enemies, or so society is now organised there. But they do meet in Area B, still open to both Palestinians and Israelis. And they meet because both have had a daughter killed in the ongoing conflict. Both realise there must be a better way: indeed at their first meeting

“It slowly dawned on Bassam that the only thing they had in common was that both sides had once wanted to kill people they did not know.”

(p.28 Apeirogon by Colin McCann)

What makes the story of the Samaritan so poignant is that this dynamic was as true of Jesus' time as now. Samaritans were despised by the Orthodox Jews of Jerusalem for being of mixed race and culture, a remnant of the northern kingdom conquered by the Assyrians in 722BC and worshipping God on Mount Gerizim in Schechem rather than on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Two peoples then of common origin who now rarely met. Indeed the action of the Samaritan in Jewish territory would have been as shocking to his fellow Samaritans as it was to Jesus' Jewish listeners and especially the lawyer whose job is necessarily one of clarifying boundaries, of getting 'yes' or 'no' answers. The tragedy of Israel today of course is that camps are now being constructed by Israeli Jews for the confinement of others, but as Etty Hillesum and Bassam Aramin and his Jewish counterpart Rami Elhanan realise, this dynamic of delineating others as different and to be despised is a delineation and confinement of ones own true self, it's a trap of ones own making - it leads nowhere except to further killing.

In stark contrast to these human made boundaries is the free flow of birds over the conquered territories of Israel and Palestine as Colum McCann describes at the beginning of his novel 'Apeirogon' based on the true characters and lives of Bassam and Rami. I can remember this too watching what I thought at first was a cloud appearing over Bethlehem but was in fact a flock of several thousand storks moving north in slowly circling spirals on their spring migration to Europe and Russia. And I couldn't help thinking that of all the cultural remains we were visiting of Jesus' time in Palestine this was the most original and everlasting- indeed the most significant for Jesus would have seen these birds too, these thousands of birds moving northwards in spring and southwards again in autumn. This then as an even truer image of Christ the creator God wanting not our confinement in this territory or that but the possibility of movement, contact, love.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour