

Sermon on Sunday 3 August 2025

Rev. Alan Stewart

No 'No-Go' Areas

A sabbatical, among other things, can be a great opportunity to do a little personal and spiritual stocktaking, and these past months have been, for me, a space to take inventory of where I am and who I am; of where I've come from and where I'm going.

I mentioned to some of you that I'd booked myself onto a five-day silent retreat by mistake. Well, who knew? It was actually one of the best mistakes I've ever made! It was spacious and affirming and rich and uncomfortable (in a good way) and very full of grace. Silence, I'm here to testify, does indeed speak. Silence takes us into the terrain of the soul, and in those five days of often awkward or bored silence, the Spirit of grace led me gently into some hitherto no-go areas of my life. Specifically, The Spirit led me to revisit some of the wounded and unresolved relationships of my past, and gave me just enough courage to swallow some pride, let go of some hurt, and reach out in hope of reconciliation.

In those months, I also did some personality stocktaking via the Enneagram. If you haven't come across it, it's an ancient personality system which describes nine interconnected personality types, each with their own core motivations, fears and behaviours. It's a wonderful tool in understanding ourselves and others better. And, for me, it's been both liberating and at times

uncomfortable. It was hard, for instance, to recognise and own things like envy or the need to be special. Again, the Spirit of grace helped me face these uncomfortable truths and, as I did, a whole host of little lightbulbs went on... Ah, so that's why...

Grace led me into these no-go areas of my past and my personality, but it would wait until almost the end of those three months to take me physically into two no-go areas in my homeland of Northern Ireland, when I spent a very precious week with my kids, Rosie and Elijah, visiting family and going to familiar and unfamiliar places.

Because of Elijah's interest in politics, we ventured into two places I'd never previously had the opportunity, or in fact the desire, to go; the Bogside in Derry and the Falls Rd in Belfast.

You see, I grew up a Protestant in the height of the Troubles. I went to a Protestant school where no Irish history was taught. I had only the commentary of my family and those within my own community. Inherited fear and mistrust served to demonise the Nationalist or Catholic areas like the Bogside and the Falls. These were places which harboured terrorists and glorified their acts. These were, and still are for many, no-go areas.

As I listened, however, to the other side of the story, as I visited the Free Derry Museum, and the gallery of murals painted on gable walls, I began to see differently. As I heard our Belfast tour-guide, Barbara, talk about the discrimination, injustice and violence visited on her community by those honoured by mine, a whole new story revealed itself. And I felt a deep shame and

sorrow that I have never sought out this truth about our shared history.

It was humbling to hear Barbara speak of the signs of hope blossoming between our communities, but also of the trauma she works through daily. And it was profoundly painful to hear her tell family stories of barbarism, particularly at the hands of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the one group that Barbara still cannot forgive. Some of you might know that my brother was in the RUC and that his life was taken by the IRA. I later spoke privately with Barbara. We looked into each other's eyes and we hugged, and I think that in that moment a little grace broke through for each of us.

When we were there, it was the marching season and many predominantly Protestant towns were bedecked with Union Jacks and Red Hands of Ulster. Usually, the more Catholic towns would respond with hanging the Irish Tricolour, but this time they hung flags in solidarity with another nation; Palestine.

During these past 22 months, we have witnessed how the Israeli government have made huge parts of Gaza no-go areas for the world's press, for foreign aid and, most tragically, for the people who for centuries have called this land their home.

Shamefully, until recently most of the world's leaders have watched from a distance as the IDF bomb and starve not only the Palestinian people and those who are risking their lives to help them, but also, of course, the Israeli hostages who they are supposedly trying to save.

And, like you perhaps, I feel helpless and angry. And I can only believe that Jesus weeps over Gaza as once he wept over Jerusalem.

In our parable today, we read about enemies sowing weeds in a field of wheat, 'while everyone was asleep'. And Jesus goes on to explain later that these weeds are, 'the children of the evil one'. His advice is not to tear out the weeds but to wait for the judgment of God. Is Jesus here really saying that because evil is inevitable, we should just leave it in the hands of God?

He can't be. His point is, I think, that a reckoning will come; justice will out. But it won't come through segregation or violence, it will come in encounters which give the Spirit of grace space to move.

And so, we petition or boycott, we donate or we demonstrate; most of all we pray for those who hold power that grace might break in. And we try to keep our own hearts soft and free from hating.

I wonder if there are any no-go areas in your life. To heal and thrive it's often important to venture into and through the no-go areas of our lives, in order to disable their power over us.

Sometimes, of course, these no-go areas are designed to protect us from the trauma of our past, and, therefore, it's important not

to go there alone. Sometimes we need a trusted friend or the help of professionals.

Often, no-go areas are patrolled by resentment and hurt designed to diminish and control us. So, we open ourselves to the wisdom of God's timing, waiting with him until both courage and opportunity arises. And we ask that we might be clothed, protected, as Colossians reminds us, with compassion, with kindness, with humility and with patience.

And in God's time, when the Spirit of grace takes us by the hand and says, 'let's go there', then remember; there are no no-go areas for God. God is already there, waiting.

