

Café Explore June 2021

Hi everybody, it's time to settle down to explore with a coffee, biscuit or cake.

Every morning I look at the BBC News app on my phone and from there I can read the newspaper headlines! Oh dear, moan, moan, moan!

Maybe we have plenty to be angry or sad about but there are good news stories too and perhaps we should focus on them more. On the radio was a short mini-series about the least visited places in Britain, places people would probably not choose for a 'staycation!' But the people interviewed were proud to describe the beauty of their area including one about South Tyneside and Souter Lighthouse.



Where is all this going in a Café Explore?

It made me think of beautiful places where no one wants to visit.

Here's one - Syria.

What was an affluent, reasonably stable country 10 years ago is now devastated by civil war and of course Covid.

This country was the cradle of the first gentile Christian churches. Think of the cities mentioned in Acts, Antioch and Damascus.

But now, 80% of the population live in poverty, 60% are food insecure, 33% of the children are not in school. 6.7 million are internally displaced and 5.6 million are refugees abroad, mainly in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. There were 2.2 million Christians before the war and now according to Open Doors charity there are 677,000 all facing war, covid and persecution.

10 years of this and yet now rarely in the news.

Back to our **Bible exploration**, this time looking at mentions of **Syria**, (Aram in Old Testament)

As usual read the passages given as if for the first time, noting any words or phrases that speak to you.

If these stories were headlines, would they be good news stories? I hope so!

Syria's heritage is traced back to Aram, son of Shem, son of Noah. It is the oldest biblical land that still exists today.

The story you may recall best is found in **2 Kings 5:7-16** New International Version - UK

Naaman healed of leprosy

5 Now Naaman was commander of the army of the king of Aram. He was a great man in the sight of his master and highly regarded, because through him the Lord had given victory to Aram. He was a valiant soldier, but he had leprosy.

2 Now bands of raiders from Aram had gone out and had taken captive a young girl from Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. **3** She said to her mistress, 'If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy.'

4 Naaman went to his master and told him what the girl from Israel had said. **5** 'By all means, go,' the king of Aram replied. 'I will send a letter to the king of Israel.' So Naaman left, taking with him ten talents of silver,

six thousand shekels of gold and ten sets of clothing. ⁶ The letter that he took to the king of Israel read: 'With this letter I am sending my servant Naaman to you so that you may cure him of his leprosy.'

⁷ As soon as the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his robes and said, 'Am I God? Can I kill and bring back to life? Why does this fellow send someone to me to be cured of his leprosy? See how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me!'

⁸ When Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his robes, he sent him this message: 'Why have you torn your robes? Make the man come to me and he will know that there is a prophet in Israel.' ⁹ So Naaman went with his horses and chariots and stopped at the door of Elisha's house. ¹⁰ Elisha sent a messenger to say to him, 'Go, wash yourself seven times in the Jordan, and your flesh will be restored, and you will be cleansed.'

¹¹ But Naaman went away angry and said, 'I thought that he would surely come out to me and stand and call on the name of the Lord his God, wave his hand over the spot and cure me of my leprosy. ¹² Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Couldn't I wash in them and be cleansed?' So, he turned and went off in a rage.

¹³ Naaman's servants went to him and said, 'My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you, "Wash and be cleansed"!' ¹⁴ So he went down and dipped himself in the Jordan seven times, as the man of God had told him, and his flesh was restored and became clean like that of a young boy.

¹⁵ Then Naaman and all his attendants went back to the man of God. He stood before him and said, 'Now I know that there is no God in all the world except in Israel. So please accept a gift from your servant.'

¹⁶ The prophet answered, 'As surely as the Lord lives, whom I serve, I will not accept a thing.' And even though Naaman urged him, he refused.

Matthew 4:23-25

²³ Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and illness among the people. ²⁴ News about him spread all over **Syria**, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralysed; and he healed them.

Acts 9:1-19

9 Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in **Damascus**, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. ³ As he neared **Damascus** on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'

⁵ 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked.

'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied. ⁶ 'Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.'

⁷ The men travelling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. ⁸ Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes, he could see nothing. So, they led him by the hand into **Damascus**. ⁹ For three days he was blind and did not eat or drink anything.

Acts 11:19-30

¹⁹ Now those who had been scattered by the persecution that broke out when Stephen was killed travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and **Antioch**, spreading the word only among Jews. ²⁰ Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to **Antioch** and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good

news about the Lord Jesus. ²¹ The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

²² News of this reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to **Antioch**. ²³ When he arrived and saw what the grace of God had done, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. ²⁴ He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

²⁵ Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, ²⁶ and when he found him, he brought him to **Antioch**. So, for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at **Antioch**.

Good news did come from Syria!

So let us now remember Syria's suffering in our hearts remembering their ongoing years of war, poverty and persecution.

Christian Aid's response (christianaid.org.uk)

We have been working with partners in Lebanon and Iraq to respond to the huge number of Syrian refugees who fled there, as well as inside Syria to deliver vital emergency assistance and support.

As a result of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we are adapting our work with partners so that we can continue to safely deliver assistance and protect the communities we support.

Our aims

1. To ensure the protection of all civilians, including humanitarian workers and civil society organisations inside Syria.
2. To ensure access to humanitarian support – including food, shelter, education, and medical support.
3. To ensure a just peace is negotiated.
4. To ensure the safe and voluntary return to homes of those displaced.
5. To ensure that all parties involved in the conflict are held accountable to international laws and standards.

Here is **a prayer from Open Doors**. (www.opendoorsuk.org)

Lord God, thank You that You have stood with the church in Syria throughout all the difficulties of the past decade.

We pray that You will continue to show Your love to those who have suffered so much. Bring unity and joy to Christians who have had to leave their homes, and solace to those who mourn.

May Syria become a country where praise for You resounds loudly.

Amen.

Thank you for joining me in Café Explore.

Marie