

*A Pilgrimage  
to the*



*Land of the Holy One*

*12 - 21 February 2014*

It was a great privilege to travel with a delightful mix of folk on a journey of discovery in February. It was a time of discovering things past and present, things 'over there' and things within ourselves, and we had wonderful company both within the group and in those we met along the way, with whom to do so.

The reflections some of the group have offered here will bring back to mind many memories for us all and, I hope, offer a path in to that shared experience for other readers who were not able to journey with us. Different places and aspects may speak to individuals in different ways, but a depth of encounter is common to us all and that to me is one of the great joys of 'making pilgrimage' together.

So as one who had a fair bit to do with the organising of things, a big thanks to those who have taken the trouble to record these memories and a very big thanks to you all who made the pilgrimage something that will be lodged permanently in the memory in a wonderful way.

The challenges that we had to rise to were of course temporary. At the time of writing, approaching the events of the Passion of Jesus which was so much a focus for our journey, I am reminded that the challenges for the people of land continue day in, day out, and of the continuing prayer of the Palestinian Christian community:

*We weep for our cities and especially for Jerusalem. And we weep for ourselves, for we have not learnt the things that make for peace.*

*O Lord, transform the tears into love and love into action.*

*O Lord, transform action into justice and teach us the road to peace.*

*We ask all this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

God's blessing on them and on us all

Deryck

## ***Wednesday - 12 February 2014***

### ***Travel to the Holy Land***

A rather early start as we had to be at Edinburgh airport for 5.30am; I don't think many folk had much sleep that night. Everyone arrived on time, and we were checked in as a group for the flight to Heathrow. Arriving at Terminal 5, we had to transfer to Terminal 1 for our flight to Tel Aviv. We had plenty of time, and even more time, as once we were boarded, we were informed that we would not be leaving for a further hour due to flight control problems in Europe, and so a rather long flight was made an hour longer!

After an uneventful journey, we arrived at Tel Aviv, and had a very slow passage through passport control and customs. On reaching baggage reclaim, we found that one case was missing, and so there was further delay while this was investigated. Rather tired by this time, we had a two hour transfer to our hotel in Tiberias, and were very relieved when we were able to find our rooms here. We were rather too late for the evening meal, but the hotel staff had left food in all our rooms, which was very welcome, but not nearly as welcome as the beds waiting for us.

**Thursday - 13 February 2014**

***Sepphoris, Caesarea and the Mar Elias School***

We were now two hours ahead of GMT, but were to become accustomed to early starts throughout our visit. After a 6am call, we were able to see more of the Ron Beach Hotel, with our rooms overlooking the Sea of Galilee, and with sunrise at around 6.30 and East facing rooms, what a view to greet us. We then had the most amazing selection of breakfast dishes, including fresh dates and figs, and a huge dripping honey comb, plus hot dishes, pastries and cakes, different breads and lots of fresh fruit.



We were on the bus by 8am, on our journey to Sepphoris, the first century Roman Administration base for Galilee. Galilee is remarkably fertile and green, quite different from the wilderness further south, and during the journey, our guide, Oliver, was able to give us a great deal of information. Fluent in a number of languages, with Hebrew and Arabic being particularly pertinent, he was able to tell us of the relevance of some of the names in the Bible. “El” in Hebrew means “God” and so Isra-el (also Jezre-el) means “the seed of God”, and Carm-el; “the vineyard of God.” The name “Palestine” is derived from the “Philistines” of old. Throughout the visit, Oliver spoke without any notes, but with great authority, depth and passion for his subject.

On arrival at Sepphoris, we were unable to take the bus down the road as road repairs were being carried out (why these couldn’t have been done at night when visitors would not be present is still a mystery). So we had rather a long walk to the site where we were able to see the remarkable ruins of a first century Roman town, the wealthy homes had wonderful mosaics, some still clearly visible and quite beautiful.

Sepphoris was being built when the young Jesus was in Nazareth, and as it is only 2 – 3 km from Nazareth, it is quite possible that Jesus and Joseph walked there each day to help with the buildings. A “carpenter” at that time would not just have worked with wood – there would not have been enough work – but with anything which needed to be constructed; buildings, tools, roads etc. At this time, there would have been about 30 families in Nazareth, most of whom would have lived in caves. There is one theory that Mary’s mother, Anne, was from Sepphoris, so maybe Mary was born and brought up there?

It was about this time that we found what a treasure we had in our driver, Riyadh. He was always willing to give a hand to help folk on and off the coach, and it was lovely to see how he developed a rapport with Olive, always giving her a hand, keeping her company on the few occasions when she could not manage the terrain, and always with a joke and a ready smile.

From Sepphoris, we travelled to Caesarea Maritime, a town developed on Roman lines by Herod the Great. Herod was not of the line of David, but had been crowned king, much to the annoyance of the Jews. Herod wanted a port which was open seven days a week, and which did not stop for the Sabbath and the eve of the Sabbath, and so this town was developed and named after his patron, Augustus. It had two main roads running north to south, and east to west, crossing at a square – a typical Roman development, so that wherever in the Roman Empire you happened to be, the layout would always be the same. The roads had deep ruts in them where many carts had been driven – a busy and wealthy city.



Herod the Great (not the Herod of the time of the crucifixion) built an amphitheatre for plays and entertainments loved by the Romans and Greeks, but hated by the Jews who were more concerned with spiritual matters, and who disliked men dressing up as women and speaking in high voices, and half naked women dancing. Herod built his palace within earshot of the amphitheatre, so that he could keep an eye on proceedings. His palace had a swimming pool, and a gymnasium for training horses, and other sports, there was also an easy means of escape if needed, as it was on the edge of the sea.

Herod employed great engineers and builders; they developed a self-cleaning harbour – gaps in the walls allowed the sea to wash through and clear out the silt. They also solved the problem of lack of water. A spring had been discovered 16km away, but at about the same altitude as Caesarea. A dam was built to raise the level of the water, and then a 16km long aqueduct was built from the spring to the town. The aqueduct was built on sand dunes, and was used until the 1920's, when part of it collapsed as less sand was being washed up the coast from the Nile.



We had a wonderful lunch in Caesarea – being asked if we would mind being out of doors; in 25C this was a real hardship! Small dishes kept appearing at intervals – lovely salads, humus, rice, herby potatoes, lamb rissoles, sesame chicken schnitzels, fruit and ice cream - very appetising.

From Caesarea, we travelled over Mount Carmel, but were delayed in rush hour traffic and so were not able to get to the Mar Elias school in I'billin in time to see Elias Chacour, the founder of the school. However, we heard from his godson, another Elias, who is now Head of the school.

The Israeli Government does not seem to feel that villages in Palestine should have good schools, and refuse or greatly delay planning permission for new buildings. Salaries are paid, but were stopped for seven months when an extension was built without planning permission – this was only resolved after agreement with wealthy donors in the US. Everything seems to be done to undermine the work the school is trying to do, and much of the head's time is spent overseas to try to top up funding.

The main aim of the school is harmony; education is provided from nursery to university level, for pupils, and with staff, from many different backgrounds; to provide a cross cultural and multi-faith ethos. Around 50% of the pupils are Muslim, 45% Christian and 5% other. Fees are about \$200 a year, but about half of all the pupils are unable to pay but are taught nevertheless. Results are excellent as there is a strong work ethic, but students have problems entering university as they have to wait three years after leaving school as Jewish students must do National Service before university.

As head of school, Elias faces many problems. He has encouraged pupils to speak out about injustice, but suffered greatly when an older pupil protesting peacefully was shot dead by Israeli soldiers. How does anyone cope with this? The school continues despite the unhelpfulness of the government, but only support from overseas allows it to stay open. Our prayers for them are greatly welcomed.

After a very busy day, we returned to our hotel in Tiberius, 200m below sea level. Flocks of birds flew over the water, the wind whipped up the waves, and we could see the Golan Heights across the water. What would tomorrow bring?

Chris Bond

## ***Friday - 14<sup>th</sup> February 2014***

### ***Mount Tabor and Nazareth Village***

6am - Morning call- (I don't usually get up before the birds)

7.00am - Breakfast – as usual I eat too much for breakfast – who can resist the fresh fruit, cheese, bread, eggs, etc.

7.30am - We are all on the bus and raring to go to our first stop of the day.

### **Mount Tabor and the Church of the Basilica of the Transfiguration**

After a short bus journey we get to the base of mount Tabor and then we all pile into large taxis to tackle the 13 hair pin bends to the top. The views over the Jezreel plain were magnificent, it was a beautiful day, the sun on my back gave me a warm glowing feeling and I felt on top of the world. The Basilica of the Transfiguration was simple with a beautiful painted ceiling; the main picture is of Jesus with Moses and Elijah.

The gardens were also simple and beautiful, with a serene feeling. The gardens are tended by recovering addicts from Italy who spend up to 18 months working as handymen and gardeners. I could not think of a better place for reflection and recovery and I pray that they all find the peace they need.

We then had to take the Taxi back down to the bottom, the 13 hairpin bends did not seem too bad when you could see the magnificent views.



## **Nazareth**

Next stop an open air construction of Nazareth Village.

We had a guided tour of the village, people were dressed in biblical clothes and even the sheep and goats were nuzzling up to us and making us welcome. We watched a carpenter at work using simple tools and a woman spinning and weaving. We went into the replica synagogue for our readings, it was lovely and cool in there and it made me think of all the hustle and bustle in a synagogue like this 2000 years ago.

We had a biblical style lunch – what a treat. (I ate far too much)

Lentil soup - humus and other dip - flat bread – coleslaw – chicken - apple and dates.

After lunch it was time to leave and we were all given a little pottery lamp - to keep the light shining.

We then visited EMMS hospital chapel- with the carpenters work bench for the altar and the tool box for the lectern. We were given a talk on the good work that is done by the many volunteer doctors and nursing staff in the hospital. As I was sitting in the chapel the hymn “Bind us together Lord” kept sounding in my head, I don’t know why but maybe one day I will find out.

After leaving the Hospital we visited the Church of the Annunciation, this church is hexagonal inside and is plain on the bottom with a beautifully decorated second level. There are mosaics from all over the world inside and out. Underneath the church are caves carved out of the white rock where the holy family is said to have lived. As we entered the church the organ was playing “Ave Maria” - this brought a lump in my throat as the sound was so beautiful.

A short walk from the Church of the Annunciation through the Souks, we came to the Church of the Synagogue which is a vaulted church from the crusader period. In this small, peaceful, plain unassuming vault we had some bible readings and one could reflect on how Nazareth may have been against the hustle and bustle of the new town of Nazareth outside.

We then walked to the Greek Orthodox Church at St Mary’s Well, there we briefly saw the well where it is believed that Mary was drawing water when the angel Gabriel first appeared to her. A Funeral Service was about to take place so we left there and went on the bus to our last stop of the day, Cana.

## **Cana**

At Cana, we had had our bible readings and prayers at the courtyard of the Church of Miracle and some time to look into the church.

26 tired people then walked to the bus and we got back to the hotel at 5.50pm.

Dinner at 7pm and Compline at 9pm, where we could reflect on the wonderful day we had and pray for a restful night before we started the next day of our exciting spiritual and mortal adventure.

Wilma Brown

**Saturday - 15<sup>th</sup> February 2014**

### ***The Lakeside Ministry***

Sea of Galilee (aka: Sea of Tiberius, Sea of Genneseret, Sea of Kinneret – which means in Hebrew the Sea of the Harp - due to the shape of the lake). The Sea is situated in the north east of Israel in the Jordan rift valley adjacent to the Golan Heights.

The Sea is 13 miles long by 8 miles wide and lies 209 metres below sea level. It is the lowest *fresh* water lake in the world.

The morning was overcast and a gentle rain fell upon the relatively calm lake since overnight the wind had dropped. The Golan Heights visible across the lake were partially shrouded in mist. At about 8.0am we sailed from the embarkation pier adjacent to the Ron Beach Hotel in what is claimed to be a replica of a wooden 1<sup>st</sup> century AD boat found in the Sea of Galilee. Our boat was named SHIMON., We sailed across the lake while Deryck gave a short homily concerning Jesus calming both the sea and the frightened disciples.



We disembarked on to the north west shore after a relaxing half hour sail and were taken by coach to the Convent of the Beatitudes church and garden commemorating the Sermon on the Mount.

The Mount, (aka Mount Erebus) lies between Capernaum and Genneseret. The Convent and Church overlay the site of a Byzantine Church (4<sup>th</sup> Century AD) and there exists the remains of a 7<sup>th</sup> century cistern. The present Convent is a Roman Catholic Franciscan chapel built in 1938.

It is a beautiful chapel with the beatitudes engraved on the walls. A request for “no flash photography” was ignored by several other pilgrims/tourists (not ours) – all very sad. The grounds of the Chapel are very well maintained and in the quiet of the evening it must be a wonderful place to be but for us it was all rather rushed and with no time to simply “be”.

We now moved on to Capernaum, Jesus’ Galilean base. Beneath a protective chapel/shelter lies the remains of an ancient octagonal church. Tradition has it that it is built on the site of Peter’s house.

Some years ago a further excavation revealed within and below this octagonal structure lay an older round building. Further yet deeper excavation yielded fish hooks, tackle, coins and other remnants consistent with a fisherman’s house and carbon dating has demonstrated them to be 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Our guide told us that the consensus view of archaeologists is that this site is entirely consistent with this being Peter’s house and the site of the healing of his mother by Jesus. Sadly the modern chapel contained within the overlying shelter was closed. Near “Peter’s House” there are remains of other houses of a similar vintage and also the ruins of a 4<sup>th</sup> century Synagogue.

Close by is Tabgha where there is a Benedictine “Church of the Loaves and Fishes”. Within the Church there are Byzantine mosaics of the loaves and fishes – mosaics which are reproduced on many souvenirs. Here on the sea shore we celebrated Holy Communion. For myself, and I am certain for many others, this was very special indeed. Janet presided and as she did so the gentle light rain that had accompanied us most of the day turned into a heavy shower drumming on the overhead shelter. As I looked across the simple stone altar and beyond the small cross



embedded in the stone I could see shafts of sunlight breaking through the clouds onto the gently rising bright green slopes of the adjacent hills. So reminiscent of Scotland – I could have been beside any number of my favourite lochs. So appropriate as we remembered it was Andrew who

provided two wee fish along with the barley loaves. A time to intercede especially for all our folk at home and to be reassured of what Jesus can do with such small offerings.



As we got ready to leave after communion a hyrax appeared and sat on a small post – clearly used to visitors!

After the service we made our way towards Banias (Panias – temple of Pan) better known as Caesarea Philippi. On the way we noted snow on the top of

Mount Hermon and passed barbed wire enclosed Syrian mine fields. These old mines are deteriorating and highly dangerous. Before completing our journey to Banias we stopped for lunch at a Lebanese restaurant. The food was excellent.

At Banias the remains of the pagan temple to Pan were evident and very close by the site of one of the sources of the river Jordan. Some years ago an earthquake had caused a significant rock fall obliterating the place where the stream emerged from the rocks and now given the name of the Springs of Hermon. However the water having been forced to change course then emerged into broad shallow pools before continuing on its way to the Sea of Galilee. Notices requested that nobody should paddle in the pools since this was now a nature reserve and must not be contaminated.

It is at this site – the Temple of Pan (aka temple of the dancing goat) that tradition has it that Jesus posed the question to Peter; “Who do you say that I am?” The eternal question.

We then returned slowly to Tiberias via the Golan Heights noting as we travelled how fertile the land is. Apparently this is due largely to volcanic soil lying on top of limestone. En route we stopped briefly at the edge of the Avital Park noting nearby mine fields and an Israeli “Look Out” – built on a previously constructed Russian base. From here Israeli forces can view distant Syria. Shortly afterwards we crossed the River Jordan, now clearly recognizable as a river with tall grassy banks and sometime later we ended our day at the Ron Beach Hotel.

Howard Moody



## ***Sunday - 16<sup>th</sup> February 2014***

### ***Nazareth and the Jordan Valley***

On the Sunday we left Tiberias to travel to Jerusalem to continue the rest of our Pilgrimage. We first attended the Morning service in Christ Church Nazareth. I would like to say that everywhere we visited during our Pilgrimage we were greeted with such warmth and our welcome at Christ Church was no exception.

As we waited for the service to begin a member of the congregation welcomed us and told us about the beautiful Church. He introduced an elderly lady who told us that her Father had worked on the building of the Church. There was a clock hanging in the Church and we were curious to know if perhaps the congregation were timing the sermon. Deryck beware

The Priest gave the sermon in Arabic and then very kindly translated in English. He explained that as Children of God it is not enough to just go along to Church on a Sunday we need to act, follow Christ teachings and be his living stones. We sang the hymns in English and others sang in Arabic. It was a different experience but an extremely comforting one to worship with our brothers and sisters in Christ albeit in a different language.

The priest had two "Angels" who were training to be servers. The two little boys would be about 6 and 8 years and the younger was going to need to grow a bit to fit his gown which was about three sizes too big. The gown sat at a jaunty angle and kept slipping off one shoulder. Nonetheless they took their task seriously and it was good to watch the Priest training the boys and encouraging them both by gently nudging them in to place. We were invited for coffee after the service and the most delicious sweet treats.

We then headed for the Jordan Valley and stopped off at the Sachne Hot Springs where we enjoyed a picnic lunch. You will have gathered by now that shared food experiences played a very large part in our Pilgrimage. What an idyllic setting, the water in the hot spring was a beautiful turquoise colour. There were some locals swimming in the spring and we were fortunate to spot a kingfisher who made a guest appearance.



We then visited the baptismal site at Qasr El Yahud where Jesus was baptised by John. Many other pilgrims were going for full submersion but we were content to just dip our fingers in the waters of the Jordan. There was also the baptism of a baby taking place. The Jordan River at this point is quite narrow, I would say about 4 metres wide and you could see the Jordanians on one side and we were on the other with a rope border and

armed guards on both sides to ensure no one crossed the border. It was a very relaxed atmosphere and there was certainly no cause for concern.

We continued on to Jerusalem to our Hotel which was in an ideal location for visiting the old city. We had a wonderful view from the Hotel of the Damascus gate which takes you in to the old city. Jerusalem is a place of great beauty and a fascinating place to visit. The memories and experiences in the land of the Holy One, the people I met and those who shared the Pilgrimage will stay with me a lifetime.

With love  
Rona Finlayson x

### **Monday - 17 February 2014** **The Mount of Olives and Ein Karem**

The Mount of Olives – a name so evocative of Christ’s life and Passion that it was a fitting place for the start of the Jerusalem part of our pilgrimage. Near the top stands the Pater Noster Church, so called because according to tradition it was close to here that Jesus taught his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. Round the cloister walls are tiles embossed with the prayer in nearly 200 languages from all over the world.



Going down the fairly steep slope of the Mount of Olives, we came to the equally evocative Garden of Gethsemane whose ancient olive trees may even date from the time of Jesus. A beautiful small chapel, the Dominus Fleuit (meaning ‘the Lord wept’), commemorates Jesus’s sorrow as he looked towards Jerusalem and foretold its destruction.

From Gethsemane we had a stunningly beautiful view of the walled Old City with the golden cupola of the Dome of the Rock gleaming in the sunshine. It was sobering to think how this city, a holy place to Jews and Muslims as well as Christians, has so frequently been the scene of conflict. “Pray for peace in Jerusalem” is something that pilgrims, and indeed all Christians, are asked to do.

Close to Gethsemane a vast Jewish cemetery stretches round the hillside of the Mount of Olives, while a Christian cemetery and a Muslim one occupy the lower slopes, yet another reminder of the importance of Jerusalem to all three monotheistic faiths.



A church that we did not visit but admired from the outside was the beautiful Russian Orthodox Church of Mary Magdalene with its seven golden onion domes. Over a century ago Russian Orthodox Christians were very prominent in Jerusalem, but are now sparse in numbers like most Christian congregations in the Holy Land.

One more fine church was on our schedule that morning. San Pietro in Gallicantu stands on the slope of Mount Zion, across the Kidron Valley from the Mount of Olives. It was to this site, some believe, that Jesus was brought after his betrayal and arrest, because below the church are thought to be the foundations of the High Priest Caiaphas's house. The name of the church refers to the crowing of the cock after Peter's denial of Jesus.

Lunch was much needed by this time, and we received excellent food and hospitality in the Church of Scotland's St Andrews Guest House, whose church is simple but beautiful, a contrast to the ornate ones we had been to that morning. After a restful time there we drove a few miles to the village of Ein Karem where John the Baptist was born. A fine church decorated with tiles from Spain commemorates this, and I particularly admired the beautifully carved Stations of the Cross.



An impressive, huge 1/50 model of the City of Jerusalem as it was in the 1st century was our next port of call. We saw what archaeologists believe Herod's temple, which was later destroyed by the Romans, would have looked like. Immediately after, we visited the Shrine of the Book, where the extremely important Dead Sea Scrolls are on display – a treasure indeed, as they are the most ancient versions of parts of the Bible.



Clearly we had spent a day in which a huge amount needed to be taken in. Fortunately our excellent local guide, Oliver, had such a knack of picking out the highlights and summarising the complicated history but also giving us peaceful spaces in which to reflect that most of us simply felt moved and privileged by our experiences that day – and eager to find out more.

Christine Stevenson

**Tuesday - 18<sup>th</sup> February 2014**

***The Dead Sea – Masada, Ein Boqek and Qumran***

Although it was optional, the entire group chose to go to Masada and the Dead Sea; a testament to the excellence of Oliver's guiding and Riyad's driving. As we left Jerusalem Oliver reminded us that the city straddles the watershed. The green Mediterranean slopes in the east soon gave way to the dry rocky wilderness of Judea in the west. On a good road we descended from 800m above sea level to 360m below, seeing only a few Bedouin encampments in side valleys. Once down on flat ground we sped south, away from Jericho.

The hills of Jordan stretched out on our left, steep crumbling red cliffs on our right. Oliver fed us snippets of information on the way; here are two: "That lone tree in the stream bed is the acacia. It can live a long time without rain, because its roots go down as much as 50 metres. It has small leaves and large thorns to protect them." "The Dead Sea has shrunk 45 vertical metres in 30 years. This is partly due to global warming with less rain, partly due to huge irrigation projects all along the Jordan Valley." The vast fruit plantations on either side of the road bore witness to the second statement.



Our first stop was at a Qumran, where in 1947 a shepherd discovered in a cave pottery jars which contained the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls related the only known histories of early Judaism and Christianity, written between 200 BCE and 60 CE. We gazed at the hillside from the partly excavated ruins of large buildings which may have been the home of the Scrolls' authors, the Essenes. They hid the jars in caves when the Romans invaded in CE 68. As we clambered over the ruins (the hall where the writing took place was called the Scriptorium)

the sun shone from a deep blue sky; the cold wind of our earlier days in Galilee was forgotten.

We drove on to Masada, with the Dead Sea on our left. Oliver pointed out the summit of Mount Nebo in Jordan, high above the far bank: "This is where Moses brought the Jewish people to look down over the Promised Land after years of wandering, and where he died."

Masada is a hill top fortress built by Herod in BCE 37-31. The steep rocks of the hill made it almost impregnable; only a ramp constructed by Jewish slaves allowed the Romans to enter after a long siege. When they did so they found that the 950 Zealot occupants had chosen mass suicide over subjugation. The fortress has become an important symbol of Jewish resistance to outside attack. "Masada will never fall again."

Although some tourists walked up the angled Snake Path to the fortress, we were happy to be whisked up by cable car. Oliver gave us a fascinating explanation at various points of the fortress; the grain store, the cistern (near which the world's earliest shower was discovered), Herod's chambers and a Byzantine chapel. We shared this visit with many other tour groups, including one of noisy children which made us strain to catch our guide's words.



We had been promised a decent lunch at Lot Hotel, Ein Boqet (although all our lunches had been good!) and the chance of a swim in the Dead Sea. The buffet lunch was – as promised – magnificent. We shared the meal with tourists from all over, perhaps Russian language being dominant. We had time to swim/float in the sea and in the warm (unsalty) water of the hotel pool and even try the draught German beer before boarding the bus.

The journey back to Jerusalem was interrupted by a short detour to Wadi Qelt. Riyadh coaxed the bus round a twisting side road to a small hill, which had a cross on a stone pillar on top. From the stony summit we looked down over the ravine of the wadi. On the far bank, high above the stream bed, a monastery had been plastered onto the cliff. This was the monastery of St George, now occupied by 7 Greek Orthodox monks. It was an imposing, isolated structure, but, said Oliver, that is what the monks wanted. In the distant past many fundamentalist Christians had accepted martyrdom as proof of their religious fervour, in more recent times a life of extreme austerity was the equivalent.



The day ended with the Golden Walls buffet followed by evening prayer. This day we had not been following in “the footsteps of Jesus” but we had enjoyed a fascinating tour in the West Bank which had greatly increased our knowledge of the region and its history.

David and Pat Syme

### ***Wednesday - 19 February 2014***

#### ***Temple Mount and Bethlehem***

**(Including Pools of Bethesda, Bethlehem Rehabilitation Centre & Jeel al Amal Home & School)**

I can hardly believe it is a week since we arrived and already it is our penultimate day of exploring the ‘Land of the Holy One’, before we begin our long journey home. We have done and seen so much and had so many memorable experiences. Today I got up early and went on to the roof garden at our hotel to watch the sun come up. The day looked full of promise, with the sun gently gilding the top of the walls enclosing the old city of Jerusalem from our good vantage point opposite the Damascus Gate. The city was coming to life, with people going about their daily business.

We had planned to visit **Temple Mount** but, although we set off early, there was already a lengthy queue when we arrived (blame the cruise ships whose passengers want to see everything in a day!), so we decided not to wait and to alter our itinerary accordingly. This must have been frustrating for those first-time visitors for whom seeing the Dome of the Rock and the El Aqsa Mosque was to have been one of the highlights. The Dome was tantalisingly visible just above the Western Wall, its golden surface shining in the sunlight. At least we were able to experience the



Western Wall, the last remaining vestige of the Second Temple built by Solomon. Men and women were segregated, with men on one side and women on the other. I noticed that there were a few chairs with desks for women who were unable to stand to make their prayer requests. Some of us women were naughty and took photographs of the men's side over the fence ...

Oliver, our ever-resourceful tour guide, drew up an amended itinerary and we set off to visit the **Pools of Bethesda**, where St Anne lived and where it is believed the Virgin Mary may have been born. After inspecting the remains of the Pools, where there have been extensive excavations, we proceeded to visit the large Romanesque Church, dedicated to St Anne.

The Gospel site of Bethesda invites us to take time for meditation and prayer. Everyone is confronted by Jesus's question: "Do you want to be well?" To all who experience illness, weariness, fears or remorse, he still says: "Stand up, take your mat and walk!", as we remember this is where we believe Jesus healed the paralytic man on the Sabbath. We had some time to draw breath here. The present Basilica is renowned for its special echo and Deryck led us in some Taizé chants. There is a beautiful marble statue of St Anne with the young Virgin Mary in the church. The site is now run by the White Fathers, whose work is particularly



in Africa. I stopped and spoke to one of them, who turned out to be Father Michael Fitzgerald from Birmingham! A lovely man with a gentle face, who reminded me of the late Pope John Paul. He kindly posed for his picture.



Our next stop was the

**Bethlehem Rehabilitation Centre.** We had expected to have to travel via a checkpoint at the ghastly 'security wall', but we were taken a longer route which saved us from having to encounter the wall. We had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, we were spared a close encounter with the wall, on the other we would have liked to have seen it close-up to further understand its impact on those who have to live within its confines on a daily basis.



We arrived at the Rehabilitation Centre in time for a short presentation by its Deputy Director, Imad Abumohor, who gave us an insight into the work of the Centre which covers all medical specialties dealing with mind and body. After this we were given a short tour of the centre, which was busy with mothers and children. There seemed to be a happy atmosphere, although clearly

some sad cases. We were provided with a full lunch (another one!) in the canteen, with time to shop for gifts and souvenirs in the adjoining craft shop.

After lunch we set off for **Bethlehem**, our main focus being to visit the **Church of the Nativity**. Bethlehem was also very busy with tourists (pilgrims?) but, after queuing for a short time in Manager Square, we obtained access to the Church. It's difficult to know what to say about this. Some people found it completely OTT with all its altars, images and chandeliers. This was not helped by the many 'baubles' left over from the Christmas season (which lasts longer there) still adorning the already cluttered space. We 'squeezed' ourselves down some steep stairs into the Grotto of the Nativity beneath the chancel to see what is believed to have been the very place of Christ's birth. We were reminded that St Jerome took up residence in the caves underneath the church and produced the Vulgate Bible, the first Latin translation of the scriptures.



Before heading home, we visited the **Olive Wood Factory** to meet those involved in this family-run business – and of course to make more purchases. I spoke with a nice young man aged 17 called Abdullah, who informed me that his cousin now runs the business.

Some of us went on to visit the boys' home and co-ed school of **Jeel al Amal**. The sun was beginning to set as the coach ferried us through some very run-down looking suburbs of Jerusalem. There were shops, but few customers it seemed, then there were people who seemed to be living just by the side of the road with little in the way of warmth or shelter. This is a part of the city which most visitors don't see, I imagine. We were given a very warm welcome at the home, where we were met by the daughter of Basil & Alice Sahhar, who founded it in 1972. She is clearly a wonderful, dedicated person and she was so grateful for the large suitcase of gifts which Bill and Margaret Scott had collected to donate to the school. We met some of the boys and we left with a warm 'glow' that we had given a little back as pilgrims and not just 'taken' as tourists.

So this was a very full day indeed. Looking back to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, John Betjeman's poem 'Christmas' kept coming into my mind and I finish with an extract from it:

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine

**Thursday - 20<sup>th</sup> February 2014**  
**Yad Vashem and The Via Dolorosa**  
**the final day of our pilgrimage.**

Viewing sunrise from the hotel roof garden overlooking the ancient city walls of Jerusalem held the prospect of yet another lovely day. There was a tinge of sadness that our pilgrimage was nearing its end, although an unaccustomed late start meant there was no need to be in the bus until 9.00am!

The day would prove to be one of contrasts and parallels, beginning in the morning with a moving visit to Yad Vashem, a modern museum with striking architecture and extensive gardens devoted to the Holocaust. It was an emotive experience and the reminders of such a terrible human catastrophe and the video testimonies of survivors were quite hard to cope with. However, even in the darkest times there were good deeds and Oliver, our guide, showed us the avenue of the Righteous in which were planted trees to commemorate those non-Jews who risked their lives to save Jews during the Holocaust.

The sombre mood engendered by Yad Vashem was lifted somewhat when we returned to the old city of Jerusalem for lunch at the Ecce Homo convent. Beneath the house lies a pavement of large smooth slabs where Pilate is reputed to have condemned Jesus. Beneath the convent there are the most amazing deep cisterns and a labyrinth of underground passages. A lovely lunch was enhanced by a leisurely coffee break on the convent roof overlooking the buildings of old Jerusalem. We could hear children playing football in a nearby school playground and a noisy rooster crowing; washing hung out on the rooftops in the sun to dry; everyday life carrying on as normal.

With the suffering of the Jews under the Nazis in the last century still fresh in our minds, we now remembered Christ's suffering in the first century as we followed in His footsteps on His last painful journey carrying the Cross up the Via Dolorosa. We stopped to reflect in some of the tiny chapels located at the Stations of the Cross. A visitor might hardly notice these chapels when shopping on the busy street, but once inside them there was an oasis of calm and peace in which to meditate. Our walk up the Via Dolorosa ended at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the last station and the traditional site of the Crucifixion and Christ's tomb. The church was thronged with pilgrims from all over the world and too crowded for us to see the tomb itself.



Finally, we walked to an alternative site for Christ's burial in the Garden tomb, which was excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is situated just outside the city walls, not far from our hotel, in a lovely tranquil garden, quite different to the busy, slightly chaotic streets of the old town. After bidding farewell to our wonderful guide, Oliver, the garden was a fitting place to end our memorable pilgrimage with a celebration of the Eucharist seated on benches beneath the trees as the daylight faded.

However, that was not quite the end of our stay in Jerusalem: in marked contrast to the spiritual events of the day, a Sultan's banquet was yet to come. Our hotel put on a wonderful final meal for us and the sight of Deryck and Christine and their fellow pilgrims all doing a sort of Arabic 'conga' around the tables of the dining room is one that will remain in our memories for a long time!

Frances and Peter Jeppesen

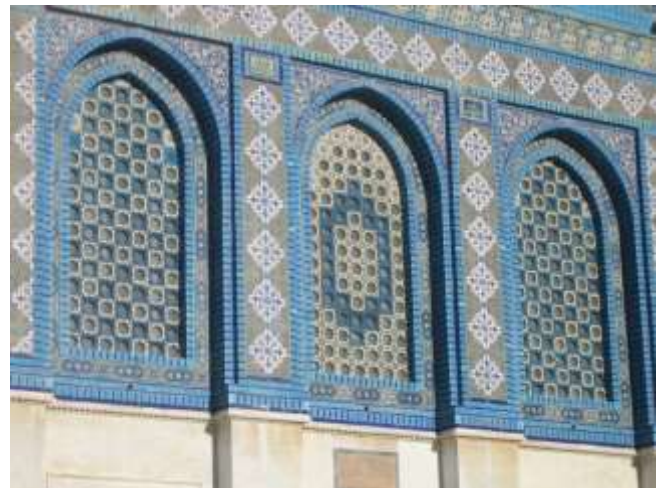


## ***An alternative morning***

Several members of the party did not wish to visit Yad Vashem, and so Janet, Christine Stevenson and I decided to forgo breakfast and leave the hotel at a very early hour in order to be able to visit the Temple Mount, which we had been unable to visit the previous day. This is only open from 07.30 to 11.00, with all “infidels” having to be off the Mount by 10.45. We had a steady walk to the entrance, arriving just before 7am, and to find a much shorter queue than the previous day. After passing through security, we entered the Mount, and found it to be a very peaceful and relaxed place – and HUGE. There were groups of Muslim women studying together, and groups of men sitting on carpets spread out on the grass also studying. Several cats were strolling over the area and happily followed a man who was feeding them.



The buildings were beautiful – such an impressive site to see this huge golden dome, and all the Islamic art round the sides.



We felt for quite a time that we were the only ones in the area – there were no tour groups or any of the hustle and bustle of the old city – just peace. We were unable to enter the mosque, after an effort to destroy it some years ago, but the beauty of the whole place will stay with us for a long time.



Each Wednesday morning, the Dalmatians meet. The Eucharist is celebrated, and some folk who cannot come to the Sunday services join members of the congregation of St Mary's at this time. On the last Wednesday of each month, a speaker is invited and after the Eucharist there is an informal, friendly and informative meeting followed by a shared lunch of soup and dessert. On the last Wednesday of March, there was a chance to share the experiences of the pilgrimage with this group, and a large number of folk came along.

Janet presided, and below is the homily she gave at this time.

*Collect Lent 3. ASB*

*Lord Mercifully grant, that we, walking the way of the Cross, may find in it none other than the way of life and peace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

That Lenten prayer seems to sum up all our longings as together, we each try to walk our personal Lenten journeys in these weeks leading up to Easter.

We follow the high points and the low points of the journey that Jesus made leading up his crucifixion. What are our expectations about this particular journey we are encouraged to make for these 40 days?

Some of us also followed that same journey on our pilgrimage from Galilee to Jerusalem. What were our expectations on our Pilgrimage to the Holy Land.? They are for each of us very personal and individual.

I had read some of the very earliest accounts of pilgrimages to the Holy Land. Some recounted their reactions on first glimpsing the white shining walled city of Jerusalem. (white, because it is built of limestone)

They could only fall on their faces in wonder and worship.

On our journey indeed we witnessed many folk also on their knees, touching and kissing stones which have been kissed for 2000 years. I too felt compelled to touch these ancient stones where crosses are carved in profusion and where prayers written on pieces of paper are often tucked into ancient cracks.

We saw many very devout people, Orthodox Jews at the Wailing Wall, but also there were women, obviously grieving arms around each other and hands placed on the Wall. There were the quiet, well mannered Muslims very early indeed on the impressive Temple Mt, a place of light and gentle peace.

And there were Christians on their knees, and much sincere and beautiful singing, both inside and outside churches, on Mt of Olives and along the Via Dolorosa, just everywhere. There were tearful mass baptisms in the Jordan. There were also the hundreds of others just looking, jostling, brandishing cameras often inappropriately, trying to capture the place and the sense of holiness. There seemed a certain urgency about it all. But there were other places, the high and wonderful hilltops, the silent deserts...which both silenced us and spoke to the silence within. One sensed a corporate longing as expressed in the many Psalms of Ascent: "Out of the depths I cry to you O Lord, O Lord hear my voice" and "wait for the Lord and in his word I put my hope". For our group the daily bonding together of the Morning and Evening prayers became very significant. "I have quietened my soul, like a weaned child is my soul within me." Perhaps, we hoped for an encounter with the living Christ in some way and in retrospect that may become clearer if we give ourselves time. Perhaps the authenticity of the places indeed help that, some more than others, especially when we read the relevant accounts and reflected in the places that marked his earthly life.

Often the edifices built over them give little impression of the events of long ago. But sometimes when we stepped deeper into caves underneath or looked down at the columned Pool of Bethesda one had a glimpse of something hidden, vibrant and waiting to be recognised and understood. One began to understand that humanity has to construct the security of altars, like Peter's need on the Mt of Transfiguration, but one began to realise that the temple of the human heart is where Jesus is to be found.

But then there were other things. The graffiti in red felt pen on a pure white wall in a beautiful chapel of the Transfiguration, the offensiveness of the too casual young man lying full out on the revered stone where Jesus was reputed to be laid out, mockingly posing, straw hat waving in the air for his girlfriends photo, but no more shocking than the ugly security wall imprisoning Bethlehem and other places, the sick divisions between Jew and Arab, the abandoned villages, the illegal settlements in the West bank, the pollution of good farmland by mined fields of the Golan heights the exodus of Christian communities from Nazareth and Bethlehem, and the Palestinian taxi driver quietly saying to me as he drove me to St John's hospital. "Madam, it is very bad for us here."

Is it here that the suffering Christ is to be found? The mocking and the scourging of the Road to Calvary?

Jerusalem is a microcosm of the world, no wonder Jesus wept over this city, it was the centre of the world in his time and it is still a microcosm of our world, for not much has changed; Paradoxical in its woundedness and scarring and yet in all its beauty. For us, there were oases of calm such as the garden tomb where we had a Communion of peace on our last day.

However, one can really understand why Jesus chose the shores of Galilee as a base camp. Galilee is serene still, and it was there close to the shore at Tabgha where Jesus fed the 5000 that we stepped aside and broke bread together, strangely observed by a wee cat and 2 staring Hyraxes. There we paused and thought about Christ's footprints and the imprint they had made upon this land and his people in history.

We reflected upon the imprint of God that was to be found in the words, faces and tears of people whom we met in the present, those who spoke with such passion, at the school of Elias Chacur, the Christian hospital at Nazareth, the rehabilitation centre, where I sat with Arab women feeding their very disabled babies, and the smiles at the school for orphan boys where we met the vibrant daughter of the founder and the solemn 3 year old with perfect manners.

Above all the tears of an Arab Christian priest who told us of the Christian exodus.

This was Gethsemane. "Stay with me, stay here with me, Watch and pray,..." These were the living stones crying out to be touched, and here for me was the Risen face of Christ. And not just there but all over the world in every place where Love and faithfulness meet and righteousness and peace kiss, (Ps. 85) there is Christ to be found.

Our thanks go to Deryck for the time and care taken with the organisation of this pilgrimage; the preparation beforehand was well thought out, and early meetings with those members of the group who were not members of St Mary's congregation meant that we were easily able to form a friendly circle. The booklet giving detailed plans for each day, with appropriate readings and poems, also meant we were well prepared and knew what to expect; and was much admired by other groups sharing the hotel!