

Celebration LINK

May 2007



Recently my wife and I went on a pilgrimage to Israel. It was actually a course run by St George's College, attached to the Anglican Cathedral in Jerusalem. Entitled 'Palestine of Jesus', it aimed to give course members an appreciation of the gospel narratives on several levels: sensory experience, through visiting sites; an intellectual understanding by means of lectures; theological reflection; and the spiritual experience of pilgrimage. It included an overview of the current political situation.

All this made for a very intense couple of weeks and even now as I write there is a sense that much has still to be assimilated. But several impressions are clear.

One of our initial reactions was to note how small everything is, topographically speaking. The events described in the Gospels took place within walking distance, at least in the Jerusalem area, and the location of the sites is broadly known because there is not a lot of room for variation. Westerners usually want to know the exact spot, because for them only that will give a site authenticity, but even with that outlook there is the sense that Gospel stories must have happened *somewhere* near here. The traditional sites are as likely as any to be the right ones, and the sense of history is palpable.

It was quite interesting, listening to a Palestinian Christian scholar, to observe how different scholarship seems in the Holy Land itself from the detached writings of western Europeans and Americans. There is a richness in the

understanding of culture, geography and tradition that not only brings bible stories to life but also dismisses a good deal of abstract theorising as nonsense. A key part of the course, impressed on us again and again, was the importance of the meaning of words and names and their relationship to the physical landscape. Many times we had a sudden sense of enlightenment: "Of course! That's how it must have been."

Depending on what tradition you come from, devotional responses to the Holy Land may vary. Those of a more Catholic background may revel in the veneration of shrines and stones and find the historic liturgies deeply moving. Those of an Evangelical persuasion may find this quite difficult, preferring quiet contemplation away from the crowds. In no case is this division more blatant than in the rivalry for the site of Calvary, the Garden Tomb versus the Church of the Resurrection.

The Garden Tomb is certainly atmospheric, for those who want simplicity and something that accords with their imagination of what the original scene must have looked like. It is, however, a 19th century claimant, with no historic Christian tradition behind it, while the Church of the Resurrection stands on the site of Hadrian's temple, built by him to wipe out the memory of an earlier Christian place of worship. With other evidence linking it to the first century, that, for my money, makes it the most likely site, but perhaps the most important aspect is the sense of oneness with centuries of pilgrims from all over the world who have come to worship at this place.

Of course, if it is Gospel story atmosphere that you want, there is no better place than Galilee, with its beautiful scenery largely free of the modern development that surrounds Jerusalem. True, Nazareth today is a sprawling city with little trace of the ancient village that Jesus came from, yet even here there are tit-bits to tantalise tourist and pilgrim alike: an ancient piece of graffiti, or a first century tomb with some evidence linking it to "the just one" (could that be Joseph?). You just need the right people to explain it all to you, and that was one of the great advantages of going with St George's College.

The sensory impact of visiting site after site, many of them off the normal tourist trail, was overwhelming. We were warned about a recognised condition of sensory overload, which causes the sufferer to switch off, unable to take in any more. The remedy is rest and reflection, but there was little time for that. In such circumstances it tends to be the pilgrimage aspect that suffers, yet in a strange way it was this element that succeeded in making the deepest impression.

Individuals vary – for one person perhaps the tranquillity of "blue Galilee" where "Jesus walked of old" reaches back in time and brings the voice of Jesus to life. For another, the Stations of the Cross through the Via Dolorosa can be incredibly moving, reducing some to tears. For me, one of the most powerful experiences was going into the Church of the Resurrection and suddenly calling to mind the words of



St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem

Two communities



(Above) the Wailing Wall. We visited here on a day of celebration. There was great excitement and exuberant display of ceremonial, and we were offered sweets and goodies. Provided dress code and gender separation are observed, non-Jews are welcome to pray at the wall.



Above the Wailing Wall is the Muslim area dominated by the Dome of the Rock. These Palestinian schoolgirls are Israelis. They have ID cards that allow them to travel but will have no vote. In the occupied territories, Palestinians only have permits with limited rights.



Realities of Palestine today

Clockwise from left:

(1) the wall. This picture was taken in Bethany, the home of Martha and Lazarus. Its line has no regard for property, social ties or economic life.

(2) A house in Deheisheh refugee camp demolished by the Israeli army, because of a man who was said to be a terrorist. The man did not live there. This type of action is part of a strategy known as collective punishment, affecting all members of the Palestinian community, including children.

(3) A heavy metal gate, once the only entrance to a fenced off community of 12,000 people, has been left as a reminder of a previous time.

(4) Children in Deheisheh are cared for in a kindergarten. This enables women to do what they can to support their families. Despite the preconceptions of westerners, ordinary Palestinians are law abiding people concerned about the safety and welfare of their families. They are not jihad-ists; they just want justice.



Phil & Margaret Bradshaw with Patricia Allen in Jerusalem

was at Cumbrae that she discovered a vocation to a solitary life of prayer.

From a Christian point of view the centre of the world, so to speak, is the Holy Land. Nowhere today needs a praying presence more, and in due course Patricia found a place with the Sisters of St. Joseph at Abu Ghosh, not far from Jerusalem. Abu Ghosh is the location of the biblical village of Kiriath-jearim (the place where the ark of God remained until David brought it up to Jerusalem) and is one of the contenders to be identified as the New Testament village of Emmaus.

One part of Patricia's ministry is to continue to pray for all the community children. As we talked, we reflected that we had not met for 27 years, yet the relationships forged in those early days were such that it was easy to pick

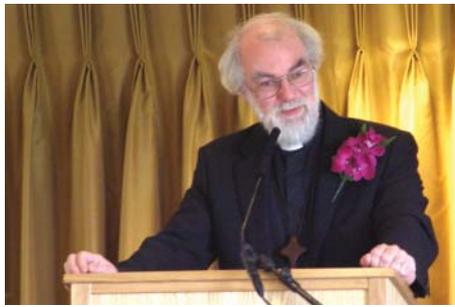
up as if there had been no break. That was a true work of the Spirit, unique in its own way, which should never be forgotten.

Later, as part of our course, we visited Abu Ghosh Convent and had a service of worship in the church with lunch to follow. It gave us something of a feel for Patricia's situation.



The Convent at Abu Ghosh

While in Jerusalem we had an opportunity to make contact with Patricia Allen, an old friend from community days in the 70s. Patricia is a former member of the Fisherfolk who belonged to the community at Yeldall Manor and Cumbrae. It was while she



Christian Resources Exhibition

We paid our annual visit to the CRE in May, which was opened on this occasion by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams. He also headed a panel of judges who awarded the Michael Ramsay prize for theological writing, won on this occasion by Timothy Radcliffe OP for his book 'What is the Point of being a Christian?'

One highlight for us was a seminar led by Steve Chalke of Oasis fame. This

was a passionate address in support of the campaigning group Stop the Traf-fik, which works for the abolition of modern slavery and child trafficking.

He acknowledged that his passion had made him an often controversial figure, but that was the price of effective action. One of his current projects is to get a petition with a million signatures urging action to stop this trade, which worldwide makes more profit

than Coca Cola or the drugs business. We were happy to add our signatures.

We also made contact with the R.O.P.E. charity (Relief of Oppressed People Everywhere), which works in a targeted way with individuals at grass-roots level. We felt we had a connection, for this was originally set up by Michael Wood who had lived in the Community of Celebration with us in the very early days at Yeldall Manor.



Cristina's story

In an obscure corner of the old city of Jerusalem is an ancient Syrian Orthodox church, said to be the oldest in Jerusalem. The original churches grew from the homes of the first Christians, and in this case the church is believed to be on the site of the home of St Mark.

Cristina, who showed us round, told us her story of an encounter with the Holy Spirit. They had been praying for a new experience of the Spirit, as in the early days described in Acts. One day, a visitor came to the church and Cristina had

a conversation with him, in English. They talked for about an hour.

Some time later the visitor returned and spoke to Cristina in Hebrew. As she does not understand Hebrew, she was unable to respond. The visitor grew angry. He thought she was rejecting him and walked out.

Fortunately the priest went after him and brought him back. It turned out that the reason he was angry was because he had listened to Cristina on his previous visit talking to him for an hour in Hebrew. She for her part had heard him speaking English. It was a demonstration of the Pentecost experience.

What made the incident all the more powerful was that the site is believed to be the location both of the upper room, where the last supper took place, and the house to which Peter returned after his miraculous release from prison (Acts 12.12).

Check out our new website.

The CCCT website has had a makeover to bring it more up to date with the current situation. Check

it out at www.ccct.co.uk. With our recently upgraded computer and software, we hope to be able to update it more regularly in future. We are also looking at the possibilities for development.

The perils of publishing

You would never guess, from the unending supply of new titles, that Christian publishing is anything but healthy. But the truth is there is little profit in it and major publishers usually need an author to be an established celebrity before they will take the risk.

Writing a book is the easy part. Once that was done Phil Bradshaw came up against the familiar hurdle, which feels more like a blank wall: how to get a publisher to be as enthused about your work as you are yourself.

Of course nothing is straightforward. What interested Phil isn't necessarily the thing that sells. But the good news was that the publisher liked the way Phil wrote, and even though a substantial rewrite was required the existing material was enough to attract a contract.

One thing that's needed now is more material about how Celebration impacted on those who received its ministry. So, if you have any stories or insights, let us know!

the angel to Mary Magdalene and the other women: "You seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; he is risen..."

It was as if we had spent hours and days looking for Jesus, as it were, in a wide variety of sites. There were traces in plenty, enough to give you sensory overload through constant movement from one evocative site to another. But Jesus himself? "He is not here." So where is he? He is risen, yes, but where is the risen Jesus today?

The conviction then suddenly dawned on me that if you want to see Jesus in the Holy Land today you will probably find him in a Palestinian refugee camp. We had visited one such south of Bethlehem, and the effect on many of our party was profound.

Bethlehem itself is a shadow of the town that it was 15 years ago when I last visited it. It is behind the infamous wall, which has official Israeli posters proclaiming peace and security on one side and bitter, derisive graffiti on the other. Here, trade has collapsed and even tourism is well down, despite the fact that Israelis and foreigners can go through the wall. The Christian community of Bethlehem is dwindling.

"Camp" is a bit of a misnomer to describe Deheisheh Refugee Camp – the word conjures up images of tents – but it is nevertheless a place of temporary dwelling that has become permanent. Brick-built dwellings housing some 12000 people (7000 of them children) are crammed into an area half a kilometre (550 yards) square. There is nowhere for children to play except tiny narrow streets more suitable for market stalls than homes. There is no privacy. Whole families live in a single room, and there is no escape from sights, sounds and smells. At one time the entire camp was fenced off, with just one gate.

Facts and statistics are mind numbing. We visited the nearby Solomon's Pools, a centuries old reservoir for the area, now empty. "The Israelis took away all our water," they say. "Now they sell it back to us, at high prices. We have to

live on an average of 8 litres a day for all purposes, while Israelis in settlements can have swimming pools." In some areas, we learn, 6% of the population (Israeli) use 94% of the water. This is one of many reasons why a Palestinian economy cannot develop. Even if it could, they say, "we have to pay high export taxes to the Israelis."

Freedom of movement is a huge issue for Palestinians. In the West Bank, an area of only about 6000 square kilometres, there are over 500 check points, 267 of them ad hoc, which means they can be set up anywhere, any time, and the criteria for passage through are totally arbitrary. For Palestinians, at one point only those from Nablus may be allowed through. Too bad, if you happen to be coming from Ramallah (the former Bethel). To get from Ramallah to Jerusalem, a distance of only about 20 km, takes 6-9 hours, so people trying to get to work start at 3am and often don't make it.

One Israeli strategy is to create "sterile" roads, on which only Israelis are allowed to travel. This means Palestinians are unable to go in through their own front door, and have to clamber over roofs to get in through the back. Main highways are also being created to link settlements, which are barred to Palestinians. Then there is the wall. You can see Jerusalem from Bethlehem, but our guide said he had never been there. The wall is more than a barrier; it cuts families off from each other and from jobs, and creates thousands of personal tragedies, from a gifted young pianist whose talent withered because her piano was behind the wall, to a farmer cut off from his land because of its arbitrary line.

The wall takes in an extra 10% of Palestinian land (mainly to include water sources) and cuts deep fingers into Palestinian territory so as to include Israeli settlements. Despite the fact that these are illegal under international agreement, they continue to expand and are seen as part of a long term objective of isolating Palestinians into "bantustans" or ghetto-like areas linked by their own roads. In one typical example, a Palestinian municipal area was cut off from its suburb, depriving

people of access to central services. The district went from self sufficiency to 50% dependency on international assistance in 8 months.

This combination of systematic deprivation and daily harassment is justified in the name of security, but it is all too reminiscent of apartheid in South Africa or the mentality that led to ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. Yet we found Palestinians who understood the Israeli position. "What happened to the Jews in the Holocaust was terrible," they said. "But why do we have to pay the price? The victims have become the victimisers, but please don't make us into victimisers."

It is of course fairly easy to draw the lesson that Jesus stood up for the victimised, in the face of power. By identifying himself with them, he made it an imperative of our faith to view political realities from the standpoint of the oppressed. But there is more to it than that in the Holy Land. There, the connection goes to the very heart of our religious belief. There is concern amongst many in Israel that the old city becomes a sort of religious Disneyland, a devotional tourist trap completely isolated from the context of Israel today.

Just as we can read the Bible and not even see what it's talking about, or see it only as a source of personal comfort, so, potentially, we can enter into the sensory experience of the Holy Land without seeing the evidence of the living Jesus that almost cries out from the very same surroundings. Jesus was always a victim, and he is a victim still.

A Christian Aid poster says that we should not divide Jews and Arabs in our prayers. It is of course a costly role, if we take it seriously – one that was ultimately borne by Jesus himself. But it does bring into focus the central role of the Christian community, the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciling the irreconcilable is what Jesus is all about, and with him there was no room for sentimentality. Can the church do that again? I would like to think so. Hopefully that is what pilgrimages are really for.

Phil Bradshaw