

Diary of a Pilgrimage

Excerpts from Wendy Robins' blog of the Diocesan Pilgrimage to the Holy Land (February 22-29) led by Bishop Christopher and Andrew Nunn

Day 1 - at the airport

Over 80 pilgrims prepare to board the flight from London to Israel - saying 'hello' to people whose names we have yet to discover and who we may never have seen before. It's one of the joys and strangenesses of pilgrimage that you begin to feel that you have known all your life people whom you have actually only ever really seen for a few days. Real friendships can be forged and renewed.

Day 2 - Jerusalem

The first time that I walked down the Mount of Olives, the Way of the Cross, I was disappointed and surprised and then full of wonderment. I had not expected it to be tarmac or to see cars on it. We even saw a traffic jam. Nevertheless it is an extraordinarily moving journey.

The day starts with a visit to the Pater Noster church where it was special to see people taking photographs of the plaques in their own languages. Saying and reflecting on the Lord's Prayer surrounded by the prayer in so many other languages helped us to realise its universal importance.

Around the corner from the church, we were confronted by a wonderful panoramic view of Jerusalem. It is really possible to imagine Jesus looking down on the city and weeping for all that he saw there.

Down the road and into Dominus Flevit (the Lord Wept) and a church designed to resemble a tear drop. It was one of three churches designed by Antonio Barluzzi that we saw that morning.

The second, the Church of All Nations is at the Garden of Gethsemane and the third, St Peter's is thought to be on the site of the High Priest Caiaphas's House. At St Peter's we went down into the crypt where Jesus was imprisoned. Our coach group filled the space and our voices rose up as we sang 'Oh Lord hear my prayer' before praying for the peace of the world.



Dominus Flevit - the 'teardrop' church

In the afternoon we visited Ein Karem - thought to be the birthplace of John the Baptist. In the church, we spent some time reflecting on John's importance in the story of Jesus' life death and resurrection.

From Ein Karem we went to Abu Ghosh, one of the four possible sites of Emmaus, in walking distance from Jerusalem. In the church of Notre Dame de l'Alliance we celebrated the Eucharist and Bishop Christopher preached.

In the evening after dinner the Pilgrims met together and were led through a reflection on the day by the Dean, Andrew Nunn. He asked people to give their first impressions which included....

'As we walked down the mountain I was overcome by what we experienced. I wept.'

'At the Garden of Gethsemane seeing a really ancient olive tree and knowing that somewhere inside it is the very tree that our Lord would have seen.'

'A huge sense of inner peace, such that I never felt before.'

'Being in the dungeon (St Peter's) with everyone else and knowing Christ was on his own when he was there and must have known what was to come.'

Day 3 - The stations of the Cross

After Morning Prayer in St Anne's church we set off towards the Ecce Homo arch. In the courtyard the pilgrims were divided into four groups to walk the Stations of the Cross. Each group set off along the Via Dolosa in the bustling souk. Each had a large cross which different members carried during the walk..

As the Pilgrims progressed through the stations they gradually made their way up the hills upon which Jerusalem is built to the roof of the Holy Sepulchre Church where they said the last five stations amid the cell like rooms of the Orthodox monks who live there.

Then we made the short journey across the souk to the Church of the Redeemer, where Bishop Christopher helped us to feel the experience of the stations of the cross. He reminded us that we need to hold the pain of the crucifixion and the joy of the resurrection in tension. "Jesus was spared nothing in his suffering and passion for us and we too are aware of the nature of that suffering having made our own spiritual journey this morning".

After lunch we continued our walking tour of the Old City making our way to the Dormition Abbey via King David's tomb. Here and later at the Western Wall we saw the separation of men and women for prayer and in each instance the space for the men was much bigger than that for the women.

From the tomb we went into the Upper Room. There the Dean reminded us that... "It was the Upper Room that was the place of the Last Supper and to which the frightened disciples returned after the death of Jesus. It was in this room that Jesus appeared and Thomas had his doubts challenged. It was from this room that the disciples left for the mount of the Ascension and to where they returned as the apostles.



The grotto beneath the Church of the Nativity and the star marking Jesus' birthplace

"It was in this room that Mary and the apostles spent the ten days between the Ascension and Pentecost, in prayer - and it was this room that the Spirit entered, as wind and fire sending the apostles into the streets and the waiting world with the Good News of Jesus Christ. Finally, it was in this room that Paul met with the leaders of the church in that first council to debate the life of Christians. And in all of these visits I've come to realise that this is not just a room, but here the church was born, this is not room but womb."

Our next stop was the Church of the Assumption. Its lower room has a remarkable Tomb of Mary and there are icons painted all around the wall.

We walked through the Jewish Quarter to the old Town. A short walk took us to a place where we could overlook the Western Wall and have a wonderful view over the city, seeing the Dome on the Rock and the Alhambra Mosque. So the final decent for the day into the area of the Western Wall which until recently was known

as the Wailing Wall.

Day 4 - Bethlehem

The day began early for some of the pilgrims as Bishop Christopher led a trip to the Holy Sepulchre. Susan Wheelers writes: "Up at 5.15am and out of the hotel at 5.30 to walk to the Holy Sepulchre. At the Damascus Gate we paused to gaze at the moon and the morning star, Venus - a special moment. The city was asleep as we wended our way to the Holy Sepulchre. We gathered round the Bishop for a reading from John and then separated to make our own devotions. I went first to see the rock of Calvary.

After that as I wandered I found the caves at the back of the Holy Sepulchre. I ventured in and imagined the Angels on Easter morning telling the women Jesus was not there - another very special moment. As we returned to the hotel at 6.40am the city was just waking."

After breakfast we headed off to the Shepherd's Field to experience an open air Eucharist. The Dean presided and preached and, because of where we were, he focused

around the Christmas story.

It is hard to get your head around singing Christmas hymns in the sun, in the open air in February. The Dean loves Christmas and said he was in the perfect job because the Cathedral have about 43 carol services each year.

Back on the bus we headed to Bethlehem to the Church of the Nativity, that most holy of places where Jesus is believed to have been born. You enter the church through what is known as the humble door - so-called because you have to bend down to get through it.

The church is undergoing major rebuilding with scaffolding everywhere. It was surprisingly empty - fewer pilgrims are coming to the Holy Land at the moment, presumably because of the security situation. So we were able to go straight into the Grotto and see the star that marks the place of Jesus' birth.

We then headed to the nearby Roman Catholic church where St Jerome's Caves are in the crypt - where it is believed that St Jerome produced what we know as the Vulgate version of



At St George's Cathedral

the Bible.

Finally, following another brief look around Manger Square, towered over by a mosque, we headed for lunch.

After lunch it was off for a bit of retail therapy at the King's store, which had almost anything in olive wood, from the smallest cross to an almost life size nativity scene. Our guide explained that the shop was a collective and the money we spent would help approximately 38 Palestinian families.

It was a special joy to travel to St George's Cathedral in Jerusalem for Evening Prayer. It was wonderful to see the Revd Canon David Longe who had been a curate and Assistant Priest in the Diocese of Southwark and who is now Archbishop Soheil's Chaplain. A CMS mission partner here he is clearly passionate about the work of the Anglican Church in this part of the world and it was great to see him so evidently flourishing in his new role.

He writes: "It was a great privilege to welcome the Southwark pilgrims to the Cathedral on behalf of Dean

Hosam Naoum, and the Archbishop. To be able to say the evening office with pilgrims from the Diocese where I was ordained and served was deeply moving. Christians in this region are a minority: their presence is precarious and precious. Please keep the Living Stones in your prayers."

Day 5 - Nablus and Ramallah

For the first time, the group's two coaches set off to different places. The Jerusalem bus headed to Nablus to visit St Luke's Hospital and the Emmaus bus set off to the Episcopal Technological and Vocational Training Centre in Ramallah - two of the projects supported by the Bishops Lent Call this year.

Both buses visited Jacob's Well and the church that has been built over it. It was one of the most beautiful churches that I had ever seen. The clean light walls had enormous beautiful icons on them and it was huge and light and airy.

Everyone was bowled over by the church which was rebuilt and restored through

the patience and persistence of Fr Justinus Mamulus, a Greek Orthodox priest, and Jamaal Sarhain, a Muslim from a nearby refugee camp, who worked together for 30 years to transform the church ruins into a peaceful, inspiring sanctuary.

In the crypt we listened to the story of the Samaritan at the well. It is still a working well and we were all able to drink the water or bless ourselves with it and take some home in little bottles.

The visit to St Luke's Hospital was very interesting.

It was founded in 1900 by the Revd Christian Fallscheer, a Church Missionary Society missionary. Nowadays it is suffering because newer, more modern hospitals are attracting those who can afford to pay for their care and whose fees help to enable St Luke's to care for the poor. St Luke's Hospital is run by the Christian community for all people of all faiths in Nablus and the surrounding areas and is part of the very important witness of the living stones in the Holy Land.

Whist one coach of Pilgrims visited the St Luke's Hospital in Nablus, the other coach headed to Ramallah to visit The Episcopal Technological and Vocational Training Centre.

Sarah Habeeb, wrote: "The Vocational Training Centre for Boys and Girls was established in 2001. The centre is run by a team of volunteers and funded through the Lent Call. The centre runs a Hotel & Management School, Ballet School, Computer School, housekeeping courses, etc."

Christine Spurway said: "Driving to Ramallah through the outskirts of Qalandiya and seeing the pain of the suffering Palestinian people was a deeply moving experience that brought tears to my eyes."

Later that day the pilgrims transferred from Jerusalem to Galilee. For some Pilgrims this was their first ever glimpse of Lake Galilee, for others it was a much anticipated return.



Irene and Peter Wolstenholme renew their marriage vows

Day 6 - Jesus' parish

The Pilgrim's journey on Saturday was in, as the Dean described it "Jesus' parish". The day began with the drive to the Mount of the Beatitudes. Where Jesus is believed to have preached the Sermon on the Mount, the words from Matthew's Gospel are on stones all around the grounds. It is a peaceful place with breathtaking views of the Lake.

A short drive took us to Capernaum and the site of Peter's House - and of the remains of the Temple with an extraordinarily shaped church built over them.

We celebrated the Eucharist in the open air at Mensa Christi - a beautiful place with its stone altar surrounded by the amphitheatre style seats.

Bishop Christopher said: "It was at this place that the irascible Peter was three times asked to declare his faith - three times because he denied Jesus three times. But it is here too that Peter is called in a rather wonderful way as Jesus tells him that he will be the rock upon which the church is built. You too are the rock upon which the church is built".

After lunch (on the Golan Heights) we went a short distance to Caesarea Philippi and the site of the Hermon Springs - the waters that feed the River Jordan - where we

all renewed our baptism vows.

After this there was time to wander into the caves above the water and to mingle with the local families who were picnicking on the Sabbath, to buy and eat an ice cream and to shop (again) before heading back to the coach for the journey back to the hotel.

Day 7 - Nazareth

The day began with a visit to the Greek Orthodox Church in Nazareth. It was good to share briefly in their worship, to see where Mary's Well would have been and to be able to bless ourselves with the water. Then on to Christ Church (Anglican) and a lively, very welcoming, if not huge, congregation. Saying our prayers jointly in two languages and yet almost always finishing together, brought home the significance of the Anglican Church worldwide and of the Anglican Communion.

After lunch, it was time to head to the Basilica of the Annunciation. The Basilica is quite magnificent but I suspect that it is one of those buildings which you love or you hate, full of depictions of Mary from around the world. The church is on the site of what is believed to be Mary's House. The upper church is huge - the largest Christian sanctuary in the Middle East.

From the Basilica we headed to Joseph's Church built in the

site of what was believed to be the carpenter's shop. Here is a beautiful peaceful church with (according to tradition) various parts of the carpenter's shop in what is now the crypt.

Later at a church built on the site of the first miracle, Irene and Peter Wolstenholme renewed their marriage vows. Their wedding took place 24 years ago on 29 February, but it seemed good to renew their vows here in the Church which commemorates Jesus changing the water into wine at the wedding in Cana.

Day 8 - the journey home

The last day began with a dawn (6.30am) Eucharist by the Sea of Galilee, at the request of the Pilgrims.

We then started the journey home by sailing across the Lake of Galilee - a beautiful and truly memorable last act of a pilgrimage.

As we reached the middle of the Lake the engines were cut and we were astounded at the peace and the silence as we simply drifted. It was time to hear a Lake of Galilee reading and sing a hymn before setting off to Ein-Gev where the coaches were waiting for us.

We were anointed by the Bishop for our continued pilgrimage of faith and hope and love, and the Dean gave us each a cross to help us to remember all that we had learned.

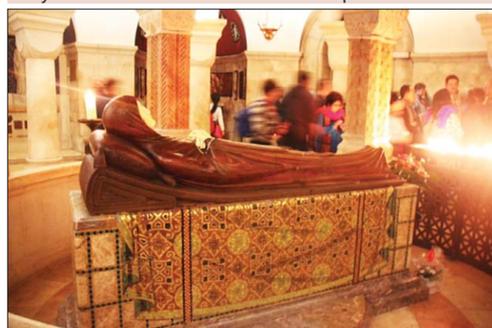
This pilgrimage has helped me to think again about how groups of people get to know each other and by sharing with each other become less afraid. It has helped me to think again about what it means to live my faith and to seek to share it.

It has helped me to think again about how we can and should each work to bring peace in our own place no matter how small that place may seem. It has most especially helped me to know for certain again that we need to pray for the peace of Jerusalem and for the peace of our world.

The Lord's Prayer in many languages at Pater Noster church



Mary's Tomb at the Church of the Assumption



The cave of St Jerome



Matthew's Gospel - on the Mount of the Beatitudes



Renewing baptismal vows beside the River Jordan



The final day Eucharist beside the Lake of Galilee

