

## Holy Land Pilgrimage - March 2023



### Day One - Monday 13th March

The Journey has not been easy. One of my main concerns was actually getting to Manchester Airport for the flight to Tel Aviv. Congestion on the motorway ring road is a daily reality, where the convergence of motorways brings traffic to walking pace. Additional roadworks have made the situation much worse so I decided to leave very early and hope that the delays would not be too difficult. It worked but I had plenty of time in the airport before the flight.

The major disappointment of the journey was that, having waited for my luggage at Ben Gurion Arrivals, nothing appeared. It took time to register the missing case, and I was rather alarmed to see so many piles of cases in the Baggage Hall. All I had with me was the clothes I was wearing, and my iPad, and phone. The immediate thought was that I could have included just a few items in my hand baggage, which would have made this situation much easier.

Zaid was a taxi driver ready to meet me at the airport. He was a delightful character. Born in Jerusalem, he told me much about the present difficulties which make life so uncertain. He was a graduate in Business Development at Bethlehem University but, in his final year, he had passed tests to drive taxis and coaches as he felt that he would never find a job suiting his qualification. He now has his own taxi company and, like so many Palestinians, his welfare relies almost entirely on tourism and pilgrimage work. He explained much of the difficulties of life as a Moslem Palestinian living in Jerusalem. Knowing that my luggage was lost he insisted that he was available to me for any errand to buy what I might need.

I arrived at the Jaffa Gate to be greeted by +Richard Moth. I met with Molly and Maria, the organisers from the Bishops' Conference. The four interns had turned in earlier - having travelled from the middle of the previous night. They had been together for a celebration of Mass at the Co-Cathedral. It had been a long day but at least I had arrived in Jerusalem - albeit without my luggage.

### End of Day One

## Day Two - Tuesday 14th March

I must admit that a degree of anxiety rather spoilt any efforts to sleep. I was revising all that was packed in my suitcase. There is the alb that I have been using since I was a deacon, over forty years ago. There was perhaps my favourite pectoral cross. From a practical point of view, that universal adapter was so important for charging my phone and iPad. Would I see them again? And there was the very unfortunate fact that I had no change of clothes for the next four days, and no toothpaste and brush! All this, I suppose, is mere inconvenience when compared with the trials and hardships of the refugees who must abandon their homes and leave everything behind, with no certainty of where they can go and where their journey might end. It really put my inconvenience into perspective.

After a rather splendid buffet breakfast, we started out on a demanding morning of visits to the various Holy Sites on the Mount of Olives. I should explain at this point that +Richard is something of a scholar on the history and the events in Jerusalem. He has been here 31 times and has obviously accumulated a great deal of facts and information. Much of the historical knowledge included here will be as a result of his instruction. We walked from the hostel in the Christian Quarter through the Old City. We were, at one stage, on the Via Dolorosa, moving in the reverse direction, but there were frequent stops when +Richard spoke of various buildings and events. I should also mention that the weather has not been good. We arrived yesterday with a warm 20 degrees, but today has deteriorated to some heavy rain showers throughout the day and even a dose of hailstones with lightning about midday. There is a strong, cold wind and clouds have moved quickly to obscure the views and it has made the walking rather less enjoyable. (But we are told that Israel is in much need of water and the rainfall is welcome).

Although I have been to Jerusalem before, I doubt that I have learned as much about the Mount of Olives as I did today. We went first to the Grotto of Gethsemane, to a chapel where it is remembered that the disciples fell asleep when Our Lord went off to pray in the Garden. We celebrated Mass in this beautiful cavern, in the simplicity of its stone walls. We went from there to the Basilica of the Tomb of the Virgin Mary, which is a Greek Orthodox Basilica, underground, at the bottom of a steep stairwell. It is decorated by numerous icons and lamps and I learned that once a gift is made to an Orthodox church it cannot be removed and the centuries have seen a great deal of extra decoration and the gifts of religious items.

From there we took a taxi for the short but steep ride up the Mount of Olives to the Basilica of Peter's Primacy and had the spectacular view of the city of Jerusalem. +Richard gave an excellent presentation on the changing shape of the city walls, over the centuries, and pointed out various sites associated with the Gospel events. We began our descent and called at a Benedictine Convent, of a community of just four nuns, of which I suspect most pilgrims would not be aware, accessed by a small gate. The convent chapel was a delight in its simplicity and its icons. From there we moved to Domus Fleuit, the church which commemorates the moment when Jesus wept over Jerusalem. The next stop was the Russian Orthodox church, with its golden domes, and the Convent of St Mary Magdalene. We had time to visit the Church of all Nations and to visit the Garden of Gethsemane, which is much more extensive than I had remembered.

Our next stop was, via taxi, at the Basilica of St Peter in Gallicantu. This is believed to be the site of the House of Caiaphas, the High Priest, who was instrumental in the condemnation of Jesus. +Richard had explained to us, as we viewed Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives, how the city walls had changed radically over the centuries. The Basilica now lies outside the walls of the present city but was then within the walls of the City of David. He explained the route by which Jesus, once arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, would have been taken to the House of Caiaphas, by a stairwell which is still recognizable.

The Basilica has been much renovated in recent years to retain access to what are believed to be the dungeons in which Christ would have been kept on the night of his arrest. Prisoners

were lowered through a hole into a deep cavern which would have had little or no natural light.

From St Peter's in Gallicantu there were distant views of the mountains of Jordan but, rather more depressingly, a clear view of the "Wall of Separation" which the Israelis have built to separate and protect Jewish settlements from Palestinian villages.

From the Basilica we walked into the Jewish Quarter of the Old City and visited the Western Wall of the Temple Mount, the place of particular devotion for the Jews. There was some strict security to enter the area and a rather alarming number of armed soldiers.

The day was not over. We went to visit Caritas Jerusalem and to hear about their work. There was a clear message that, while Caritas Jerusalem does a lot of work which is benefitting Moslems and Jews, their pre-occupation is promoting the welfare and ambition of the rapidly reducing Christian population. The young are leaving in order to find better prospects abroad.



Photo credit: Faith in Politics Twitter

After a rather rapid, delicious supper, we set out for the Holy Sepulchre in order to see the unique closing of the Holy Sepulchre's door. Centuries of dispute between the Latins, Greeks and Armenians, has meant that there is continuing debate over the custodianship of the Basilica. The closing is carried out by the Greek Orthodox man climbing a ladder to lock the doors of the Basilica at a height of about ten foot, another lock is engaged lower down by the Latins. The ladder is then passed through a panel in the door, which is then locked by another man, an Armenian.

So, we end day one. What a lot of traveling about the city and so much learned. No sign of my suitcase, but I live in hope. I managed to get a few items from a local pharmacy which will at least allow me to be washed and clean in the interim.

**End of Day Two**

### Day Three - Wednesday 15th March

We had a reasonably relaxed start to the day, which contrasted with all that was to come. The weather was still not good, with a good deal of rainfall during the morning and even hailstones and flashes of lightning at one stage of our travel, thankfully while we were travelling in a bus around midday.

Our first stop was to be Bethlehem but that included all the complications of actually getting there. We were together in a minibus and set off on the recognised route. The minibus was registered as a tourist vehicle which meant that we should have been able to pass through a particular check point with ease, but the driver was told by telephone, during our journey, that the check point was closed. This can cause chaos to so many people who cannot get to work or schools, or able to conduct their own business. Fortunately, our driver seemed to know a route that avoided the checkpoint, but it required some twists and turns over unlaidd roads before arriving in Bethlehem along some narrow side streets. We made a route through Bet Jela.

The first stop in Bethlehem was the Basilica of St Catherine. Below the Basilica is a complex system of tunnels and one is named the Cave of St Jerome. It is believed that St Jerome came from Croatia to translate the Bible. He lived in this cave for about thirty-six years, traveling locally to learn about local customs and ways of life to assist him in making an accurate translation. We celebrated Mass there. Two Byzantine monasteries were built on this place, but they were destroyed in 614 and were eventually replaced by the present church dedicated to St Catherine. The church is part of a complex which includes the Church of the Nativity which was destroyed in 529 but has become the oldest church to be in constant daily use. The group, being so small, was able to sidestep the enormous queues winding around the church for a quick visit to the place venerated as the place of the Nativity, which originally would



Photo credit: Faith in Politics Twitter

have been in a cave rather than a stable. Our excellent guide, Michael, explained that Mary would have wanted some privacy for the birth and the cave/stable would have allowed that sense of privacy.

We walked from the Basilica of the Nativity to the Salesian Technical School where we met the Rector and Vice-Rector. Both Italians, they had spent their religious lives in the Middle East since 1974. They were so welcoming and explained the role of the school in training engineers and technicians for employment. They also have a church, an orphanage and a bakery. The bakery has always supplied bread free of charge to the poor and the amount distributed freely during the pandemic rose to 350 Kilos a day. Things have now improved but there is still some distribution to the local poor. We were shown the learning spaces where many young Bethlehem Palestinians were in training and we saw the bakery, from which we purchased some very tasty bread.

The Salesians arrived in 1891 and have battled with the problems of education for the young. These have been so much worse by the restrictions on travel, where the “Wall of Separation” (officially known as the “Peace Wall”) often means that students cannot get to the school at all, and the various difficulties faced by the police refusing documentation or even assaulting or arresting individuals.

The next stop was the Milk Grotto - a place where Mary is said to have stopped to feed Jesus at the start of the flight to Egypt. It is a place of pilgrimage, particularly for Christian and Moslem women who are hoping to get pregnant or who pray about matters of health.

The next stop was St Martha’s House which is a day centre for elderly ladies, many of whom are widowed, providing care and community. About twelve of the ladies were there and they greeted us warmly. Pictures on the walls evidenced visits by a number of English bishops in recent years. It is obviously valued by the local community. Two separate groups meet, each have two visits each week, arriving for breakfast, activities and ending with lunch.

We were then treated to one of the most lavish lunches I think I have ever had, at the Olive Grove, a new restaurant in Bethlehem. A lady called Laila, who owns a tour company used by many English dioceses and organisations joined us and hosted the lunch. I have met her before on previous visits to Israel and Palestine. The meal began with eleven dishes of vegetables and salads, as a simple buffet starter. But the dishes were enormous and far more than we could consume, even with the youthful appetites among us. We thought that was the meal, until the waiter arrived to take our orders for the main course. Again, large dishes of meat and fish were served. I was feeling a little concerned about wasted food but apparently local families in need are supplied with leftovers. It really was a sumptuous meal.

But no time to delay. We next made a visit to the Shepherds’ Field. This is a place commemorating the appearance of the angels to the shepherds to tell them of the birth of Christ. A simple, modern chapel, with three paintings expressing the surprise of the shepherds at the appearance of the angels, the moment of their adoration of the child, and their rejoicing as they returned to their flocks.

Our last meeting of the day was with an organisation called Tantur. This is housed in a complex of buildings on the top of a hill between Bethlehem and Jerusalem. It is celebrating 50 years. There were negotiations, following Vatican II, about the need to establish a place for ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and learning. Various Catholic Universities were invited to found this place and eventually Notre Dame of U.S.A. took up the challenge. The Vatican purchased the land, 38 acres from the Knights of Malta, and the college was built on a site which had Crusader and Byzantine ruins. In religious terms, it is thought to have been the site where Mary and Joseph rested on their way from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. Today the college runs a series of courses which bring together Christians, Moslems and Jews for learning and dialogue. Our hosts were the Rector and Vice-Rector. The Rector is a Melkite Christian and a Jesuit priest. The Vice-Rector a Melkite Christian and a Palestinian layman. The success of the

College has been hampered by the intrusion of the Wall of Separation which makes it difficult for people to travel, especially for the group meetings of local people who have suddenly found themselves on the other side of the wall and faced with the prospect of long waiting times for crossings.

Much of the ninety-minute conversation was about the increasing difficulties endured by Palestinians in their movement across the wall, and the exodus of the young seeking better employment. We spoke about the recent attacks on Christians. In Jerusalem, about a month ago, a group of Jewish Settlers attacked a hotel dining room full of Christian pilgrims. The police delayed their arrival, and many Christians were injured. A few days later, there was a Settlers' attack on residents in the Armenian Quarter of the Old City. The police took one hour to respond. They arrested only two people - both Armenians.

But there is clearly a growing opposition among the Israelis about the behaviour of their ultra-right-wing government and the proposed legislation about the appointment of the judiciary. Last weekend, it is estimated that 500,000 Israelis demonstrated in Tel Aviv. So, for the first time, there seems to be real dissent among the Israelis but whether or not that might include the promoting of human rights for the Palestinians remains to be seen.

It had been a long and busy day and we returned to the hotel to the welcome surprise that my luggage had arrived!

The excellent buffet supper offered far more than any of us could manage after the lunch, but we had a very enjoyable half hour in conversation with the hotel's owner.

**End of Day Three**

## Day Four - Thursday 16 March

Thursday morning began with an early start. It had a much better beginning as there was a bright blue cloudless sky which was to remain with us throughout the day. We left for the Holy Sepulchre at 5.30am so as to be there before the crowds. In fact, we were far from being the first but there was time to move around the Basilica before real crowds arrived. I sat in a chapel listening to Franciscans chanting Morning Prayer, which was very pleasant. But I then happened to arrive at St Helena's cave (commemorated as the place where St Helena discovered the True Cross) when a small group of six Germans, a musical group, were singing Morning Prayer. It was quite breath-taking in its harmonies and gentleness. They can apparently be found on [YouTube](#). The music was so prayerful that those in the chapel did not move until the chanting ended.



I have spent time in the Holy Sepulchre before. Again, there is much maintenance and restoration work going on, but the crowds are not deterred.

Back to the hotel for a quick breakfast. We are on the move from the hotel today as there is the Jerusalem Marathon tomorrow and there are thoughts that getting to the airport will be difficult. So we are to be at the Monastery of Abu Ghosh overnight. We must leave our baggage at Reception as we set out for our various destinations in the city this morning.

We walked to the Pools of Bethesda. This is the place believed to be the site of Jesus' cure of the cripple who was unable to get to the miraculous water because he had no-one to help him. (John 5:1-14) The site is a maze of ruins as there have been numerous foundations from the Roman period, all stacked on one another. The site is under the care of the Missionaries of Africa (SMA Fathers). They have the responsibility for St Anne's Church which is renowned for its acoustic quality and many groups visit in order to sing a hymn or psalm. We celebrated Mass in a newly constructed chapel nearby. I met with ten seminarians from Germany in their first year of studies. They sang very beautifully in the church. Our group had planned to sing a piece, but the crowds were growing and we needed to be on our way.

After Mass, we celebrated the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa. Again, there were crowds but it was good to follow the route that has been venerated for centuries. We completed the route and visited the Ethiopian monastery on the roof of the Holy Sepulchre before having a light lunch and returning to the hotel to prepare for our next session of meetings. +Richard and I had to dress in cassocks for our meetings with some Church officials.

We went first to the Latin Patriarchate, just a few yards from the hotel, to meet with the CEO of the Patriarchate, Sami El Yousef. He is the first layman to be appointed to the post and he spoke about the scope of his work. The Patriarchate is the equivalent of a diocese but is exceptional in that it covers Israel, Palestine, Jordan and Cyprus. With the exception of Cyprus, the regions are a mixture of political problems and a degree of persecution. There is also a vicariate for migrants and refugees, of whom there are an estimated 100,000. With three countries, there are three different legal systems, and Jordan is becoming more Islamic. In Israel and Palestine, there have been signs of tightening restrictions on the Church by the government, particularly in the matters of finance and taxation which threaten the work of the Church. There has been growing violence towards the Church and its properties, as well as against Catholics. But the Patriarchate maintains 45 schools in its territories, with about 19,000 students, and employs 2,000 people of whom 87% are Christians, which is important in providing incomes for the dwindling Catholic community. The Patriarchate is able to provide some school fees, help with medical emergencies and provide social assistance for the poor. There is a need to assist refugees in Jordan and Lebanon and to help with the threatened areas in East Jerusalem where there are property confiscations, and where property can be as much as four times more expensive than other regions of Israel and Palestine.

It was a short walk from there to meet the Custos. Fr Francisco Patton is the Custos, the Franciscan superior who has overall responsibility for the care of the Holy Places. In 1270, the Franciscans were entrusted with a Mission to protect the Holy Places. This was made more formal in 1342 when Pope Clement VI declared the Franciscans to be custodians of the Holy Places. There are now 84 designated "Holy Places" around the world with the concentration being in the Holy Land. 300 Franciscan friars are co-opted for their care and they come from 11 different countries. It had been part of the Rule of St Francis that Franciscans should minister among the Moslems. They also have a seminary in Jerusalem, with 60 students. Fr Francisco had to speak about the growing difficulty in working with the Israeli Government and the Jewish State. There has been increased appropriation of land by the Government and Jewish Settlers, as we had already heard more than once, are doing violence to Jerusalem residents and pilgrims.

The Custos emphasised the good relations that exist between the various Catholic religious congregations at work in the Holy Land, and the growing collaboration with interfaith groups. It was a good meeting.

The last meeting of the day was back at the Latin Patriarchate, with Bishop William, auxiliary bishop. He explained his duties and was very direct in his conversation with us - a delightful man. His duties include Catechesis, Liturgy, Confirmations and teaching at Bethlehem University. He was the former Rector of the seminary in Bethlehem. He is a member of the Dicastery for Inter-Religious Dialogue in Rome which brings him frequently into contact with the Moslem leadership in Israel and Palestine. He was very engaging.

We had a bit of a rush to get back to the hotel to collect our bags and leave for the Monastery of Abu Gosh.

It took nearly an hour for us to travel just a few miles from the Old City of Jerusalem to Abu Ghosh. There is a very impressive system of dual carriageways, tunnels and bridges to the West of Jerusalem but which, as yet, does not seem to solve the demands of the traffic, particularly at peak hours. We also saw one protest on a bridge, protesters against the Government proposed legislation, which was certainly having its own impact of the flow of traffic.



Abu Ghosh is a small town which is believed by many to be the site of Emmaus, as spoken of in the Gospel of Luke - the place where the Risen Christ encountered the two disciples and where they finally recognised him in the breaking of bread. The monastery lies in the valley and is a dual community of both men and women. We certainly enjoyed a warm welcome. The monastery is Benedictine and founded from the monastery of Bec, in France. There are 14 nuns and 6 brothers. We joined them for Vespers and Mass and then enjoyed supper in the company of an American sister, Sr Michaela, a long-standing friend of +Richard, learning much about the life of the monastic community and their place in the local community. The monastery is next door to a mosque and the prayers were certainly loud and clear - particularly those at 4.25am on the Friday morning, as the Moslems began their holy day. The accommodation is simple but pleasant.

#### End of Day Four



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Before leaving, we stopped off for an overnight stay at the Benedictine monastery in Abu Ghosh. Centred around a Crusader Church in which original 12th century frescoes can still be seen, male and female religious pray together. It was a blessing to join them.



## Day Five - Friday 17th March

The end of our pilgrimage has come all too soon. I have not mentioned the four interns, but they have been great company and all have been in the Holy Land for the first time. We have been very busy and there has been so much to see and learn in these days. How good it would have been to be able to visit other biblical sites and to have travelled North to Galilee, but I think that they all have the appetite to visit again.

I attended Vigils with the monks this morning at 5.30am. This was in the crypt of the church, a very beautiful combination of 12th Century arches founded on Roman ruins over an ancient cistern. There was a wonderful atmosphere of prayer.

I am acutely aware that, during these days we have only met with Palestinian Christians, Christians from elsewhere and a few Palestinian Moslems. We have had no conversation with any Israeli Jews. I remember that, during my visit to the Holy Land and Gaza, with CAFOD, we met with several Israelis who were critical of their government's treatment of Palestinians and religious minorities. The official voice of the present Government is far from promoting collaboration or reconciliation with Palestinians, whether Moslem or Christian. But all our conversations, even those which exposed the worst reports, were always tempered by hope. We must continue to hope for a change in attitudes and policies, perhaps emerging from the most unlikely and unexpected directions. Bishop William recounted a visit to Berlin in 1989 when there seemed no possible end to the division of Germany and the existence of the wall - but within months it had gone. But who knows what may be achieved if we continue in hope.

### The end of the diary.

The following was reported in the news and endorses all that we were hearing during our visit: *Two radical Israeli men entered the Church of Gethsemane in East Jerusalem during prayers this morning, (19 March). The pair attempted to deface items in the church and physically attacked a bishop and two priests who were taking part in the service. The men were safely caught and held by others in the church.*

22nd March 2023: Reports on BBC World News of growing tension and violence.