

A Pilgrimage to the Holy Land – extended by volcanic activity in Iceland!

The District Pilgrimage set out as planned on Tuesday 6th April and proceeded according to plan right through until through until arriving at Tel Aviv airport on the way back, - and then life changed!!



The Dome of the Rock from the Mount of Olives – on Wednesday 7th we began on the Mount of Olives.



The Sea of Galilee. Traveling there on Monday we visited the probable site of Emmaus on to Caesarea Maritime (where Saint Paul appeared before Felix) and on to the Crusader City of Acco. Our hotel in Galilee was on the banks of the Sea of Galilee at Tiberius.



Some of the group relaxing at the Golden Walls Hotel in Jerusalem. The lounge looks out on the City Walls.



On Wednesday 14th we had a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee, reading the passage where Jesus walked on the water. There was a demonstration of the traditional way of fishing in the Lake, (needless to say he didn't catch anything – even when we tried also on the other side of the boat)!

The Itinerary of the Pilgrimage.

Tuesday 6th Left Codsall at 5am, drove to Luton Airport.
Flew to Tel Aviv, and traveled by Coach to the Golden Walls Hotel in Jerusalem

Wednesday

Went the short distance to the Mount of Olives, visited the Church of the Paternoster where the Lord's Prayer is recorded in over 160 languages, traditionally this is the site where Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Walked the Palm Sunday route stopping for communion at Dominus Flevit. Then into the Garden of Gethsemane for prayers and a group photograph, before visiting Oskar Schindler's grave and on to John the Baptist's birthplace.



Relaxing for coffee in the Old City of Jerusalem



On the banks of the river Jordan, renewing our Baptismal Vows in a communal act of worship.

Thursday. Traveled around the city walls to the Zion Gate, before visiting the Jewish Quarter and seeing some of the recently excavated city walls that are thought to go back to The City of David. Then on to the Western Wall, before ascending the Temple Mount. After coffee in the Old City we went on to the Pool of Bethesda, and the church of St. Anne. At most sites we prayed and sang a Hymn. The acoustics at St Anne's were most remarkable. After lunch in a convent on the site of the Roman Pavement where Jesus was condemned, we walked the Via Dolorosa marking the stages of Jesus' journey to his Crucifixion. This ended at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, marking both the traditional site of the crucifixion and the grave of Jesus. This is one of the very busy sites of the Holy Land.

Friday . An early start when we headed down to the Dead Sea – visiting first the fortress of Massada. We then went on to swim in the Dead Sea, before visiting Qumran where the Dead Sea

Scrolls were found. We then went on to Jericho to the Mount of Temptation, calling in at a Palestinian Co-operative to buy some local souvenirs.



Outside of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher.



The Garden Tomb. This site is not as highly regarded in traditional terms (as the site of the Holy Sepulcher) but is likely to be more akin to the tomb used to bury Jesus. It is a first century (or earlier) tomb and there is evidence of a Garden around it.

Saturday. We traveled to Bethlehem. Seeing again the Israeli “Security Wall” - visiting first “Herodion Fortress.” We traveled on to the “Shepherds Field” where we celebrated Holy Communion. The security wall now goes almost alongside the Shepherds Field – at this point it is an electrified 20 foot fence, Bethlehem is almost entirely surrounded by the wall. We went on to another Palestinian Co-operative before having lunch at the “Arab Rehabilitation Center” - now a hospital in effect – where at one stage the Director who spoke to us was in tears about the situation they find themselves in. We moved on to Nativity Square and visited the site of the Inn – where Jesus was born. Our journey back to the hotel involved a long delay at the Bethlehem Checkpoint – and we saw again the attitude of the soldiers to Arabs, as our guide was severely spoken to.



John “emerging” from the Tomb.

Sunday. The day began with an early visit to the Holy Sepulcher and then joining the congregation of St George's Anglican Cathedral for morning worship. In the afternoon we went to Bethany and visited the Tomb of Lazarus raised from dead by Jesus, and then on to the Lazarus Home for Girls, nearby. This orphanage – run by an inspirational christian woman provides a home for 30 girls. It is supported by McCabe's educational trust. Bethany was clearly suffering – it was evident that there had been a marked deterioration since I had been there last two years ago. We heard about the power struggle between “Hamas” and “Fatta” and how the work at the home was being effected. They are subjected to death threats every day as a result of their Christian foundation and ethic.

Monday We traveled to Galilee via Emmaus where we visited the likely site of the Disciples' home where Jesus revealed himself. We then went for coffee at an Cafe dedicated to Elvis (as one person said – we met the King on the road to Emmaus). We then left to visit Caesarea Maritime (where Saint Paul was on trial before Felix) and on to the Crusader City of Acco. Our hotel in Galilee was on the banks of the Sea of Galilee at Tiberius.

Tuesday Our first visit was to Mount Tabor – scene of the transfiguration. We then went on to Nazareth visiting a number of sites, The Church of the Annunciation, St. Joseph's Church, and “Nazareth Village” - a living museum of life at the time of Jesus.

Wednesday. By the Sea of Galilee. Started at Capurnaum visiting the ruins of Peter's mother in law's house (that Jesus seemed to use as a base there, and on to the Jordan river for a reaffirmation of Baptismal Vows. Then we visited the church that marks the place where the Disciples had breakfast with the risen Jesus. We moved on to Tabga where Jesus used the loaves and the fishes to feed 5000. Next was the Mount of the Beatitudes, a lunch of St. Peter's Fish (complete with head - and eyes that looked at you disapprovingly) and then we traveled to a Kibbutz where we set out on a boat trip on the Sea of Galilee.

Thursday Due to be our return home. Left the hotel on time and on the way to the airport went to Jaffa (biblical Joppa). On arriving at the airport we saw that our flight was canceled. It soon transpired that the reason was the ash from the Icelandic Volcano. After about an hour of uncertainty we went back to the Golden Walls Hotel in Jerusalem for the night.



A sculpture Jesus in chains. During our waiting for a flight we made a number of additional visits including to St. Peter's Galicante, site of the High Priest's house where Jesus was imprisoned the night before he died.

Friday. Largely a day of waiting on news reports. We needed to sort out medication for people who didn't have any extra beyond the time they expected to stay in the Holy Land. When in the afternoon it was clear that there was no hope of an immediate resolution we went off to St Peter's Galicante. The hotel only had room for half the group Friday evening and so some of us had a night at the YMCA hostel.

During this time McCabe's in London and Alpina travel in Jerusalem were both being as helpful as could be imagined, but accommodation was becoming harder and harder for groups. As a result we agreed that a hotel in Jericho might be the best.

Saturday. Traveled to the "Jericho Resort Hotel." 400m below sea level – it was very hot!! As they had people coming into their hotel rooms we used their chalets – which made the experience even more cosy! All the group was getting to know each other well! McCabes had another group there at the time and by this stage we were often working as one group.

Sunday We decide to have a communion service at 6pm and have a trip out to Wadi Qult associated with "the valley of the shadow of death" from Psalm 23 – and the site now of a remarkable monastery dedicated to a local St. George (as opposed to the patron saint of England). It was a trip worth experiencing – the "Taxi" drivers – from the West Bank had novel driving methods, and the road – closed in the interfada has never been remade! Unfortunately the day was rather marred by the onset of what we now call Jericho Tummy – and in the end ten of the combined party succumbed to it – (including Mary and myself)! During the Saturday evening Ivor and I had discussed the situation and decided that the time had come to look at other options for coming home. As a result I phone McCabes on Sunday morning and they agreed that the situation was such that we had to seek alternatives. In fact they let me know that they had already begun doing that, they agreed that they would seek what might be achieved. At just after 6pm Rosemary Knut from McCabes phoned to say that she had been able to get us on a plane from Tel Aviv to Marseille. She let us know that we would need to leave at about 3am the next morning to get the flight. At that time no other details were worked out.

Monday 2am group up and packing! Alpina Travel had arranged for Walid one of their reps to travel with us to Tel Aviv and had a coach laid on for us. We were also informed that McCabes had arranged for the coach company who they were using for their Oberamagau trips to pick us up from the airport and take us to the channel – they would tell us more later! We left Jericho through the

now silent checkpoints, through sleeping Jerusalem and on to the airport. After going through security we were told that the flight would be an hour and a half late. By the time we had been through the passport check the flight was two and a half hours delayed. Time went on and we were still not called to the gate – but just before 10-30 we boarded on to the plane. As soon as we were on the plane the flight crew stood for 2 minutes silence – it was 11am on Israel's independence day. At the end of it it was announced that there was a delay before we could fly of about 40 minutes – we were by now all half expecting to hear that the flight was canceled. At 12 noon four hours after the scheduled flight time we took off and arrived in Marseille some four hours later – by now totally exhausted but glad to be back on European soil. We had been told during the day that McCabes had arranged a Hotel for us in Lyon, and no group of pilgrims has ever been more glad to see their overnight accommodation. (Especially true for those who had been, and in some cases still were ill)!

Tuesday A good meal (for those who could indulge) and a good night's sleep and the anticipation of a coach journey home looked almost exciting!

Writing this on the coach some hours later we are all being reminded how big a country France is!!

I am genuinely sorry not to have been able to Chair Synod, preach in the Stafford Circuit or fulfill the diary commitments for Friday to Tuesday. Revd Ivor Sperring who was the co-leader of the pilgrimage did a great job in keeping spirits up. We were all very impressed by McCabes work making sure at every juncture that we were well informed and supported. As I write we are still awaiting confirmation that we have a reservation to get across the channel by some means or another, and a coach to get us back to Wolverhampton! This is a journey of faith... early on during the pilgrimage in one of the times of group worship I spoke of the uncertainty of travel for pilgrims of previous generations and how that taught them of faith, - how the journey was a part of the pilgrimage. It seems it is as true of pilgrimage today!!

John Howard

Postscript on the Israel Palestine situation as seen on the trip.

Its impossible to be in the Holy Land and not to be aware of the political situation. Traveling to Bethlehem, or Bethany or Jericho and you soon see its evidence. The security wall is clearly obscene, and as the leader of the Arab Rehabilitation Center in Bethlehem made clear- much more about a land grab, than about security.

Having said that the experience of being there demonstrates the complexity of the situation. Saaba the leader of the Lazarus home for girls spoke movingly about the abusive nature of Hamas activity. The stories she told us were awful. She – a Palestinian Christian commented that she would much rather be under the Israeli authorities than she was at present – because at least women have some human rights in Israel.

Shafiq our quite splendid guide spoke movingly about the complex situation, and chillingly said that he and many in East Jerusalem fear that another war is less than a year away – he is especially fearful of Iran and how Israel might behave towards it – and the consequences.

Sometimes from England the rights and wrongs seem clear – and certain things are clear – Israel is wrong to be grabbing land under the pretext of security, Hamas is wrong in its total disregard of human rights – especially for women. However answers are very difficult to see. To me the challenge of peace building is the one clear lesson that I observe from our visit – how can we support those who today are working for peace in the Holy Land?