

Diocesan pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Janet Bird

Colin and I recently had the great privilege of taking part in a Diocesan Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. Very ably led by the Archdeacon of Bedford, Paul Hughes, and his wife Rev Canon Liz Hughes, Airport chaplain at Luton. It was probably the most amazing experience of my life and I would recommend it to anybody who wants to have a better understanding of the Bible and the events which took place during Christ's earthly ministry.

We had been told that we were going on a pilgrimage and not a holiday and this proved to be very true. We were woken each morning by a 6.30 alarm call and then after breakfast had to be on the coach each day by 8am, except the day when we had to leave at 7.30am. The days were very full and we saw so many places that we had only read about in the Bible, some of which it was easy to relate to and others which needed some imagination, but we learnt more than we could ever have done just from reading books.

We also learnt much about the political situation which divides Israel from Palestine and the fact that people in different areas, even those around Jerusalem have different rights according to their nationality. This was something that many of us found very difficult especially concerning the towns of Bethany and Bethlehem where non-Jews can only leave if they have a special visa.

However, the difficult political situation and the number of armed soldiers who are on the streets did make us realise just what the situation must have been like for Jesus, living as he did under the Roman army of occupation.

Despite the fact that the Christian population is now very much in the minority there are still many places which have great meaning to Christians worldwide and many of these are cared for by the Franciscans, including many amazing churches with beautiful murals depicting such events as

the Transfiguration and the Ascension. We also visited Capernaum as well as celebrating the Eucharist on the shores of Lake Galilee at the spot where Jesus fed the Five Thousand with the loaves and fishes.

On our very first day, we were driven up the Mount of Olives where we visited the Church, which has tablets displayed all around its wall with the Lord's Prayer in every language imaginable, including Welsh. We looked out over the Kidron valley from the Mount of Olives towards Jerusalem, visited the garden of Gethsemane and the Church of All Nations and then climbed the long hill up into Jerusalem to visit the Church of St Anne and the Pools of Bethesda and that was all before lunch!



What made the most impression on me was the vast distances that Jesus and his disciples would have had to cover, on foot or at best on donkeys to share his teaching and proclaim the word of God. Life was far from easy and yet still the Good News spread, not only during Christ's short ministry but after his cruel death on the Cross, his Resurrection and then his Ascension into Heaven. Much of the country is still wilderness and stories like the Good Samaritan made much more sense when we were on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho.

We understood more than ever that the disciples were, in the main, simple souls just like we are but that, with Christ's teaching and then by the Power of the Holy Spirit, they were able to take Christ's message, not only around the local towns and villages,

but also to far off lands which would have taken weeks and months to reach. Despite seeing their friend suffer and die at the hands of the Roman forces, they were prepared to put their own lives at risk, and to lose their lives as they spread the message of God's heavenly Kingdom and the redemption from sin, which Christ's death and resurrection had won for all who follow him.

We spent much time travelling and seeing amazing places; but we also spent a significant time praying and worshipping. It made me far more aware of the importance of prayer in our lives. We started the trip as a group of 42 virtual strangers but such was the depth of feeling we shared that we ended as friends. Our guide was a Christian Arab who had an amazing grasp of the Bible and who really brought the stories to life and whose faith was such a part of his everyday life that I felt humbled by not only his knowledge but by the clarity of his explanations.



On the Sunday of our visit we celebrated the Eucharist on the banks of the Jordan on the site where John the Baptist baptised Jesus. The countryside all around was indeed a wilderness and it was easy to imagine what it would have been like during the time of Christ.

At the actual site, where the river Jordan is very narrow there are two distinct areas on opposite sides of the river, and it isn't possible to cross from one to the other. Added to this there are armed guards on both sides but somehow the spirituality of the place meant that it was possible to ignore the machine guns and the young soldiers holding them, and concentrate first

on our service and then on a baptism which was taking place on the opposite bank. This culminated in the group on the opposite bank who were from the Philippines singing. Let there be peace on earth which we all joined in with, fervently praying that this could become a reality. It was one of the most moving moments of the whole pilgrimage and many of us were moved to tears.

One morning Colin and I got up at 5.15 to join many of the others in the hotel garden to watch the sun rise over the Galilean hills which was truly amazing, knowing that the scene would not have changed significantly since the time of Jesus.

On our last full day we went on a boat on the Sea of Galilee and here more than anywhere else I could really feel the presence of Jesus with us. We shared prayers and then sang Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, which has always held a special place in my heart and now will always remind me of one of the most spiritual experiences of my life. It might not have been the Sabbath, but we could not help feeling a sense of awe looking at the calm hills above Galilee - all the more poignant when you realise that they are the Golan Heights, which many of us have only ever heard of because of the six-day war in 1967 when Israel seized them from Syria.

On the morning of our departure, we took part in what was probably the earliest Diocesan breakfast prayer event on Ascension Day. For a while the Diocesan website carried a picture of us all praying in our hotel garden on the banks of the Sea of Galilee at 7.30 am – actually 5.30 am in the UK. We gave thanks for all that we had been able to experience and we prayed not only for ourselves but for this world which we all share.

May all who have lost their way be led to follow in the way of Christ, that the whole world may become a better and more peaceful place and that people may learn to live together in fellowship and love. May the peace of Christ be with you all.
Love, Janet