

## Passport to Bethlehem

Dear friends,

Thank you for all your prayers and words of support as I was about to head off to Palestine and Israel last month. As you will now see, I am back! But what a lot there was to experience and see. There is so much happening in that part of the world, and sadly not all of it is positive, as we saw for ourselves.

Our main base was Bethlehem. We stayed there in a tourist hotel every night. Bethlehem is only about four miles from Jerusalem (equivalent maybe to Stretford and Manchester), but they are worlds apart, with a huge separation wall almost twice the height of the Berlin Wall around most of Bethlehem, which cuts it off from Jerusalem. There is a checkpoint that Palestinians have to go through every day and sometimes there are considerable delays.

The separation wall is part of a policy by the Israeli state to frustrate and subdue the Palestinians. It has come about because of the terrible tension that has grown over the decades between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Various international agreements have tried to reverse this process, but certain events have helped to fuel it. Before 1948, Jews and Arabs of different faiths could live together, but everything has changed. Now, where the Israelis want to, they will do their best to make their presence felt: many of the Israeli settlers who live in the West Bank in their own enclaves, wish to push the Palestinians out, and tensions can be quite high.

In some places, there can be quite a large Israeli military presence, as we saw in the city of Hebron in the southern part of the West Bank (which is where the tomb of Abraham and the patriarchs is). This has led to one section of the centre of the city becoming a cross between a ghost town and a war zone. It felt miserable to be there, seeing Palestinians trying to make the best of an awful situation.

Bethlehem is just about surviving. It is quite a big city but there is a lot of unemployment now that the separation wall has been built (and it is built to last), which is why they need tourists. We visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. It was one place where life seems to flourish – and there are many such places we saw, because the Palestinians (like the Israelis) love the land: both peoples are resilient and both have great faith.

Many, many people in Israel and Palestine want peace, but in the current situation peace can look like a distant hope. We all came away wondering what can be done. Walls are up, and what can you do when you mostly see your Palestinian or Israeli neighbour as a soldier or a terrorist?

There is hope. The Ecumenical Accompaniment Project which we saw is a scheme by the World Council of Churches to stand by the Palestinians to lower the tension and gently remind both sides, where communities are vulnerable or where there are flashpoints, that due process should be followed and that both peoples, whatever we think, are human beings. After all, it is better to live alongside rather than exercise power at our neighbour's expense.

I did, of course, visit Jerusalem; I visited Jericho, the Dead Sea (and I floated on it), and many other places. We saw a lot in one week, and I won't forget it – I hope not.

I attended the church ceremony where the volunteers on the Ecumenical Accompaniment Project handed over to their replacements on the scheme. It was very moving. One of the prayers went as follows:

In the midst of suffering and sorrow, in the midst of human kindness and ingenuity, make a hopeful witness to the hope of God's gift of new life to the world. Let it be so. Amen.

I think that is a good place to end for now. I am sure there will be more to say and more to think on, and I will continue to pray for peace in that region. It's good to be back, it's good to have been there. For us, let's try and make something of the gifts that we have, to be witnesses to the hope of God's gift of new life to the world.

Amen.

With love and prayers.

Simon