

# Pilgrimage to the Holy Land: 12<sup>th</sup>-21<sup>st</sup> February 2016

*Doreen Norfield and Hilary Burton give their report*



Ken, our Church representative for Kairos, was responsible for organising our trip through Embrace the Middle East. He asked the two of us to write about our unforgettable experiences. We are still reeling physically, mentally and emotionally. Images continue to flood the mind and tears spring up. Where to begin?

## Our group

We visited many places and sites, lots of churches, lots of excavations, and heard from many people. We had talks from a variety of people, including Refugees, Christian Palestinians, people working for reconciliation and justice, and a Jewish settler.

All Palestinians, when asked how we might help, replied *“Pray for us. It is wonderful to know that there are people thinking of us. Tell them what you have seen and heard.”*

Well here goes.

We start with just a few of the many churches we visited. As Bishara our knowledgeable Palestinian Roman Catholic guide put it, *“If there is a mention of anywhere in the Bible, build a Church there.”*

### Magdala Church in Galilee

We were both moved and touched by the new Magdala Church, dedicated to the strength of women. The site on Lake Galilee was bought to build a new hotel. It is required to excavate any new site before building and they discovered a first century synagogue and town, which they believe to be Magdala, the home of Mary of Magdala (Mary Magdalene). The altar in the Church is in the form of a fishing boat. The sail was draped around the mast like the robe on the cross.





There are several chapels around the Church. In one our guide, Rachel, showed us a remarkable painting showing several pairs of feet. A finger was stretching out to touch the hem of Christ's robe. This depicts the woman suffering from incurable haemorrhages, which made her an outcast and unclean. Her faith was sufficient.

We had planned to celebrate our final Eucharist in this stunning Church, dedicated to women, only to be told that our vicar, being a woman, would not be permitted to conduct the service. Amazingly, a Church of Scotland minister had visited this Church a few hours previously and had offered to host any group at her Church in Tiberius, just a short walk from our hotel. After feeling rejected, it was wonderful to be welcomed into her lovely Church for our service.

### **St Peter Gallicantu Church on Mount Zion, Jerusalem**

Everyone was moved by the beautiful French Church, built over the site of the High Priest, Caiaphas's house. Underneath the Church, sunk deep in the rock, was the prison where Jesus was held while awaiting his final sentence. The mood was intensified as we waited for the group which preceded us and listened as they sang two hymns in gospel choir style – silent tears fell. We had steps to help us, but Jesus would have been lowered through a trapdoor – we felt his suffering.

Emerging into daylight, we encountered a statue of Peter, in tears, having denied Jesus, and gazing at the cock crowing above him.



### **St Photina Greek Orthodox Church in Nablus**

Travelling up the Jordan Valley, we stopped at Nablus, a major city in Samaria, which is known as Shechem in the Bible. We visited a Greek Orthodox Church over the site of Jacob's well, famous in both the Old and New testament. The windows, paintings, murals, ceilings, floor mosaics were indescribably beautiful. The building was flooded in sunlight, lighting up the many red and blue glass lamps. There were further visual treats in store as we descended into the crypt to see the well. It still provides fresh water – we tasted it – just as it has around four thousand years!

#### **The living stones**

So many Churches! We could complete this article just writing about them, but we have touched on a subject which has appalled all of us – the treatment of the Palestinians. We were fortunate to meet a fair representative sample of people who told us their story. We had heard about the Separation Wall surrounding Jerusalem, with checkpoints, but we were to learn of the effects on those who live with it everyday. Palestinians who have work permits to work in Jerusalem have to be at the checkpoint as early as 4:30am, to guarantee that they can get through. We complained when we had to board the coach for an 8am departure!

We met deeply Christian Palestinians. Their faith shone out of them. We met Sami at the Episcopalian Church of St Philip in Nablus, which was running a multi-faith Sunday School (on Fridays!) and a Kindergarten. The Church had voluntarily given land for a Mosque to be built next door, demonstrating how to work together.

We met staff at the Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation (BASR), a hospital in Bethlehem. The hospital for the disabled had been founded by Group Captain Leonard Cheshire. It now serves the wider Palestinian community, treating people of all faiths and none.

We visited the Palestine Bible Society in Jericho where we found a mother and child playgroup with children of all faiths run by a delightful couple.

We will never forget Claire Anastas, for her passionate belief in the power of prayer. She had refused to vacate her home and business to the Israeli Military, who have built the wall around three sides of her house – the photo shows what used to be the busy main road into Bethlehem. Not satisfied with ruining her life and business, the military then occupied the house during the second intifada and used it in the armed struggle against the Palestinians. Claire and her four children were huddled together in the corner of the room, with gunfire all around them. Her solution was to pray to the Lord, confident that he would save them – and he did. Life is still very difficult. She fills her shop with goods made by neighbours and friends, paying them more than she can afford. Even that business has suffered because of Israeli taxes imposed on any tour bus which stops there.



**Home of Clare and Johnny Anastas**



**Mud hut built by volunteers in the Jordan Valley**

Settlements for growing crops. The poor pet dogs which craved our attention were untouchable; they stank because no water could be spared to wash them.

Israeli military regularly demolish Palestinian homes in the Jordan valley. JVS work to rebuild these with the help of international volunteers. They make bricks from mud and straw. It is difficult to get building materials into the area through the checkpoints. When these houses are demolished, they just add water and rebuild them – such is their resistance to the occupation.

We were addressed most evenings by a speaker. We remember a married couple, both teachers, as representative of the average Palestinian couple trying to live a normal life, raising their two little boys who had never been allowed to see the sea. Permits to leave the West Bank are only granted for very special reasons. Water is strictly rationed- they never know when it will be switched on and for how long. When the supply is on, everyone washes their clothes and pumps water to rooftop storage tanks. The children wash according to mum's strict instructions to save water. She is English born of

Travelling off the beaten track, up a mud track to see Jordan Valley Solidarity, we were shown to a hut, built using mud and straw (how biblical) by internationals in 24 hours. A young drama, design and theatre student of 29 was going to Jordan on her honeymoon, when her husband was arrested at the checkpoint and imprisoned for 18 months without charge – called “*administrative detention*” by the military. She told us another story - she was at a checkpoint when her companion was shot dead by one of the soldiers. The woman soldier was heard to be challenged by her male soldier colleague to shoot a man. There is no redress.

She showed us the pump built with British and UN support, which lies useless, as the Israelis put a limit on the depth which could be dug. As this was not as deep as the ring of Israeli wells around the village, no water was found. The village has no other water supply. All the water goes to the nearby Israeli



**Machine for making mud bricks**

English parents with an English passport. However, she has a Palestinian West Bank Identification and so is treated by the Israeli government and military as a Palestinian, not an international. The couple own a field but it is difficult to access to cultivate, and they cannot build on the land. They fear that their land will be confiscated, especially if they do not prove it is in use.

We heard from Mohammad who told us about the Olive Tree Campaign. Olive trees are hardy and tenacious. They are a symbol of the Palestinian's attachment to the land. Israeli military destroy many olive trees as they clear land to build settlements, and many olive trees have been burnt as a result of settler violence. Replanting olive trees demonstrates hope in the future, as they take many years to bear fruit. They are a sign of resistance – many internationals buy olive trees as a sign of solidarity. Details of how to sponsor an olive tree can be found on the Embrace the Middle East website.



**Site of Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran**

We could describe the many archaeological sites visited – Herodean, Roman, Crusader, Byzantine. The site at Qumran was memorable, where the desert community around the time Jesus lived a strict religious life and wrote scrolls containing Biblical texts. The elaborate system of cisterns and religious baths constructed for purification were astounding. The scrolls were kept in clay jars and were hidden in caves when the community was threatened. The “Dead Sea Scrolls” were discovered in 1947.

Undoubtedly the Palestinians are subjected to many injustices. We had just a brief experience of hostility. We were leaving Nablus when we encountered a “flying checkpoint” set up by the military. Palestinian vehicles were forced to turn around by the soldiers. Our coach had to wait for half an hour until two gun-carrying soldiers, looking very young, but defensive, checked the boot and the interior, then let us go, but without any explanation.

Yet we never saw anyone shabbily dressed. No-one looked famished, not even in the litter strewn, stinking, Dheisheh refugee camp. The children looked happy and smiling, but 75% of them will have been in prison by the age of 18. The peddling tradesmen who hounded us everywhere were cleanly dressed, smoked, drove cars and had mobiles and ipads. How did they manage a living when so many cafes and shops sold exactly the same things? The only beggar we saw was a Hasidic Jew in Jerusalem. Somehow people survive despite the restrictions of the Israeli occupation and, by their own admission, the actions of their own corrupt Palestinian officials.

Our journey over, we have witnessed life before Christ, walked in his footsteps and seen something of what has happened since. Sadly, the number of Christians has diminished as it has in our country where we do not experience their hardship.

The hearts of these Palestinian Christians are strong and we like to think that our small party from St John's feel strengthened in our faith as a result of the Pilgrimage. The singing and participation in the final service at the Church of Scotland on the banks of the Galilee gave us confidence, so heartfelt was it. We arrived home with

friendships formed and consolidated. We two pensioners will always be grateful for the willing hands, shoulder or arm offered as we struggled up hills, rocks and steps which shape this uncompromising land. Without man's intervention it is far from the land flowing "with milk and honey" Our final words please, as was requested of us, please pray for all the occupants of that troubled land and beg for peace.

***Doreen Norfield and Hilary Burton***

If you would like to learn more about our pilgrimage, have a look at: <http://kairoscrowthorne.blogspot.com>