

Visit to the Holy Land - 2007

I couldn't believe it, at last my adventure was about to begin! The day dawned very early, Ann picked me up at 4.30am on Wednesday 11 April and we were off to meet up with six more pilgrims onto a mini bus bound for Heathrow airport where we met with three more of our party. We were in plenty of time and just after six in the morning were sitting with a cup of tea and a pastry getting to know each other. Ann Leonard (vicar of St. Peter's and St. Andrew's at Hayling Island) and her husband John Preston (who looks after the sisters at the House of Bethany) were our leaders and had done this trip on several occasions and were full of very helpful advice which was especially helpful to me, as although many years ago I had flown on a small plane I had never left the country before. I hoped I had everything I could possibly need, but as we walked through the airport I remembered being given a boiled sweet when I flew before and when I asked one of my travelling companions if this was still the case I was concerned to hear that it wasn't - so I rushed to WH Smith's to purchase a bag of the said boiled sweets! I don't know if it helps or not, but I did make sure to suck the sweet as we took off. I have always been amazed that planes manage to get off the ground and then stay in the air and this certainly went through my mind as I sat waiting for take off and watched the stewards pointing to the exits in case of emergency. We had little screens on the back of the seat in front so that you could watch a film but I was happy to watch the map with the red line moving showing where the plane was - it reminded me of the Indiana Jones films! The plane was full with 228 passengers on the British Airways flight - when I was younger the job of an air stewardess seemed very glamorous but watching them being so busy it didn't seem so glamorous. There were quite a few Jewish people on board and as we landed they all applauded.

At Tel Aviv airport our guide George and our driver Ahmed met us, onto our mini bus on route for the Golan Hotel in Tiberius. George gave us each a map of the Holy Land so that we could see where we were going - we used them each day. Tiberius is situated on the western shores of Lake Galilee and was about a two-hour drive. George

is a Palestinian Christian and spoke English with a New Jersey accent having studied there. The hotel was very nice and it was shower, dinner and bed although it was 9.30pm - back home it would only have been 7.30pm but we were all pretty tired and I slept well.

The first day set the pattern for all the other days - our alarm call was at 6.30am, breakfast at 7am, leaving the hotel by 8am. We went down to Lake Galilee and got on a wooden boat and set sail for the Northern Shore, it was an open boat with part of it under cover. They were flying the Israeli flag - they got out a Union Flag and played the national anthem while putting it up (the right way!) - we all stood up. It was a lovely morning, quite hazy, the water was very calm but we were told that at certain times of the year storms can blow up very quickly and I thought of the disciples when they woke Jesus during a storm. We had a Eucharist on board, what a wonderful setting. We landed at NofGinosar and saw the hull of a wooden boat 2,000 years old; it was uncovered in the dry summer of 1986. Two brothers made the discovery and the huge task of digging it out of the mud and preserving it began, it makes the Mary Rose look very recent!

Back to the mini bus and onto the Mount of Beatitudes, this church is built close to where Christ gave his Sermon on the Mount. It is set high on a hill with lovely views, palm trees line the path and the flowers give lots of colour -there were roses and bougainvillea. As we sat outside in the warm air George said the Lord's Prayer to us in Aramaic and to hear the words as Jesus would have said them, where he said them was quite something. A short drive took us to Tabgha to the Church of the Loaves and Fishes - I'm sure you guessed it commemorates the feeding of the five thousand. In front of the altar on the floor is a very old mosaic it shows a basket with four loaves and a fish on either side - where is the fifth loaf? - it is the host on the altar.

George hurries us back on to the mini bus we still have lots to do - St. Peter's Primacy is our next stop - it sits right on the shore beside the lake and was where Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection. As we wandered along the

shore you could easily imagine Jesus there calling out to the disciples to cast their nets on the other side. I sat with my feet in the clear, cold water the atmosphere was so peaceful as I looked out across the lake, I could have stayed here a very long time, this for me was one of the most special moments of my time in the Holy Land. But there was no time to delay George calls us back to the mini bus and we are on our way to Capernaum the town that was the base for Christ's Galilean Ministry. Peter's mother in law lived here and the remains of the house are still here. The family and extended family would all live together, they each have a room, it is called '*insular*', within this was a room that Peter used for worship - later an octagonal church was built incorporating what was there - you can just see the shape, over this has been built a modern octagonal church, it has glass panels on all sides and bench like seats. It was a light, atmospheric building with lovely views, just a few steps from Peter's mother in laws house is the synagogue, and this dates from the 3rd century and in on the site of an earlier synagogue. There is a carving on a large piece of limestone of what is thought to be the Ark of the

Covenant it is the only one of its kind.

Onto the mini bus it's time for lunch, a restaurant close to Capernaum we had the house speciality Peter's fish and chips, we wondered what the fish was called before Peter's time! We had fresh dates for afters - I did try one it wasn't too bad, a bit like the texture of a plum but not such a nice taste! As we journeyed to our next visit George explained how the area of Galilee is often known as the Fifth Gospel and how if you know and understand the land it helps to understand the other four gospels. We were going to the eastern shores Kursi (Gadara), where the man filled with evil spirits asked Jesus for help and the evil spirits were put into the pigs, which then ran off the cliff into the lake. When Jesus went to the other side (eastern side) this is where the gentiles lived hence the pigs. There were remains of a basilica style church here, two rows of pillars and three aisles. Beautiful scented roses along the pathway and along the roadside we saw large areas of banana trees, palms and fig trees. Back to the hotel for a rest and dinner.

Lake Galilee at St Peters Primacy - where Jesus appeared after the resurrection



A good nights sleep and off we go again, first stop Cana, to see the church called the Wedding Church built over what is thought to be the bridegroom's house, it was early when we visited and there were several couples renewing their marriage vows. After this we made our way to Nazareth, the roads were very narrow in the town and we walked from the site of Mary's well to the Church of the Annunciation, which is built over the location of the village of Jesus' day. At this time Nazareth was very small; about 200-400 people mostly they lived in cave like dwellings and the remains of one of these is below the church. The present church was only completed in the 1960's and is the largest basilica in the middle east, like many other churches that we visited it is on two levels the lower level was where the remains of the cave was and then the upper level (ground level) was a more modern church with the most amazing painting behind the altar. When it was built they asked many countries to send a piece of artwork that represented Mary, they are outside in the courtyard and inside the modern part of the church, it is amazing how different they are - England's is near the altar so we couldn't get to see it.

Onto the minibus for the Nazareth Village this was really good and gave us an idea of how things would have been and looked at the time of Jesus. An open space where evidence was found of a vineyard from the time and with results of archaeological research the village has been reproduced showing village life as it would have been. There are 14 hills around the Nazareth area, and so terraces are cut into the slopes with layers of chalk and soil for drainage. The winding pathways climbed up, there were olive trees, yellow flowers - these were mustard seed, poppies and yellow daisy flowers like chrysanthemums, donkeys and goats grazing, we saw the synagogue, weaver's house and the carpenter's house and as we left we were given a little lantern to remind us of the light of the world.

Next stop Sepphoris, which is just a short way around the lake from Nazareth and is a first century Roman town. Nazareth was so small there would not have been enough work for

Joseph, and from the original translation Joseph would have been a craftsman not just a carpenter, he would have worked with both stone and wood and most certainly would have worked here with Jesus alongside him. It is very high up so there are wonderful views there are lots of mosaics here, a quite famous one known as the Mona Lisa of Galilee. The Roman road through the town remains pretty much as when built they are large stones laid at an angle so that the wheels of the carts wouldn't catch, there are marks left in the stone from the hundreds of wheels using this road. Back to the hotel where we become very English and all have a well earned cuppa!

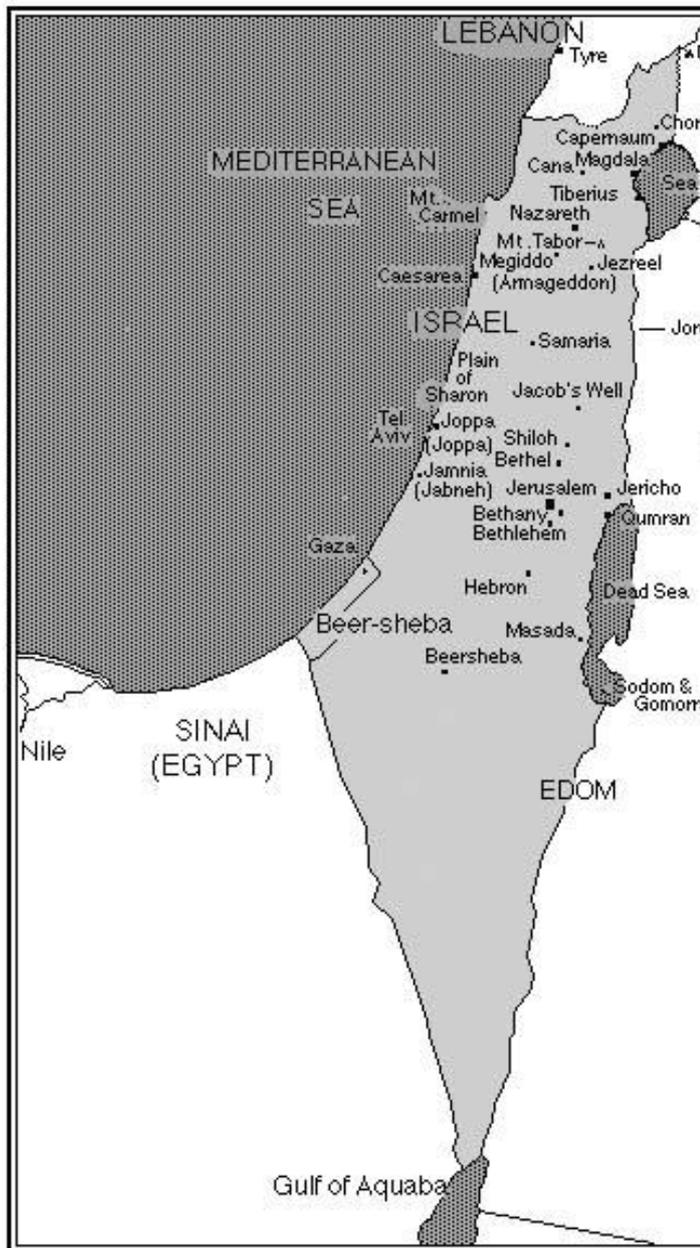
Saturday morning we leave Tiberius and head towards Jerusalem, driving down the Jordan Valley road it runs alongside the river Jordan and the border with Jordan. In the time of Jesus this would have been either a three or five day walk, mostly the five-day walk was what was used, although longer it was a safer route. Along the roadside today we saw palms as well as fields of citrus fruits and mangos.

Our first stop was a town called Beit Shean (Bet She' an), there was something on this site from 4,000BC; from these city walls the Philistines hung the bodies of Saul and his sons. The remains are magnificent and were only discovered in the 1980's, the Roman city was 2-3 century, then in the 6-7 century the Muslims came and made some changes and then in 749AD an earthquake destroyed quite a bit. It was a very grand place with two main streets with all the usual plus shops, baths, theatre, the street was open and the walkway on either side had pillars on the roads edge and then this was under cover so that the people could keep out of the sun.

Back onto the mini bus for Jericho, the landscape has changed and there are hills and mountains all around - no green here, mostly stone. We took a cable car up to the Mount of Temptation, I didn't like the ride too much but it didn't take long, the cable car was a millennium project. It was a popular destination for families taking a picnic, they were mostly Palestinians from a West Bank village, there were wonderful views up there everything looked light coloured except the area of Jericho which looked like an oasis in the desert, the Spring of Elisha provided the water.

Back down again and a short trip to the sycamore/fig tree said to be the one that Zacchaeus climbed to get a view of Jesus, he was the tax collector that Jesus asked to stay at the house of. George is letting us shop we are off to a pottery outlet; lunch provided one of those falafel things I'm getting very adventurous!

Back onto the mini bus we travel through the Judean Wilderness on the old Jerusalem to Jericho road this was the road that Jesus would often have travelled, we saw the fence and then the wall marking the borders, at the West Bank we went through various checkpoints Israeli and Palestinian. We stopped to view St. George's monastery perched in the rocks, we walked up the hill careful not to slip on the stones we were very high there was no grass. A viaduct was put in to serve the monastery and you could easily follow the water by seeing the lovely green against the quite light coloured background. It was quiet but very windy, the wind was warm and it seemed as I sat there on top on the world with my eyes closed that sometimes just for a moment the wind stopped and everything was quite still. I could easily imagine Jesus walking there being tempted by the devil. Bedouin shepherds lived in this whole area and we saw several places where they had set up home, they usually keep goats and sheep and when the animals have eaten all the food they move on to a new area. As we travel on the mini bus George is a mine of information about all things around us and where we are about to visit and he told us of a Jewish man sending his son to Jerusalem to further his education but when he comes back he has become a Christian, the father didn't know what to do and went to the Rabbi to seek advice, the Rabbi explains that the same thing happened when he sent his son to Jerusalem and says that they should both pray to God. God answers, "*The same thing happened when I sent my son*" - well it made me laugh!



On Sunday we visited Yad Vashem this is Israel's memorial to the Holocaust, it was a special day at the museum, the following day was Holocaust Day and today the president of Israel and lots of high ranking army officers including the head of the army with various television and press were all there. It was all very well laid out and impossible not to feel very strong emotions, outside is the Avenue of the Righteous - there are carrot trees planted either side of the path, the trees are planted in memory of the gentiles (non Jews) who helped Jews during the war.

We head off for Ain Kareem to the church of St. John the Baptist where we remember the visit of Mary to her cousin Elizabeth; it was a beautiful, peaceful church cared for as are many of the buildings by Franciscan monks.

Next stop Bethlehem, Bethlehem is part of the West Bank and we had to go through checkpoints. On the walls outside it said *'Peace Be With You'*. First we visit the shepherds fields, actually it was a natural cave - at the time it was quite large and went back a long way; two hundred sheep would easily fit inside with their shepherds. As we stood outside (there was a wasps nest inside - so we came out quite quickly) we sang a verse of *'O Little Town of Bethlehem'* - I found all these quiet moments very special.

Back on the mini bus and we visit The Bethlehem Arab Society for Rehabilitation - this is a hospital staffed by Christians and Muslims, outside there is a sign *'Every patient is first and foremost a human being'*. The patients are mostly Palestinian and we were shown around, they manage on mostly donations and work under very difficult conditions. The Christians feel called to do God's work here in Bethlehem, committed to stay, the wall is very close to the hospital and the Israeli's are building another settlement very close to it. The director of the hospital had some land on the Israeli side but since the wall has been built has lost it. We had a Eucharist here and then were treated to a lovely lunch - next stop Manger Square.

The square is part of the original church but through time and various rebuilding was lost, the Roman Catholic, Armenian and Greek Orthodox all have a section within the complex, the RC part

had a separate name St. Catherine's and was the largest. There was a courtyard in front with a statue of St. Jerome (it was he who lived in a cave on this site and translated the bible - it took some thirty years). The church of the Nativity is built over the original cave of the birth of Jesus, it was very busy here with many pilgrims and felt rather like *'Paddy's Market'* - the site of the birth is a fourteen pointed star (to represent the fourteen generations from David to Jesus) flat on the floor, there is a curtain shielding the site with little lamps hanging above it. We came outside to the courtyard and sang a verse of *'Away in a Manger'*. I found these moments more meaningful - close your eyes and you're there.

Back on the mini bus, there were long delays to get out of Bethlehem through the checkpoints but everyone is very patient - I guess that it is just the way it is. The new bishop of Jerusalem was enthroned today and we walked across to St. George's Cathedral (just a few minutes walk from the hotel) the service started at 4pm we arrived just before six, the Bishop, Suheil Salman Dawani was nearing the end of his sermon. Parts of the service were in English and parts in Arabic, we sang the responses in Arabic and the hymns each in our own language, at the end as they all processed out the choir sang (and we all joined in) *'We Shall Overcome'* and the second verse *'We shall live in peace'* and then *'We shall walk hand in hand'*.

After the day that we had had I found this rather moving and felt that we should all be standing and holding hands as we sang. As we came out of the cathedral a scout band was playing - there were saxophones, drums, trombones, etc., they were very enthusiastic it was a wonderful cheerful sound.

Monday started earlier than usual, we left the hotel at 7.30am. I heard the Muslims called to prayer at around 4.30am - the time seemed to vary between 4 and 4.45 am. We were off to Masada at the southern end of the Dead Sea; this is the lowest point of the earth's surface. Obviously flat on the Dead Sea side but mountainous on the other side - it is classed as desert as it has less than 200mm of rain a year. On the journey we saw large areas of palm trees, some were being picked they were using a cherry

picker style thing - it looked quite bizarre, also saw acacia trees, these are umbrella like and provide good shade in the desert. This wood was used in the making of the Ark of the Covenant.

We had to go through checkpoints again today, most of the Dead Sea area is in the West Bank. Arriving at Masada we travelled the 400m to the top of the mountain by cable car there was a path called the Snake Path that has steps with a hand rail, there didn't look to be any resting places! Herod built Masada as one of his fortresses; it is quite amazing, just imagine the planning, etc., into this happening, aqueducts were built bringing water coming down the hills from Jerusalem, there was even a swimming pool, and many good examples of mosaics on the floors and the walls, no expense can have been spared. Jewish Zealots who withstood the Roman army after the fall of Jerusalem in around 70AD took Masada - they had food and water and could have lasted. When they felt that the Romans could not be stopped, the leader called them to the synagogue and sold them the idea of suicide, although against their law, slavery to the Romans was a much worse option to them. The men killed the wives and children, and the last ten men drew lots (the tiles with the names on were found) for the one who should kill the other nine and then fall on his own sword. The only thing the Zealots destroyed were the weapons to stop the Romans using them and to show that they still had plenty of supplies.

It was getting very hot and George wanted us back on the mini bus heading for Qumran. This is where a Bedouin Shepherd boy found the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 - it sounds like an adventure story doesn't it? There are copies of all the books of the Old Testament, except Esther (this book does not mention God); these are the oldest manuscripts in existence. There were 931 documents from different periods as early as 300BC to 40AD. They give a snap shot of the world Jesus ministered with his disciples and shed light on the practise of the Jewish religion during the periods when the books of the Bible were written. The group were Essences, men who lived in caves in the hills, they wanted a simple, spiritual life -they called themselves '*Sons of Light*' and others Jews and Gentiles '*Sons of*

Darkness' - they spent there days writing the scriptures and laws.

After lunch we head for a dip in the Dead Sea, the water and the mud are very good for the skin and there are lots of Dead Sea Beauty products available. It was very warm here; most people went for a float (as you do in the Dead Sea). I sat on the waters edge and enjoyed just sitting - one of our party had difficulty working out how to stand as she was floating away towards Jordan - we helpfully offered to send her passport over for her!

We made our way back to the hotel, it had become our habit to sit and enjoy a nice cuppa and a chat over the day and then either before or after dinner we met up for drinks in Ann and John's room for more chat and to talk over what we would be doing the following day.

Tuesday we started at Bethpage a small village near to Bethany, this is where Jesus began his entry into Jerusalem on the first Palm Sunday. We visited the church where there were paintings on the walls with a sepia type of finish they were very effective. A short trip on the mini bus took us to the top of the Mount of Olives which is the highest point in Jerusalem, this is the view often seen on television interviews, and we had our photo taken here with the amazing view behind us.

We carry on on foot down the steep fairly narrow paths that will weave our way into the old city; we stop by at Dominus Fleuit the Chapel of the Tear Drop. This modern chapel commemorates Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and was constructed in the form of a teardrop by the architect Burlazzi in 1955 on the ruins of an ancient church. It faces west so that the window behind the altar looks out over Jerusalem and is a simple, peaceful chapel. During construction work between 1953-55 ossuaries - boxes of stone to conserve the bones of the dead - were found dating back to the first century. We carry on down the steep paths, wonderful views along the way past the cemeteries where Jews, Christians and Muslims each have a section - the stones put on the tombs are put there by people unable to be at the funeral and they mean '*truthful good*' a bit like us sending flowers. We come to the Garden of Gethsemane (Gethsemane means '*Olive Press*') - it is just a small part of what it would have been, lots of olive trees including one said to be 2,000 years old. Alongside it, The Church of All Nations to commemorate the Garden of Gethsemane - several nations helped with funding and art work. This church was very dark the stained glass windows were modern in purple shades - purple colouring was the richest and most expensive colour to create naturally in the time of Jesus.

We left here and were lucky to be able to go into a locked part of the Garden of Gethsemane where we were able to wander around, sit and pray and take in the atmosphere. Carrying on down the hill we entered the old city through St. Stephen's Gate - it is sometimes called the Lion Gate - this was because of the Crusaders; there are two pairs of lions on the wall.

Onto the Pools of Bethesda where the crippled man was healed and into St. Anne's church (Mary's mother) - the ceilings are arched, wonderful acoustics, there is an eleven second delay in the sound. We had a little sing and on our way again. We walked through the narrow pathways in the Muslim quarter, small shops on either side; we only saw men working in the shops - they sat in the doorway selling their wares - spices, food, souvenirs, material, clothes all sorts. When we came to the Jewish quarter it was very different - more spacious and expensive looking.

We left the old city through the Zion Gate and walked on to the western part of Jerusalem to the site of the Upper Room - it is thought to have been John's mother in law's house. The room was plain - it had a couple of pillars - around the top of one of the pillars were pelicans, the significance of this was if there was no food for her young the pelican would split open her own stomach so that they could feed - she dies in the process, the ultimate sacrifice as Christ died for us.

Another short walk to the Church of the Dormition. This was a church dedicated to Mary - it was on two levels the upper level (ground) was Mary and Jesus earthly/human and the lower level was the divine/heavenly.

Hop onto the mini bus a short ride to St. Peter in Gallicantu - this church is for Peter denying Jesus three times - there was even a cockerel crowing somewhere. This church like many others was built over an older building thought to be Caiaphas's residence; there were prison like cells possibly where Jesus spent part of Maundy Thursday. Outside were steps that went down quite steeply and would have gone down to the Garden of Gethsemane where we know Jesus often went to pray. It was amazing to think we were walking where Jesus and thousands of pilgrims had walked; it's hard to get your head round it, I think we deserve a nice cup of tea!

Our last day - we started at Temple Mount entering the old city. We had to go through machines and bags were X-rayed - there were lots of armed army personnel. It is a huge area 35 acres - the Dome of the Rock (Muslim Mosque)

dates from 600AD - this is all on the site of the Temple of Jesus which was destroyed around 70AD. Since 2000 only Muslims are allowed into the Mosque - the Temple Mount was where Abraham offered Isaac, where Jewish Temples stood and Jesus taught.

We came down from here and did the Stations of the Cross - the Via Dolorosa the tiny streets were mostly empty and we were able to do this in a prayerful way. Stations 10 to 14 are inside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the various religions have a bit each and are very different; the site of Calvary is up some steep narrow steps and then 14, the site of the tomb, is a short distance away down more steps. We left the church and walked towards the Western Wall (this used to be called the Wailing Wall) - this was the Western retaining wall of the Temple not part of the Temple itself. Men on the left (heads must be covered) and ladies on the right with a six-foot fence between us - the ladies had a much smaller area. There were lots of people, apparently no matter what time of day or night there are people praying here - the site itself is not holy but it is close to the most holy site for Jews - the original Temple. There was a Bar Mitzvah happening which was causing much celebration and as we walked away there was music and dancing with the young lad sitting on somebody's shoulders - a truly memorable day for the young man. The Temple Mount Excavations are all very recent and are still being worked on - all sorts of things have been uncovered including an angled stone that had an inscription about trumpets - *'where you would tell people new things'* - this came from the top corner of the Temple wall - this is where Satan tried to tempt Jesus for the second time. The wide stone steps that would have gone up to the entrance of the Temple where we know Jesus would have walked, sat and taught - St. Paul was also a pupil here. We also saw good examples of the ritual immersion baths - ritual cleansing was very important before entering the Temple with your sacrifice.

Back at the hotel we shared our last Eucharist in an *'Upper Room'* in the hotel overlooking Jerusalem facing the setting sun - in fact facing Emmaus which was the gospel reading that we had. It was a lovely end to our time here - just

leaving us dinner and an early night.

George arranged our wake up call for 2.30am, ready to go to Tel Aviv airport for our homeward journey. I was sad to be leaving this wonderful country but looked forward to coming home. As you see I brought so many memories home with me, I had difficulty picking just a few out!!

Sandra Haggan



The group photograph overlooking Jerusalem – George the guide – front row left, Sandra front row centre, Ann Leonard back row 2nd left and John Preston back row far right

