

Israel-Palestine: The Paradox – ‘Living Christianity’ Encounter Together 2020

Rev. John Howard’s vivid and compelling accounts of the Holy Land persuaded us to sign-up for the ‘Living Christianity’ tour. This is not a cosy tourist trip to the Holy Land and the experience of sharing prayer and singing in some of the most sacred Christian sites was spiritually uplifting.

We were very ably led by John and Rev. Angleena Keizer, both of whom have extensive experience



Figure 1 Living Christianity group on the Sea of Galilee, with John Howard and Angleena Keiser, 2nd and 3rd from the left.

of life in Israel-Palestine and at no point did we feel at risk as long as we took their advice. They had put together a broad, busy, programme so that we could get a taste of the many aspects of the land that is puzzling and sometimes astounding. We visited many of the Holy Land sites about which we have heard since childhood. We stood in the synagogue in Capernaum where Jesus would have walked, prayed as we sat in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and lifted our voices in song in more than one of the beautiful churches in the land. In Bethany we bent double to enter Lazarus’ tomb and we were

given some olive twigs by the gardener in the Garden of Gethsemane. Joining the hundreds of Christians who, like us, were drawn to places such as the Church of the Nativity, and realising how many countries were represented in the crowds, was uplifting. We also joined a variety of congregations in special services for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Quite often we had no idea what was being said in the service but the sense of joining in common worship was wonderful. We moved around the old streets of Jerusalem noting the ancient landmarks linked to biblical passages that we read out to each other.

We were shown significant sites in the more recent history of the city. We walked through the narrow alleys filled with market stalls following the ‘Via Dolorosa’, sang ‘Love Divine’ in an echo filled, subterranean cistern below an Orthodox monastery. In such moments we were lost in the wonder of where we were. Thanks to the networks provided by John and Angleena, we were privileged to be able to share a Shabbat service with worshippers in a synagogue in Jerusalem and visit some of the most holy Muslim sites. We witnessed some of the constraints experienced by Muslims in Palestine. Sharing a family Shabbat meal was also a highlight of the trip.

Around and through this special spiritual experience was threaded the distressing situation of the Palestinians. Many of the Christian tourists were bussed-in and out of the West Bank with apparently no recognition that the Palestinian State is occupied by Israel; we stayed in the West Bank and were introduced to many of the realities that frustrate and control the everyday lives of Palestinians. Palestinians working outside the West Bank must have Israeli permission to work and are subjected to daily scrutiny at checkpoints as they travel to their work; Israelis are not stopped. Our car, which had a Palestinian colleague travelling with us, was stopped as we entered Israeli territory and searched by sniffer dogs while we were subjected to airport-type security checks; the other car, with no Palestinian in it, was waved through. Our Palestinian guide in Hebron had to leave us at one point because he was not allowed to walk along a particular street. Children who had been to get food from the soup kitchen in Hebron had to pass through a checkpoint to get the food home. A children's playground near the separation barrier had 'skunk water' sprayed on it (and the children playing there) during a tense period in the region. Skunk water is a foul-smelling liquid which is used to deter rioters and to 'mark' them and is fired from a 'skunk gun' on the top of the Separation Barrier. It is also used to spray houses in the refugee camps.



Figure 2- Praying by the separation barrier

And whilst we asked 'why?' and 'what for?' each time we came across another conundrum, we were humbled by the immense resilience and absolute determination of the Palestinians. We met several people who had been evicted from their homes in 1947/8 and who, overnight, had become refugees in their own country. Archbishop Elias Chacour was one of those refugees. He is an Arab Israeli living in Ibilin Galilee. He had built, rebuilt and extended a school through all the red tape and politics to do what he knew was right. We spent an afternoon at The Tent of Nations hearing about the many decades of determined, peaceful activity necessary to demonstrate the family's right to farm the land, despite many attempts to evict them or 'persuade' them to leave. Their story continues. We experienced hospitality from many people, including a family which invited us into their home to share the Makloubeh dish made for special occasions. The father in the family had been beaten by Israelis so that now he needs surgery to replace a broken knee. Their 13 year old son had been taken from the house one morning at 3 am for questioning. They continue to work for peace. We also shared a Shabbat family meal with three generations of practising Jews who are engaged in work to support peace and reconciliation in different ways. The youngest family member is working for the rights of people in the Gaza Strip. We did not, and would not have been allowed to, visit Gaza. That's a whole other story.