

## A Pilgrimage



John 4.27 "Just then (Jesus') disciples came. (And) They were astonished that (Jesus) was speaking (alone) with a woman, (a Samaritan, no less) but no one said, 'What do you want?' or 'Why are you speaking with her?'"

As many of you may know, Lisa and I have just returned from a trip to the Holy Land with a small group of ten pilgrims from this Diocese lead by our Bishop Jeff. You should know, first of all, that we all went there well aware of the Level 3 warning from the American State Department about traveling to Israel at that time, but we went anyway.

We stayed primarily at St. George's College in East Jerusalem, which like so many of the other various religious Guest

Houses of the Holy Land has been struggling to survive since the October 7<sup>th</sup> attacks and the subsequent unrest, unrest which caused our earlier planned diocesan pilgrimage to be cancelled in 2024, one that I and several members of this parish were planning to go on. So, the last time Lisa and I went to the Holy Land was with both our bishops and others from the diocese in 2019, but much has changed since then. Almost all of our group has been on pilgrimages to the Holy Land before (this was Lisa's fifth and my third trip there), most of our focus and motivation for our trip then was supporting our Palestinian Christian brothers and sisters, and especially the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East, part of our worldwide Anglican Communion.

St. George's College was originally founded by the bishop of the Anglican diocese of Jerusalem in 1887 as a seminary for Palestinian Christians. On the walls of the Cathedral there, I saw plaques lovingly remembering their brave young men who fought and died in the First World War, as I have seen in many churches in this country and even more so in England. But it took me a minute to realize, however, that these young men fought for 'other' side, for the Ottoman Empire, their homeland. Later in the chapel at the St. Andrew's Guest House in what is now "West Jerusalem," where we had lunch one day, I saw similar plaques, some remembering their sons who fought and died in the Palestinian Police and the "Palestinian Brigade," who defended their land, then under the

British Mandate, from the so-called "Jewish Zionist terrorists" who were fighting to establish an independent Nation of Israel. Although the U.N. approved the 1947 Partition Plan for dividing parts of the former Ottoman Empire into a Nation of Palestine and a Nation of Israel (with Jerusalem as a designated International zone), the Arab Higher Committee, the Arab League, and other Arab leaders and governments utterly rejected the proposal, noting that there were twice as many Arabs families than Jewish ones living at that time in the territories that were to become the nation of Israel.

The 1948 Arab-Israeli War that resulted thus caused the displacement of more than 700,000 Palestinians that either fled from or were driven out of their houses in the North into U.N. refugee camps. Many of their families remain there still, the children of the children of those original refugees. The number of registered Palestine refugees has grown from 750,000 in 1950 to around 5 million in 2013, they are a people displaced, a people without a home.

East Jerusalem, at that time, was held by the nation of Jordan and which includes the Old City, as opposed to West Jerusalem, which was then claimed by the new nation of Israel. Thus, the Palestinian Seminary of St. George's could continue after the founding of the State of Israel in 1948, but East Jerusalem was then captured and occupied in the midst of the 1967

war and then was unilaterally annexed by Israel in 1980. The United Nations still considers East Jerusalem a part of the Palestinian territories according to international law, and under illegal occupation by Israel, but ever so since the 1967 war, St. George's has been unable to continue in its original mission as a Palestinian seminary, and so the college focused instead on pilgrimages, and biblical courses, a ministry which virtually collapsed after October 7<sup>th</sup> 2023. Thus, we were then gladly welcomed at St. George's and elsewhere again and again as the 'first' American pilgrims to return since October 7<sup>th</sup>, a sign of hope for them that more pilgrims would be soon returning, which is necessary for so many other guest houses, hotels, restaurants, vendors and artisans whose very livelihoods depended upon pilgrims to the Holy Land. It was thus very important to them for us to be there, which is exactly why we went, for often they fear that they are a people forgotten.

Thus, on the ninth day of our pilgrimage, last Saturday, we were visiting the Church of the Angels in the Shepherd's Field outside Bethlehem when we first received notice of the explosions in Tehran. Iyad, our guide, got a warning that the Israeli government was going to close the Security Check Point between East Jerusalem and the West Bank, which would thus prevent our return to St. George's, so we had to cut our visit short. Remember that Israel controls all the ports, all the border crossings, and

the airports of both the Israel and the Palestinian territories. Israel determines who gets in and who gets out throughout the Holy Land. The Palestinians are thus a people trapped in their own homeland. 60 Minutes had a feature a few years ago about Christians being forced out of Israel and the occupied territories, as more and more illegal Jewish settlements are built there, settlements in the Palestinian territories in which it is against the law for Palestinians to enter. Indeed, roads have been constructed in the West Bank by the State of Israel for the exclusive use of their settlers, roads that Palestinians may not use on their own land. Thus, the maid who cleaned our room each day at St. George's was from Bethany, a small village just over the Kidron Valley from Jerusalem, a little over two miles away. But our maid cannot drive on the Israeli roads such that she has to leave at 5:00 in the morning for her long two-hour roundabout drive to St. George's each day! Iyad who lives 23 miles away in Jericho can make his journey in just 15 minutes, because he has an Israeli license plate! Thus, it is very much a life in Palestine of separate, and not equal.

We had lots of conversations like this with our Palestinian brothers and sisters while we were there. Our group, for instance, had a private one-hour meeting with Hosam, the Bishop of Jerusalem in his residence at St. George's as he updated us on the situation in the larger Anglican Church of Jerusalem and the Middle East, of

which he is Archbishop and which includes all the countries that those hundreds of missiles and drones from Iran are now flying into. The Anglican Church, for instance, operates the only surviving hospital in the Gaza strip, but the Archbishop has been prohibited by the Israeli government from visiting it since October 7<sup>th</sup>.

We also spent an hour with Fr. Nael, the Rector of the Episcopal Christ Church in Nazareth, a wonderfully active congregation. We worshipped together with them one Sunday on our last pilgrimage and it was good to see him again. He told us of the recent interfaith gathering of the once close group in Nazareth of Moslem, Christian, and Jewish clergy of the local congregations, and how their first gathering since October 7<sup>th</sup> erupted into a vicious dispute between the Moslems and Jews as to who suffered the most in the recent war in Gaza! He lamented over how these so-called "peace makers" could be so unwilling to seek peace with one another! We also had an hour with Ahmad, the owner of a local bookstore around the corner from St. George's. Ahmad was born in Israel, in Israeli-controlled East Jerusalem, in a Jewish hospital even, but who really has few political rights, though his family has lived in the Holy Land for generations. He cannot get a passport, for instance, because has no acknowledged citizenship, and no vote on the Israeli government to which he pays taxes and that restricts his movements, and little recourse

then when Israeli police recently invaded his bookstore on rumors of his selling books that were inciting violence, police who trashed his store, held him for two days in prison, before finally acknowledging in court that they had no real legal case against him. I also talked with the owner of the Gift Shop outside the Church of the Visitation; a Lebanese Maronite Christian whose parents and older brothers fled the troubles there in the 1970's. He was thus later born in Israel and so he has an Israeli passport, so he can return back to Lebanon and visit his family there. But his brothers cannot go, for if they leave, he lamented, they are unlikely to be allowed to re-enter Israel. They feel trapped. They feel that the Israeli government actually wants them to leave and not return, as so many others have. Yet, he noted that any Jewish person anywhere in the world can receive Israeli citizenship if they want it, but not his brothers who have lived there for 50 years. Omar, our bus driver and a practicing Moslem, has lived in East Jerusalem all his life. He pays the same taxes to the same Israeli governing authority as the residents of West Jerusalem. He wonders then why the trash in East Jerusalem is picked up least frequently, and why the roads and sidewalks there are in worse shape, even though the same Israeli authorities have governed both parts of Jerusalem for the last fifty years. Palestinians in the Holy Land also pay taxes collected by the Israeli government on behalf of the Palestinian Authority, but

Israel is now withholding a portion of those funds such that the Palestinian schools are only open 3 days a week, and the doctors and medical staff only receive 60% of their salaries.

We had hoped to visit the St. Photini Greek Orthodox Monastery in Nablus. St. Photini, according to tradition, was the name of the Samaritan woman with whom Jesus spoke with by the ancient well of Jacob in today's reading, but the Israeli army suddenly declared the area a "military zone" which we thus could not enter. After the Shepherd's Field, we had hoped to go on into Bethlehem itself, where the shopkeepers and their olive wood sculptures are famous, shops in desperate need of pilgrims to survive. But that little town of Bethlehem is completely enclosed by a 30-foot-high concrete wall, with watch towers, constructed by the State of Israel between 2002 and 2005, and often closed by the Israel government to the outside world, especially at Christmas time. The 30,000 remaining Palestinians residents there call it the "Wall of Apartheid," and have expressed their frustration with graphic graffiti all over the inside walls. We visited one shop there last time that is literally surrounded on three sides by the huge wall, like a prison, with the family living upstairs who refuses to close up shop and move away as so many others have done so. Bethlehem was 90% Christian in 1950, but today it is only about 10%. Christian, they feel they are being pressured out of their homes to make room for new Jewish settlers.

So in some ways, I think our trip to the Holy Land was a little bit like Jesus talking to the Samaritan woman at the well in today's reading, as Jesus was traveling in foreign territory, ignoring the social norms of his day and delving into her personal life, the way we connected with our Palestinian brothers and sisters, seeking to reassure them that they are seen, that they are not forgotten, that they are not alone. And that kind of exchange, we hope, can make a difference, as it did with the Samaritan woman at the well!

After a day of sheltering in place at St. George's on Sunday, Iyad arranged to take us to the Allenby bridge at the border with Jordan and be met there by a Jordanian travel agent friend of his to be taken to Amman to await a flight out. It took us 5 hours to get across that bridge as we made our way home. Our hearts, though, remain with our Palestinian friends back in Jerusalem, and all those who are living under the constant threat of missile strikes and falling debris, and political turmoil, and governmental oppression. Our pilgrimage group was very appreciative of all the prayers and concerns from so many people here in the States. And I would ask that you continue to pray now for our Palestinian brothers and sisters, who need them so much more than we do. We crossed the border and returned home, while our guides, Iyad and Rami, had to return to the danger and uncertainty of life in their homeland after dropping us off. So,

please continue to pray for peace across the Middle East, for the peace of Jerusalem, and for the innocent people of all faiths and countries there who desire only to live together in peace with one another. For until all find safety in peace . . . none of us will truly be home. AMEN.