

Amos Trust Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, June 2004 (Freda Alexander)

I visited the Holy Land with a party led by Garth Hewitt; although officially a 'pilgrimage' it was more a fact-finding visit; we saw the Holy Land as it is **now** and we met the 'living stones' there **today**. The holy sites formed the background which was interpreted in context. Our guides were all Palestinian who had such severe travel restrictions imposed upon them that each could cover only a small area. The advantage of this was that we met a succession of guides; all were graduates and Christians but none had theological training; yet all were eager to share with us their own theological insights – I wrote in my diary 'YES, everyone is a theologian' which really brought 'Contextual Theology' to life.

You will want to know where we went and what we found. You probably know that, following the 1967 war, there are essentially three different parts of historical Palestine: Israel, East Jerusalem and the Occupied Territories (West Bank and Gaza); while East Jerusalem is legally also an occupied territory it has been, effectively, annexed and 'looks like' a seamless part of the city of Jerusalem. The problems of the Arab population are different in each of these 3 areas. Almost all Christians are Arabs, though these are <10% of the Arab population; these Christians have lived in this place for nearly 2000 years and we met Susan, the daughter of Audeh Rantisi, who can trace her family roots back to the fourth century. Sadly, emigration is higher amongst the Christian Palestinians.

Within Israel, all Arabs who retained their homes in 1948 are citizens; they form 20% of the Israeli population but only 5% of university students which is indicative of the discrimination they face – they have fewer rights, in Israel, than Jews living elsewhere in the world! Israel has conscription but Arabs are not allowed to do military service; *however*, many professions and other areas of life are closed to people who have not served in the army. No Israeli who marries a girl living in the West Bank is allowed to bring her into his home as a citizen (and, of course, it is only Arabs who wish to do this). Despite all this, the ordinary Arab Christians we met were resilient cheerful people, full of joy and eager to advise us to forget them and concentrate on those in the occupied territories who were so much worse off.

We stayed in East Jerusalem for a week at St George's (Anglican) cathedral. Our first morning there we visited the holy places above the Garden of Gethsemane and sang 'Pray for the Peace of Jerusalem' as we looked out of the window of the 'Lacrima Christie' church over to the old city. The words, written by Garth, were hauntingly appropriate:

But peace will never come
Till there's peace for everyone
And there can be no peace for the Jew
Till there's peace for the Palestinian too.

220,000 Arabs live in East Jerusalem and our guide, Nader, was one of these. These people have red ID cards but are *not* Israeli citizens; Nader has been married for 7 years but his wife still has a blue (West Bank) ID card; she used to visit her village, 15 miles away, most weeks; now she goes just twice a year but, each time, they know that if she is identified as she tries to return then she will not be allowed to. The Arab population here have substantially decreased rights and facilities compared with Jews in East Jerusalem and Israeli citizens (e.g. no postal deliveries, little refuse collection). While we were in

Jerusalem, we spent a day with Jeff Halper, a Jewish anthropologist who now spends all his time working for ICAHD (Israeli Campaign Against House Demolitions). He took us for our first horrific view of the Wall. This keeps most of East Jerusalem on the Israeli side; it goes roughly through streets and communities; we stopped and stood beside this massive structure; a small shop was nearby- the owner has just received a bill for \$1000 tax but his customers are on the *other* side of the wall; several of us went inside to buy drinks – mine was fizzy orange for which he charged me just 50p. Few Jews lived in East Jerusalem before the 1967 war; since then, immigration has been encouraged and approximately half the present population is Jewish.

Jeff took us around the outskirts of Jerusalem to view the large ‘settlements’ which extend like tentacles out from it into the West Bank; many of these are built and expanding within designated urban boundaries so that they do not form ‘new’ settlements. The largest is Ma’ale Adummin which is planned to stretch from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea and already has a population of 30,000; these people are economic migrants from Israel, Russia or elsewhere and have been offered a high standard of living – we saw that life inside the settlement was, indeed, pleasant. Later we visited Bethlehem and Beit Sahour; our guide, Wisam, showed us the most disturbing settlement: the Green Mountain outside Bethlehem has had its top taken off, its trees destroyed so that the Har Homa settlement could be built. These settlements are in contravention of international law and involve destruction of the environmental heritage of the land – for what purpose? We went with Wisam to the lovely simple ‘cucumber festival’ in Beit Sahour where the young people celebrated their culture. This reminded me of how the older Jewish people had tenderly taught their culture to the children in Terazin during the holocaust. Both stories fill me with awe at such human strength and commitment in the face of adversity but also make me wonder why one people who suffered such persecution are now, themselves, persecutors. .

This is just my personal story; I saw a wall which causes humiliation and suffering and does not look like a security barrier but looks more like a projected frontier. Yet the land ‘outside’ the wall cannot form a viable Palestinian state. I saw the land being destroyed by the rapid settlement expansion whose purpose appears to be the Judaisation of the territories; I saw the moral and religious basis of the Jewish population being dissipated by its fear of terrorists, its rapid influxes from overseas (with few checks that those who claim to be so are Jewish) and the violence its young people are forced to perpetrate. I admired those of all faiths (and, supposedly, of none!) who were working laboriously for the long slow burn, starting with the children and leading, eventually, to community understanding. I listened to the concerns of Arab/Palestinian Christians who see other Christians in the US, the UK and elsewhere reading the promises made to Abraham and the text of Romans 9 and interpreting these as evidence of God’s choice for Jew rather than Palestinian. I resolved, again, to do what I can; this must include praying for this land and *both* its peoples; it must also lead to action, walking alongside and in solidarity with those, both Jew and Arab, who suffer. I myself will also help, through my work for Palcrafts, those who are *most* marginalised – the Palestinians who lack food, employment, education and human dignity.

At a deeper level, my story includes two other things to share with people at St John’s. First, within the group, I was exposed to many different ways of being Christian and of being Church; we never joined together in what I would call worship – but we sang

together, was that worship?? I asked people about their churches and discovered concepts like 'post-evangelical' which were new and strange. I actually felt more at home with one Baptist minister than with my fellow Anglicans. All this extended what I had been learning since reading Rowan Williams 'Christ on Trial': that I must be continually prepared to allow my world to be enlarged to include the stranger who will not be recruited into my ways of thinking or being; such a world is scary and this group certainly challenged me. Secondly, I was enormously saddened when listening to Palestinian Christians discussing how to interpret the bible in context. They were thinking of the promises to the Jews but their arguments are more familiar to us from discussions of sexuality; yet the Palestinians/Arabs could not begin to see the extension which their reasoning deserved. Some were fiercely opposed to homosexuality and even to female priests; others believed that they could not support either in *their* cultural setting. I am totally committed, intellectually and emotionally, to an inclusive church but I have also grown to love the Anglican church in Israel and Palestine. So, my story includes a new, deep, appreciation of what it will mean to share the pain of the broken body of Christ if that is the future for our Anglican communion.