

Clergy Study Tour to Israel, January 2018

[Article written for the Anglo Israeli Association magazine]

Israel. Palestine. West Bank. Gaza. Oslo Accords. Western Wall. Settlements. Galilee. Bethlehem. Jerusalem – from the pages of the bible to the front pages of the papers, these words and phrases had been familiar to me for much of my life. And yet, like random pieces of a jigsaw, they had never fitted together in any meaningful way. I knew the trouble in the region boiled down to two peoples claiming rights to the same patch of land, but whose land was it and who had given it to them? Why couldn't they find a way to live together peacefully?

And as a Christian, how was I to square the biblical promise of land for the Jews with justice for the Palestinians? Over the years I had made several attempts to understand more fully the Israel-Palestine conflict but in the end, finding it all too complex, I had simply added it to my list of 'subjects-I-must-one-day-get-to-the-bottom-of'.

So to touch down in Tel-Aviv last January as part of the Clergy Study Tour seemed like a God given opportunity to at last see for myself a land that had both fascinated and baffled me. And it was clear from the itinerary that this was no ordinary trip. In the following nine days our group of twenty clergy would meet entrepreneurs, priests, politicians, academics, ambassadors and holocaust survivors; we would visit the West Bank, the Gaza border, the Golan Heights, Galilee, Bethlehem, Jerusalem and the Dead Sea; we would sit with Israelis and Palestinians as they shared with passion the realities of their daily lives in this beautiful but troubled land; and we would get to visit the biblical sites that form the backdrop of our faith.

There are moments in life when you feel you have been transported to a parallel universe. That first day was one such moment as I stood on a hilltop in the West Bank looking out over the hills of Samaria. We had just visited the temple ruins of Shiloh (where Eli had raised the boy Samuel) and now we were invited to the home of Eliana. Eliana and her husband lived with their five children in a Jewish settlement.

Gathered in her garden, surrounded by security fences and with Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim on the horizon, she told us why she and her husband had chosen to live in the heart of Palestinian territory. 'This land was given by God to our people', she says. 'It holds our history and is ours to inherit'. She tells us that friends had died establishing these hilltop settlements and she believed their right to be there preceded and superseded any artificial borders established in 1967. She wished the Palestinians no harm. 'There is room enough for us all, but the Palestinian authorities don't want peace', she said. Listening to her passion and conviction I began to understand why these 'illegal settlements' exist. When you believe heart and soul the land is yours then you have a duty to claim it.

My concern before I came on this trip was that we might be exposed to just one side of the debate. But this fear was quickly allayed as the next day, in the Palestinian city of Ramallah we sat with Javier, a member of the PLO negotiating team. He pulled no punches: 'You are in a PLO office' he said, 'but it's a joke. We are under occupation. We have control over nothing. Everything is done through Israel; they want apartheid'.

Back in our hotel just a few hours later we met the Reverend Haddad, a Lutheran Minister. A quietly spoken Palestinian Christian in his late thirties, he too spoke of his denial of rights and of being treated as a second-class citizen. We asked him what he might say to those who believe that the land has been promised by God to Israel. 'God is a God for everyone, not just for the other. How can he be good and almighty if I must be evicted?' We asked him what kind of prayers his church offers to see an end to the conflict. 'To teach us what love is', he replied, 'To accept the Israelis even if they are our enemies and to recognise the rights of each other.'

These are just a few of the many conversations we would have over the coming days. As we travelled the length and breadth of the country (roughly the size of Wales) the time spent in the coach gave us time to process all we were experiencing. Our hosts, Ruth, Jacob and Israeli tour-guide Avihu were invaluable in answering our endless questions as we tried to make sense of it all.

And there was so much to process: Sderot, an Israeli city where 85% of the population suffer from PTSD due to the rockets and mortars fired on them from the nearby Gaza border; Yad Vashem, the haunting Holocaust Memorial that does much to explain Israel's present day preoccupation with security; our evening in a Chinese restaurant where Professor Rabi from Tel Aviv University explained the Israel-Palestine conflict in the wider context of the Middle East; observing Sabbath prayer at the Western Wall in Jerusalem followed by a Shabbat meal in the home of an Orthodox Jewish family; the boat trip on the Sea of Galilee and the deep connection with our faith as we walked where Jesus walked – so many conversations and encounters during the nine days that made this a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Nine months later, as I reflect on my visit, I see that what I returned home with more than anything was a framework for understanding this amazing land and the conflict that lies at the heart of it. Now, whenever I hear news reports, view documentaries, read books and articles or engage in conversation about Israel, I am able to evaluate what is said and even dare to venture some insights. The pieces of the jigsaw now fit together and I have some understanding of the social, political, theological and historical factors that have led to the present day situation.

And most important of all, Israel is not now for me a country on a map or an item in the news; it is a place where I met wonderful people: Eliana, Javier, Mustafa, Imad, Shadi, Ophir, Uzi, Avihu, Ohri – Israelis and Palestinians who all

want the best for their families, their communities, and their country. I will continue to pray for them.

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