

LETTER FROM JERUSALEM

November 29th, 2010

This has been a glorious November, not usually the brightest month, but here in Jerusalem each day has been sunny and warm. Our visitors have topped all records and so many groups have come to see a hill with the image of a giant skull and an empty tomb from the first century. Over the last few days we have hosted many vibrant French gypsies from all over France. When they meet in France, there are 40,000 at a gathering and we were delighted at their enthusiasm for our Garden. Such passion in worship and prayer might offend some, but we welcome so many expressions of faith and remember that we won't all praise God identically in Heaven! The busy Lizzie annuals have been replaced by cyclamen (*sicycloman* as some say in the US) and every shrub could do with a good shower of rain, long awaited in this land. I am back into gentle gardening and love watering, pruning and tidying up, but most of all meeting the people who come here.

In early November, Richard and I took off for Eilat on the Red Sea, a tiny strip of it that still belongs to Israel, adjoined by Aqaba in Jordan, Egypt at Taba, and Saudi Arabia across the bay. Four countries in 20 kilometres and each would be unwise for us to stray into in error! We travelled due south through the Negev Desert, a long awaited return for me since 1973 and my Yom Kippur War experience on the kibbutz I have yet to visit again. However, we did see Sde Boker, and the sparse home on another kibbutz of the first Prime Minister of Israel, father of the nation, David ben Gurion who died on 1st December, 1973, just after the conclusion of the fourth war of the nation's first quarter century of history. The local desert scenery was so beautiful and we saw the iconic ibex, symbol of the National Parks of Israel, in their full curvy horned glory at nearby Avdat National Park. The great joy for us in Eilat was to snorkel and explore the coral reefs just off shore, and wonder at the amazing variety of underwater life. I was so excited to swim once again..

The following week, on our day off, we headed north to another sea with our friend, Chris May, to show him the Sea of Gallilee, or Kinneret (the harp) as it is called locally. This area never fails to thrill me with its peace and delicate beauty having so many associations with the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. A lack of rain means the water level is low, but we sampled the delicious local fish at a first class restaurant below the site of the Gadarene country at En Gev and watched kingfishers darting across the lake in the mid afternoon sun. Doesn't life have some idyllic moments for one's memory!

I have recently been immersed in the Twentieth century history of Jerusalem from a book, "O Jerusalem" (by Larry Collins and Dominique la Pierre) which has made the 1948 War of Independence so immediate. As a result, I am researching some of the sites of local battles, especially along the road between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Castel is a rocky fortress dating from Roman times towering over this carotid artery of the nation and as an Arab village very strategic for ambushing convoys to the city from the sea. It changed hands several times, during which Abdul Khader Husseini, brilliant leader of the local Arab forces was killed. So many sites of carnage in recent times are now tidily resurrected into new homes and those of another race now reside there. Wherever one treads, rivers of blood have indeed run in ages past, but Jerusalem, despite its tragic past, lures the millions to visit her limestone hills and the ruins of a more glorious era. In the midst of it, the Temple Mount with its beautiful golden Dome of the Rock and shining blue tiled walls draw people of all faiths to consider the past glory of the Temple that was the centre of Jewish worship and national life. Richard and I sat having lunch overlooking the Kotel, the vast area of the Western Wall plaza, sacred to the Jews, below huge area of the Dome of the Rock, sacred to Muslims, and considered to be the site of Abraham bound his precious son, Isaac to an altar. With the backdrop of the Mount of Olives with the neat, white graves of Jewish departed on its slopes, and the desert beyond, I never tire of that beautiful vista.

We had been looking at the excavations in the Herodian Quarter, ruins of palatial houses, belonging to the nobility and priests which were ransacked and burnt in the Fall of Jerusalem of 70 AD. The Romans in their desire to suppress the Jewish revolt massacred the populace and burned the Temple, then only so recently completed in all its magnificence by Herod the Great. It was here that Jesus attacked the priestly classes and their failure to communicate the love and grace of God the Father. It was so near here too that His death ended the need of animal sacrifice to atone for the sin of the world by his own excruciating death on the Cross. It was near here too that He rose from the grave, having broken the power of sin and death over us. So here in this small, green oasis of The Garden Tomb, we have the privilege of sharing with thousands each week about the gospel accounts of that first Easter weekend that changed the world and pray for them that wherever in the world they return too, they will not forget the message of the Garden. "He is not here, for He is Risen!"

May this Christmas be a blessed time and the news of the Saviour's birth become reality for you.

(Richard and) Rosalind