

From Richard's pen for a change.....

What an extraordinary month. This city really is unique in what can happen. You will know that I have had an 8 month struggle with the Islamic Waqf (guardians of the Muslim sites in this country) over a dangerous construction that will tower over our garden, and when (not if according to my Civil Engineer) it could kill hundreds of our visitors here if they happen to be there at the wrong time.

In the past 3 weeks the Waqf has cut me off from all further negotiations, and continued to build, so I have had to contrive new ways of bringing them back to the table. They have only agreed that they would implement all my design changes to make it safe so long as I paid for the design and construction and took full liability responsibility – 'this is only fair and reasonable' I was told.

Roll the clock back 13 months to when we arrived here; I knew that the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox disregard the Garden Tomb in favour of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. We offer a very different experience here that those RCs who come seem, mostly, to value. So I set off on charm offensive....my first port of call was the (Palestinian) Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem, Bishop Suheil Dawani. I knew he was also sceptical, but after a 90 minute call he agreed to visit and then said that he would introduce me to all the other patriarchs in this city...11 more to be precise! To date all but two have not replied to my various offers.

10 days ago the Latin Patriarch (=RC) Bishop, another Palestinian called William, invited me for tea. What a delightfully charming man who said to me 'all we Christians need to be working together in this land so that all the Jews and Moslems come to know Jesus for themselves, as this is the only solution for the conflict here'. "I can work with this man," I thought to myself, so seizing the chance and recognising him as a Palestinian, I asked him to help me with my Waqf issue. You must meet the Deputy for Jerusalem (the Palestinian Authority {PA} elected "MP") and the Governor of Jerusalem (another PA assigned title) – no-one in my contact network here in Jerusalem had heard of either so you can judge their level of influence! I have since called on the Deputy who turned out to be a Christian Palestinian who undertook to bring the issue to the PA Minister of Tourism (another Christian in the PA), the PA Minister for the Waqf and the Head of the Waqf. He also said he would open up channels to President Mahmood Abbas as he said it was probably only him to whom the Waqf would listen.

In parallel, the new British Consul General here in East Jerusalem, has been 1000x more helpful than his predecessor. Sir Vincent, himself a devout Catholic from Eire, has offered also to contact the PA Minister of Tourism and the Head of the Waqf.

Then most recently I called on the Governor whose lineage stretched back centuries as he is part of the powerful Hussein family of the 'Mufti' fame, during the British Mandate period, and he himself has been head of the Waqf for 35 years. Rosalind and I had prayed together that he would be unbiased in this political post, and not wholly pro-Waqf. He listened intently to me; indeed he is an architect by training so understands the issue objectively. I had the advantage that he knew nothing about the dispute, but he saw the logic of what I shared with him and has promised to facilitate in such a way that the Waqf now builds a wall that is guaranteed to be safe, and that they pay for it. Well, the jury is still out and over the past eight months I have so often felt that we have secured a deal, only later to have our hopes dashed.

I share all this with you to give you a flavour of activities in this city, and to suggest that you spot the thread in this of God's amazing hand in preparing the way – with those sympathetic Christians in key posts, with a Governor who understands the sums, with the much delayed visit on Bishop William.

Two other points of interest among so many this past month have been a dinner with the new British Ambassador in Tel Aviv, a 38 year old very bright man called Matthew Gould, the first ever Jew that Britain has sent here as ambassador. And on 24 February we had the extraordinary privilege of hosting the 33 Chilean miners who escaped safely last October; it was the most wonderful occasion, such an honour.

Rosalind adds: Richard gave a very special welcome address to the miners and we felt that they were really touched deeply by this place and the beautiful communion service they all took part in (whatever denomination) by one of our British Methodist minister guides, interpreted by our lovely guide from Paraguay. Judging by the hugs and appreciation expressed afterwards, we felt that some healing had been received in the struggle to return to normal life after those dreadful 69 days in a hole underground last year. We never know whom we are going to meet next and every day is full and exciting in this extraordinary and Holy City.

Chilean Miners:



Up and above our wall inside the cemetery.....

