

A Letter of but not from Jerusalem

It is hard to answer the often asked question 'So what's it like in Jerusalem?' Never dull... never a boring day... living in a pressure cooker... fascinating... challenging. All true! Let me give you a "Richard perspective" on the past month by highlighting some fascinating little vignettes, all in June – Rosalind left early to help her sister, Helen, after a heart attack.

45 Palestinian women teachers are brought to the Garden Tomb as part of what we in the UK would call 'inset' teachers' training. Many were veiled. Not even one declared herself a Christian believer, quietly, as some do. As I introduced them to the Garden, then guided them around, it was a challenge to tell them the spiritual story of the Garden in a true, entertaining, memorable way, sensitive to their Islamic heritage. Not only was I told by one of them not to use the word 'Israel' in their beloved East Jerusalem, where we are, but they also asked me if we Christians believe in Hell, and what it is. A day later I received 40 Israeli tour guides who are in a 2 year training programme that qualifies them to take tourists of any faith around Israel; they need to know how to work with us in the Garden as the principal Protestant tourist site in Israel, yet I have to tell the story of the Crucifixion and Resurrection to them in terms they as Jews understand, interweaving some of their own Scriptures from the Old Testament.

Another day, we hosted an evening 'Garden Party' for all our neighbours in the street, mostly the Palestinian street traders from whom we do all our shopping, but also the German Catholic nuns from the Paulus Haus, the multi-national nuns from the White Sisters and a few Catholic priests from L'Ecole Biblique. The week before I delivered his invitation to M, our local Palestinian friend who mends our fridges in his very scruffy workshop, in fact on the West Jerusalem side of the city on the fringe of the ultra Jewish Orthodox Mea Shearim. M handed me his usual strong Arabic coffee in a decidedly dirty glass cup, it had probably served many that day. I drank it, hoping the caffeine would overpower any effects. M wanted to tell me why he could never adopt Islam, a religion, which, by his description bred hatred. I asked him if he knew how Christians should handle hatred towards us: "You love your enemies and pray for them", he said insightfully. What made this conversation all the more interesting was Gabriel, who was also sitting there, an elderly Orthodox Jew who told me he had been to the UK 45 times. Where else can representatives of the three main world religions, focussed on Jerusalem, sit together, unplanned, for an hour of such amazing dialogue?

One Wednesday lunchtime, Rosalind and I were invited over to the Mount of Olives, a 10 minute drive away, for lunch with the students and Academic Dean of the Mormon University. What a lively discussion, as I teased one whose father was in the US Air Force, on the Mormon position on the Armed Forces, and with another on the divinity (or not, in their belief) of Jesus. That day was Shavuot, when Jews celebrate what we call Pentecost; on this one day of every year, many of the Israeli Messianic Jews (those Jews who accept what Jesus taught and who He is) gather outside Jerusalem; we joined about 900 that afternoon in a wonderful celebration of their faith.

Another lunchtime was spent with 'Tass', who was once one of Yasser Arafat's assassins but who has now found faith in Jesus – read his amazing story if you like in 'Once an Arafat Man'. At Easter, the Garden Tomb hosts what is maybe the most significant service of all, when about 600 Palestinians come across, using one of their two annual passes out of the West Bank, to come to their own Resurrection service in the Garden and invite Messianic friends to join them. What a truly awesome privilege for us to host this event – and what a strong statement of Hope in this place here there seems to be no other solution. Tass says he wants to work with me in offering such events more times each year.

Then there's our Wall of which we have occasionally told you a little. Having taken the Islamic Waqf to court twice over Easter, with reasonable, though not total success, we now reluctantly face mounting a court case against the Municipality of Jerusalem as the only way to ensure the safety of our ¼ million annual visitors.

This month I have been accused by some of being too rabidly Zionist and by others of being far too sympathetic of the Palestinians; in that we never do politics in the Garden Tomb, I hope that we have the balance about right.

Within the Garden three major changes have happened this month, all the result of 18 months preparations and planning – a new IT system is launched, a new Visitor Management Centre, and the shop is being re-furbished after 20+ years. Our own Liz Woods was also awarded the MBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for her 19 years service to the Garden Tomb through 'thick and thin' - intifadas and tourist slumps also caused by 9/11, credit crunch and thus staff cuts.

Now we are back in the UK for Richard's mother's 90th birthday celebrations on 2 July at which our own Iona (27) announced her engagement to a wonderful man she met in her London church 15 months ago. All six (us plus Matthew) have now gone to the Lake District for a family holiday.

As I started, never a dull day in Jerusalem!

Richard M