

August in Jerusalem

A peaceful, if warm Sabbath (Shabbat) morning in the Garden Tomb today, but half way through Ramadan, peace and quiet have been in short supply around us. Each day starts with the heavy explosion of ordinance, traditionally from an old Turkish cannon which stands unnoticed for the rest of the year above our site in the cemetery which surrounds our property. The ear-splitting noise, fire and smoke herald the start of fasting before dawn and the end of it just after sunset. Muslim tempers are short as the Muslim population do not drink or eat in the unusually intense heat which has characterised the long days of this August in Jerusalem. The clamour in the streets each evening going into the Old City, and the volume of people arriving past our road for Friday prayers, is second only to the streets of Mecca at this time.

Sadly, for us the last weeks have however been one of conflict with our Muslim, if deceased, neighbours. Extensive repairs in the adjoining cemetery extended to erecting a five metre high wall adjoining our boundary wall and security fencing, this above a part of the Garden where many visitors assemble in their groups each day. As we observed this wall growing and made contact with the cemetery officials, it became clear that many tons of earth to create more graves, were to be deposited behind this fence with a concrete infill (part of it put in after dark one night) and that the planned structure would could risk lives if it collapsed in extreme weather conditions. This concern unleashed a barrage of activity with the Ministry of Tourism, the Jerusalem Municipality, local Muslim residents, also an ant's trail of armed police and army who would arrive unannounced and march through the Garden to prevent further building, after it was ordered to be stopped by legal injunction. Richard, supported by our Chairman of Trustees, Victor Jack, fortuitously here, eventually met formally with the Waqf (Muslim building authority) for resolution, (we "only listen to the King of Jordan"). Our concern was to avoid a major clash between the Waqf and the Israeli authorities, who adopt a less subtle approach to conflict. At present, and in subsequent meetings, Richard has negotiated for a full structural report and a lowering of the wall by the Waqf; this has yet to be fulfilled. Remaining good neighbours while being unwavering for safety are uneasy partners. However, only this week, more structural development has been observed in the cemetery above Skull Hill (the very probable site of Golgotha) which is not owned by us, yet of huge importance to the many Christian pilgrims world-wide who visit us and view it, should this be irreparably damaged. In this struggle for the protection of our property, for our protection and for the testimony of this Garden site, we have had to call upon the Lord and been given many reassuring verses from Scripture in the midst of the conflict. Jerusalem never has been a "City of Peace"!

This month we have also had some very happy interludes in "The Land". One weekend, we were invited up to a Gentile friend's lovely house in the Samaritan hills above the Kanna valley which marked the division of the Biblical territories of Manasseh and Ephraim. We, a little guiltily, explored the "settlements", some very rustic and were also invited to participate in the meal and prayers which mark the end of Shabbat. Another expedition on our day off was to Tel Aviv, to have a four course lunch prepared for us by the Jewish friends of our dear friends, Peter and Shirley Melly: Reuven and Hedva, now in their mid-eighties are Holocaust survivors, who, independently, having escaped from the ghettos and death camps, found themselves interned by the British and UN in Cyprus in 1947 for a year, where love blossomed. Then they, by administrative deception, were able to travel to Palestine in April 1948, and found themselves fighting for survival in May and June 1948 at the end of the British Mandate and in the formation of the State of Israel. We felt very humbled as they shared their story with us, as they do not usually talk about these experiences living an active, positive and fulfilling new life in this country, despite the pain of the loss of all their loved ones, nearly 60 years ago.

Our David's arrival mid-month was a real tonic, and he helped here with guiding and forcing us out dancing in the streets of West Jerusalem one evening in the new Mamilla Mall, under the Jaffa Gate with our Chairman and another young guide, an undergraduate student ordinand, Jude aged 22! We have had four younger people to assist us in the summer heat when older couples are reluctant to come and been grateful for their energy and time. There have been some swims down at Jaffa, awaiting the arrival of planes at Tel Aviv and we have discovered a kibbutz pool, at Latrun, close to the main Jerusalem – Tel Aviv highway to divert for some respite. Latrun features large in the story of 1948 and at many other periods of history on high ground above this land corridor, which I mentioned last month in the story of the Burma Road. There is an Israeli Army Armoured Corps HQ there and museum situated in the British built fort we visited with David and were fascinated by the tanks and the stories we heard from a young girl soldier there. A place of peace is the nearby Community of Latrun, adjoining the Trappist monastery in Crusader fortress ruins, where I spent a day of retreat yesterday. Amongst the flowers, bees and lizards, drinking in the calm atmosphere I thought of our own English King Richard, the Lionheart, in the place where he spent his last Christmas, in the midst of another battle for Holy Places in another era.

Despite all the shenanigans, the Garden continues to be the most wonderful place to serve, to be, to enjoy, to relish. We may be a little tired from what we thought would be a quiet summer, but we are buoyed up, not bowed down.

To end with a theme of peace: the sweet doves nesting in the sun umbrella on our roof hatched two chicks and have now flown. Richard and I are off too for a summer holiday with our own chicks next week in France and then some time in the UK later in September.



One of the turtle dove chicks at 10 days, 2 days before flying off



David 4 guides and Richard



That 5m wall grows above our 7m wall



Note this week's new brown dirt above the eyes of Golgotha