

NEWS FROM RICHARD AND ROSALIND - FEBRUARY 2010

Our dearest friends

I (Richard) have just been speaking to the pastor of a large group from Sweden who have walked through the Garden on this glorious morning. Now they are worshipping and breaking bread in their own way, at their own pace, in the peace of this place. Already today the team has been up since 0630 sweeping the paths and washing all the spring pollen off the many benches. (Like good organisation, good cleaning is never noticed). Saturdays are our favourite days here as the Garden has not just the overseas visitors but also the local Israelis and Arabs for whom Saturday is their day out for family time.

We draw towards the end of our second month out here, and it continues to be the most wonderful experience and privilege and honour. We could tell you of the thousands of who have come in, of the multiplicity of strands of worship we hear day by day, of the testimonies that we receive week by week. Of the rich variety of people we meet. Wednesday is our day off, so this week Rosalind and I caught the Arabic bus from one of the two the bus stations that surround the Garden; down into the Kidron Valley and then up to the Mount of Olives. Tour groups usually have an hour up there; we took five or six, walking around the roads and paths, pushing open a few doors, talking to locals and having a café lunch; there we talked to the only other person eating lunch. He was so gracious and after a while admitted to being a bishop in the Mexican Orthodox church – now that was a new one to us! Yesterday, he arrived in the Garden so he shared lunch with us on the roof above our apartment in the warm sunshine overlooking the trees in the Garden and the roofs of Jerusalem.

On Wednesday, two weeks ago, we had a private tour of the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament by the Speaker of the House's speech writer who is a friend of the Garden. We were invited into the dining room where the Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, the Minister of Defence, Yigael Allyn and other Cabinet members were seated nearby. Only the PM was served, the rest of us were using the plastic trays and self service system! The building is impressive, situated on a prominent hill in West Jerusalem and recently extended. It was fascinating to sit in on proceedings, but we could not understand very much of the debate!

This month we have visited our neighbours, the prestigious L'Ecole Biblique where its Principal, Father Hervé, showed us around its wonderful library and many tombs that are adjacent to ours but a different design, ours is the only one locally to match the Biblical accounts and it was interesting to compare. We are making friends with the Arabic Christian school next door and have had a superb lunch at the nearby French Evangelical mission. Somewhat differently, we have also visited two tour companies to ensure they keep the Garden on their itineraries (Roman Catholic groups tend not to come here as they see the Church of the Holy Sepulchre as more appropriate to their groups).

Tomorrow morning we will try the Lutheran Church in the Old City; we are then being taken back to Bethlehem for lunch in a moslem home, being invited and hosted by the ever-charming Sami who for 40 years has parked his car outside the Garden's

gate selling souvenirs to 'our' visitors; what a new experience this will be – Arabic hospitality is legendary.

Rosalind adds:

Yesterday evening we were invited to Evensong at St George's Cathedral, conducted by the Palestinian Bishop of Jerusalem followed by a Reception as the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan is here this weekend. It was quite an event with all the local Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Ethiopian and Coptic Patriarchs invited together with the R.C and Muslim representatives, some of whom spoke words of welcome to our Primate. The former group did resemble a group of black hooded crows as they stood solidly together in their amazing headgear and robes, but were very friendly when we went to talk to them. Three Bishops were present, including one from Northern Ireland and various other locals, with our British Consul General for the West Bank and Palestinian Territories. The Archbishop had hoped to visit Gaza tomorrow and we learnt that permission has finally been granted to enter, which is not given to many.

We are continuing to love serving here in the Garden, meeting a myriad of nationalities and people in tour groups and as individuals, I can hear the groups speaking in many languages pass by the window as I write, being shown around by one of our volunteer guiding team. It is a delight to sit weeding and chat to folk to who pass by and very kindly take photographs of the Under-Gardener. I have spent this morning, after the bench cleaning exercises, getting our potting shed in order for the spring, with the visitors above me viewing Skull Hill! This weekend we spend a night in Galilee with friends who may be interested in working with us here as volunteers and I look forward to seeing the area again – its tranquillity is such a contrast to the frenetic activity and tension which seems to be part of Jerusalem. Reading the eye witness accounts from Josephus of the Fall of Jerusalem after the 68-70 AD Jewish Revolt when over one million inhabitants of the City were killed, many more died in the siege and others aged under 17 taken as slaves to Rome, makes one realise as the Archbishop said last night, this is indeed “ a place of testing of hearts”. Few can visit and not be touched and troubled by its history. I have been privileged to talk and pray with some who find this Garden a place to nourish their souls and refresh their spirits.

We will be back for a fortnight early next month and will see family, Combe Down friends and Richard will do much Garden business in the UK.

With our thanks, admiration and love

Richard and Rosalind