

## **October 2010 - Letter from Rosalind Meryon in Jerusalem**

Richard and I returned to the Garden just four weeks ago after such a good time with our family in France and in England. It has been a strange month for me since as I have been in a plaster cast, having broken my leg on holiday. Today has been Liberation Day, however, and after a consultation and X ray in a very dark and dusty local clinic, the Palestinian, Muslim orthopaedic doctor said: "Thanks be to God, your bone has united beautifully!"

Despite the restrictions on my own activity, this has been a full month in the Garden. After the festivals of September, Rosh Hashana (New Year) Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) and Succot (Tabernacles lasting eight days) when many international Christians come to support the State of Israel, we have had record numbers of visitors. One Saturday, we welcomed 2,500 and, at least one third of this number were local Israelis, attracted here by recent media publicity concerning our boundary wall with the Muslim cemetery. It is a joy to have Israelis and Palestinian visitors who drop in to experience the peace and beauty of this place, some commenting on the presence of God here. We have quite a few friends, some from years back, who make contact with us here, which is always delightful and we try to give each of them time for some hospitality and chat. Some couples have been invited to try out as volunteers, when they are usually accommodated here too, so my rôle is becoming a tour manager and hostess, along with the gardening and archives.

Our days off this month have been spent with friends visiting Israel, and we are still finding new sites to see outside Jerusalem. My passion for history is well satisfied here. I recently read the abridged works of Flavius Josephus, a Jewish freedom fighter, then turncoat Roman historian (c70 AD) with extraordinary accounts of Herod the Great, his megalomania, paranoia and jealousy (he killed a beloved wife and two sons not to mention the children of Bethlehem after the birth of Christ). This Herod was also responsible for some amazing construction still to be seen in this land, not least the glorious Second Temple of Jesus' time. This week, we took Richard's nephew and lovely girlfriend up to Caesarea, a maritime metropolis around the port Herod built on a coast with no natural harbours, in just 12 years. This became the centre of Roman government after Herod's death and where the first Gentile Christian, a Roman centurion, was baptised by Peter. Caesarea, named after Emperor Augustus, was also the place where St Paul was imprisoned and gave his defence to two successive Roman Governors, Felix and Festus, and the grandson of Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa II before being sent to Rome for trial. Today, a beautifully restored site stands elegantly beside the Mediterranean, complete with hippodrome, theatre, bathhouses and superimposed layers of later periods, but ironically it is the vast aqueduct, about one mile north abandoned by the shore, that for me, illustrates best the sophisticated Roman world King Herod brought to the troublesome province of Judea. Another Wednesday outing was to Herodium, not far from the Shepherd's Fields outside Bethlehem, a strange, conical, volcanic looking, man-made structure in the desert landscape built by Herod the Great as his mausoleum. This sad, bad and troubled man, so afraid of the announcement of "Another born to be" King of the Jews", one born in a stable in Bethlehem, that city named the "House of Bread", later said of himself: "I am the Bread of Life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never go thirsty." John 6:35.

This land breathes Biblical allusions and another place which we enjoy and seen this month, is Jaffa, allegedly the oldest sea port in the world where Jonah set sail from disregarding God's instructions to go to Nineveh, capital of the Assyrians to tell them to repent; only after spending three days and nights in the belly of a whale did he return to the first assignment to go to the most fearful people of the ancient world to actually heard and received his message. This was a tale which Jesus himself told as a prophetic allusion to his own death and resurrection. It was Jaffa, or Joppa where Peter was summoned at the house of Simon the Tanner to go to Caesarea to the centurion who had been told by an angel to seek out Peter there. Today, it might be quicker to walk the thirty miles of coastal roads to Caesarea from Joppa/Jaffa just south of the modern city of Tel Aviv, as the even the dual carriageway roads are so congested! The ancient streets and rocky shores have seen so many epochs of history come and go, but I also think of more recent stories of the thousands of young Jewish refugees arriving by sea at Jaffa, having survived the horrors of the death camps in Europe so soon becoming embroiled in the War of Independence in 1948, when many of them lost their lives after losing everything else.

This is indeed a land of history, of tragedy, and of huge religious significance. Many of us arrive by air, sleep in luxury hotels and tour the country in air-conditioned coaches or cars, ticking off the sights and expressing our opinions of the rights and wrongs of the political situation. I realise that none of us can really understand the past, but we can begin to understand our own spiritual needs and address these whilst we still have time and opportunity to do so. Even the apparent disaster of a broken leg can give space for reflection and prayer!

The blessing of the latter rains are hovering in some leaden sky and after a very hot month with no rain since late April, we long for it to fall and refresh this land. May you be blessed wherever you read this and thank you for your interest in this Garden.