

Planting a Granny Smith apple tree and other experiences

In May this year, 22 Kiwis invaded the beautiful and quiet compound of St George's College in Jerusalem. We were on pilgrimage that began in Israel and continued in Rome, Assisi and Subiaco. Wherever we were we would ask three questions:

1. What has God done here?
2. What is God doing here now?
3. What can we do as a continuing response to God's provision and challenge?

These reflections pick up on some of our responses to places we visited.

For many of us, the landscape and physical environment were hugely important in the pilgrimage experience. Many of our group described themselves as 'not city' people and for them the crowds and bustle of Jerusalem and Rome were often overwhelming. Spending time in the countryside around the Sea of Galilee, and in the hills above Assisi and Subiaco provided refreshment for the soul, and a huge sense of gratitude for the beauty of God's creation.

A member of our pilgrimage group, Rev'd Dr John Flenley, has just published a book "**Trees, Trees, Trees! You can do something about climate change**" and a copy of his book has been donated to the St George's College library in Jerusalem. John's book summarises the science behind a call for tree planting and shows it to be an effective response to mitigate our own and humanity's carbon footprint. Our group gave thanks for the privilege of travelling to the other side of the world to experience the land where Jesus walked. We also recognised that the fossil fuel used to transport us to St George's had contributed to atmospheric carbon dioxide levels and added to the brokenness of our environment. We acknowledged the need to be stewards of God's creation and marked this by planting an Antipodean carbon dioxide absorber – a Granny Smith apple tree – in the beautiful St George's garden, itself a microcosm of our Creator God's earth. And as our ongoing response to God's call for environmental stewardship we will continue and extend our tree planting as a practical way to reduce our carbon footprint.

For another pilgrim, walking on the Palestinian earth was a constant reminder of the cross: the upright buried in the earth speaks of the generations of saints and martyrs leading back from today to the early church. The cross-piece represents the diverse community of faith from every denomination, nation, tribe and tongue coming together at holy sites to remember, to seek understanding and to give thanks.

We visited caves at the Shepherds' Fields, near Bethlehem, the general area that the shepherds would have been in before the visitation of the angels. As one pilgrim noted (using words from Ian Cron's book *Chasing Francis* to describe her experience) "the air was pregnant with the sacred". Unlike so many of the churches we visited, there were no frescoes or paintings on the walls, and this lack of adornment of any kind added to the beauty of the caves. We stood in the coolness and sensed something extraordinary. We recalled the Gospel being preached on our own shores for the first time on Christmas Day 200 years before, in 1814, and we sang the New Zealand Christmas Carol, Te Harinui. As our voices filled the air an ordinary shelter for humble sheep and goats became something extra-extraordinary.

As part of our pilgrimage experience, our group contributed financially to a project selected for us by St George's. The Princess Basma Centre for Children with Disabilities is overseen by the Diocese of Jerusalem and was established in 1965 to enable children from Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza to have access to both health services and education. The Centre hosts each child and an accompanying adult family member (usually the mother) for an intensive three week course of rehabilitation. The programme includes hydrotherapy, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy, all carried out by qualified staff. The presence of a family member means that aspects of the therapy are carried on when they return home so that progress can continue. The Centre impressed us in several respects. Staff are welcoming to all who come and the commitment is for longterm treatment and support. The Centre is dedicated to improving the lives of children so that they can become participating members of their own communities rather than be hidden away and neglected as has often been the case in the past.

Other highlights in Israel included our stay in Nazareth and the opportunity to visit excavations of a first century tomb with a rolling stone that sealed the grave; celebrating an outdoor Eucharist in one of the possible Emmaus sites overlooking the road leading up to Jerusalem; magnificent artworks that retell aspects of the Gospel story; walking the Via Dolorosa amongst the everyday life of the Old City – shopkeepers setting up their stalls, children heading to school, women out buying the day's supplies.

From Israel we moved on to Rome and for one pilgrim the magnificent Basilica of St Paul's Outside the Walls was particularly special. This church, dating from the 4th century, is one of the largest churches in the world and we were awed by its size and beauty. We made our way down the huge nave, a space that was free of any seating and edged by large stone colonnades. Below the altar and below floor level, was the tomb of St Paul. As we knelt and gave thanks for a man who had also experienced both Jerusalem and Rome and who had shaped our lives and our faith, the architecture and beauty of the building spoke to one pilgrim's soul in a unique and transforming way. For her the magnetism of the large and exquisite symbol above the altar was indescribable. Fingers of gold spread out from the centre of this large dome-like structure into the mystery of "beyond" as if she had walked to heaven. "Yes" said our guide, Archbishop Sir David Moxon, "this building does that to you".

We were richly blessed on our pilgrimage and know that it will be a source of ongoing blessing in the months and years ahead.

Contributors:

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