

Ordination Training Israel Trip Report

25th Jan – 1st Feb 2017

Simon Shorey, Ordinand, St Mellitus College

I had finished writing an essay on the political state of Israel a few days before the trip. With the fierce battles between Israelis and Palestinians, and the recent news reports on Israel, I left England with a bit of negativity towards the Israelis. However, after spending a day walking the streets of Jerusalem, meeting the people and seeing it all face-to-face, my heart softened for the people. I still disagreed with some of their actions, but being amongst them removed the blinkered view we can get from books, however broad our reading. Our first day included a visit to the Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum, which was very moving. In the evening we heard about some of the incredible ecumenical work that Father David Neuhaus was leading, which was encouraging and inspiring to hear after all that I had read in recent weeks.

I ventured into day two with a very different heart and mind, however it wasn't without its challenges. With a busy day visiting lots of sites in and around Jerusalem, one particular phrase started to cause question, challenge and a bit of scepticism within me - 'this is where...'. From 'this is where the cross was placed into the rock', to 'this is the upper room where the disciples had the Last Supper'. Some sites seemed conveniently placed with multiple stories linked into one building. Other sites were simply completely different than what I believed they would be like. The closeness of the cross and the tomb, both in the Holy Sepulchre, was a particular struggle. Some reasoning and justification was stronger than others. Some was driven by Eastern tradition, others by Western. Some acknowledged that it may not be the exact site, but it is close to it and it is similar to it.

I returned to my hotel room with mixed emotions of having seen so much, but also having questioned so much. I didn't expect to be doing that. As I journaled about the day I realised what was behind this. As we read, we form images in our minds of how things were and are. I had done that as I had read the bible over the years. These images are then shaped further by TV programme, films, even the children's Good News Bible! As I uncovered the source of my scepticism I realised that historical research with delicate excavation and deep biblical study was coming up against my imagination! Once I realised that, it was very obvious which one I should lay down, and which one I should dare to believe!

I stepped out with eyes wide open on day three. I had chosen to believe, and with that the stories and sites came to life even more. It continued to be an incredible experience, but with only a few hours left in Jerusalem, I was keen to take as much in as possible. We journeyed to Bethlehem for some of the classic sites and heard of some amazing work that the Arab Rehabilitation Society was doing against all the odds. Heart breaking, but also faith growing and hope restoring as people strive to provide basic healthcare.

We left Jerusalem on day four after some final visits, including returning to the Holy Sepulchre to experience some of their morning worship and share the Eucharist. We then travelled to the dead sea for an hour of relaxing enjoyment, and then into the desert for some much needed time to pause and reflect, listening to God in the quietness after having three full days in the loud and busy Jerusalem.

Having tackled so much personally in Jerusalem, Galilee felt like a haven. Peaceful, beautiful and enjoyable. Again, we visited many sites every day, tracing parts of Jesus' own journey around this area. Highlights included seeing a group of people being baptised in the River Jordan, sharing the Eucharist overlooking Lake Tabgha and in particular seeing the incredible town of Capernaum excavated, including Peter's round house where the Christian church started. This was the most stunning architectural work of retaining the old while building the new hovering above the original site, allowing for worship to continue above the very site Peter led the first church. Our visit to Caesarea on the final day was also incredible, bringing to life both the sending out of the disciples to all nations, but also the brutal treatment against Christians in seasons of its history. A final stop in Jaffa along the coastline, then back to the airport.

I would like to thank St George's Trust for contributing towards the cost of this trip. It was an amazing journey, both physically and emotionally. I have 100s of pictures and many stories that are already working into my preaching and discussions. It was a hugely worthwhile experience, which I hope others will also benefit from. Thank you again.