

## Ecumenical Pilgrimage to the Holy land 2018



What a glorious beginning of a journeying together from 27<sup>th</sup> May to 4<sup>th</sup> June in 2018! We were a gathering of 41 people, many of us strangers to each other, of all ages (from 16 to 75 years old), of many nationalities and cultures (British, Canadians, Americans, Indians, Sri Lankan & Indian Tamils, Nigerians, Ghanaians, Bajans, Gambians, Jamaicans and Europeans), and of various denominations (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Methodist and Pentecostal). After experiencing a challenging immigration, we were determined to stay cheerful, to take the opportunity to get to know one another, and to gain deeper understanding during the Pilgrimage. The majority of the members did not know one another before, but we gradually developed a sense of belongingness, so that at the end of nine days all of us pilgrims experienced the feeling of being as one in God's Family.

The itinerary consisted of six days in Bethlehem and three days in Nazareth. It was organised by Special Pilgrimages, of Essex, and a knowledgeable guide was provided to us. We are proud to say that in total we walked 30 miles within nine days. The walking affected some of us but it increased the experience of supporting each other in our weaknesses.

Members were regularly encouraged to think of themselves not as tourists but as pilgrims in the Holy Land.

We visited the holy sites in Jerusalem, Jesus' birthplace (Nativity Church) and those of His agony at the end of His life - in the Garden of Gethsemane, His way of the Cross leading to the Crucifixion ('Via Dolorosa'), as well as His glorious resurrection. All these sites made the reality of His life on the earth come alive to us. The pilgrims met the different traditions which exist there as they visited the Empty Tomb (in the Garden Tomb and Holy Sepulchre) and Mary's death place in Jerusalem (though some believe she died in Turkey). Visiting the holy sites in Nazareth brought the Bible to life, particularly the three-and-a-half years of Jesus' life and ministry in the region of Galilee.

Throughout the Pilgrimage, every day started with morning prayer and ended with personal reflections from the day that enhanced our spiritual journeys as we learned from one another in the group, and indeed this experience was the special privilege we all shared on this pilgrimage. We also shared Holy Communion wherever an opportunity arose in the holy sites. Ecumenical spiritual learning made a vast difference in everyone's life as we reflected and worshipped together.

The 'Olive Tree field visit' which was guided by a charity called Embrace enabled the members to be aware of the challenges in the everyday life of the local people in Bethlehem. It made us aware of what could be done individually to stand alongside local people with our prayers and support.

We also visited the holy sites in Cana, where the first miracle was performed by Jesus, and at Yardenit on the river Jordan, where Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist. People were given the chance to renew their baptismal vows and wedding vows respectively. In Yardenit we understood, through some other pilgrims we met on the site, how strong can be the desire to be baptised again. It helped us to reflect and remind ourselves about the importance of Baptism and how one Baptism is enough in our Christian Journey, as Paul said in his epistle. Renewal of vows at Cana was a special worship service. As a group of pilgrims made up of couples, widows and singles, we were full of mixed feelings and life situations. But the preparation for this service helped us to be mindful about considering and caring for one another, and upholding one another in our different situations. In the worship the underlying concept of Faithfulness - 'Faithfulness to God and Faithfulness to one another' - was a meditation wedding that brought people to a sense of belonging as one in God's Family.

Visiting the Basilica of the Transfiguration was a marvellous experience for every one of us. A Healing Service happened to be organised when we had a Holy Communion in the Mount of Tabor. Before the communion service, pilgrims offered the names of their family members and friends as their prayer requests for them. Gradually, as the service went on, people wanted to add some more names for prayers. That revealed the inner thirst people have to pray for the sick during worship and also it revealed how much they care for one another's health, and we felt very moved in the service. Afterwards many of us shared the healing which we experienced, and this ongoing testimony in our lives was shared on the pilgrimage and brought glory to God.

Visiting the different holy sites with different denominational traditions enhanced our understanding of the ecumenical journey. We found that female priests were not accepted to celebrate the communion, as most of the churches are under the jurisdiction of Orthodox or Catholic traditions. In some places a female priest was not even allowed to go into the Church because of her clerical collar. But this understanding prevailing in the holy sites increased the pilgrims' desire to pray for Ecumenism among the Churches in the world, rather than criticising or debating the structural implications.

Visits to the Anglican Churches in Jerusalem (St Georges Cathedral) and in Christ Church, Nazareth, also added different but inclusive spiritual experiences.

Visiting the excavations and the marvellous continuous work of excavators made us thankful for the hard and costly work behind such excavation.

This Pilgrimage was uniquely valuable for understanding one another in the midst of our ideological, structural, and cultural differences. It was truly an informative and inspirational experience. The memories of all the pilgrims gathered on this journey led to transformation in their lives which was felt and shared by them all, to the glory of God's Name. We thank God for this great God-given opportunity for such a diverse group of pilgrims to come together as one, with open hearts, to learn in their pilgrim journey!

The Revd Jessie Anand

Pilgrimage Spiritual leader , Pilgrimage to the Holy land in 2018