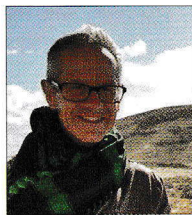


Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East

A pilgrim ministry...



Reflections from the Dean of St. George's College, Jerusalem

St George's College, Jerusalem is the Anglican Centre for Pilgrimage in the Holy Land. It was founded after the First World War with the hope of training Palestinian clergy for the Anglican diocese of Jerusalem. In the last thirty years we have become more of a pilgrimage centre where engagement with the Land, the history and the people are taken more seriously than in many pilgrimage organisations.

St George's College, Jerusalem runs pilgrimages for Anglicans and Christians of other denominations around the world. Our pilgrimages are predominantly religious in nature but we are committed to ensuring that people engage in the political realities of Israel and Palestine today. We highlight the injustices experienced by Palestinians as a day-by-day reality. We deal with modern history as well as ancient history. We make sure that our pilgrims engage with the Wall of Separation and understand the real impact of it on Palestinian lives. We also make sure that people hear and understand Jewish narratives in a positive light. However, we do not simply set up a cheap equivalence. We are clear that Israel's occupation of the West Bank brings injustice which, whilst it continues, is a barrier to constructive talks.

In the college, we enjoy good relations with a number of religious institutions around the city and with Jews and Muslims who together form the vast majority of the people of Jerusalem. Christians represent just two percent of the city's population. We regularly have Muslim and Jewish speakers addressing our pilgrims, so that St George's pilgrims get a broader view of the character of the city than many pilgrims do. We are not a peace and reconciliation organization but we are a pilgrimage centre which is committed to encouraging peaceful outcomes through striving for justice. Foremost for the college is ensuring that people return home much better informed and challenged to strive in their home country for a just outcome in Palestine and Israel.

Jerusalem is a fascinating city to live in. It is steeped in several millennia of history, much of which is still in view. The college is located a short distance from the Old City where most of the holy and historical sites are located, so these are very much part of our daily lived reality. Whilst it is wonderful to live in such a historical place imbued with profound religious significance

for Christians, Muslims and Jews, it is also one of the most contested places on earth. Conflict never seems to be too far from the surface and things can blow up here into clashes and violence at a moment's notice. That tension is an inevitable part of our context even as we go about shopping for daily necessities. Heavily armed Israeli soldiers are visible everywhere in and around the Old City. It is vital to remember that Jerusalem is a divided city even though there is no wall or border to mark the split. East Jerusalem has been occupied by Israel since 1967 and so Palestinians and many others understand and experience East Jerusalem (including the Old City) as being under military and civil occupation.



Having said this, many pilgrims and other visitors do not necessarily notice these harsh realities. Life continues on a day-to-day basis, with relative normality. Only those well acquainted with the city will necessarily be sensitive to the underlying tensions until something erupts, which it does quite regularly. Damascus Gate is the main thoroughfare for Jerusalem Palestinians and is the most common flashpoint as it is where young people congregate and socialize. The overbearing presence of Israeli soldiers is provocative and often leads to low level aggression and sometimes more.

By facing these realities, not protecting pilgrims from seeing them, we aim both to surprise them with the crushing reality, and encourage them to see that there is something they need to do about the situation by educating others in their home context. Many who come to St George's on pilgrimage share this hope for the people who live in the Holy Land and beyond. I hope that each and every one of them will seek to continue to be educated and strive for a better reality for the people who suffer in these lands.

Please pray for us that we can continue with our pilgrim ministry and that we receive the resources we need to continue in the present and into the future.

Richard Sewell

Photos: St. George's College

