

#### 4. The central meaning of Christianity.

Jesus predicts his death (Matthew 17:22-23; 20:17-19; Mark 8:31-32 and Luke 9:21-22).

In the last presentation we considered some of the teachings of Jesus that related to our life on this earth. We now need to see what the pilgrimage showed us about his teaching and fulfilment of his ministry relating to the world to come. From his earliest teaching in Galilee Jesus had predicted his death, its circumstances and mode, and his resurrection on the third day. Matthew 17:22-23 and Mark 9:30-32 record two of the warnings that Jesus gave his disciples about his coming death, its mode, and his resurrection on the third day.



This was our first view of Jerusalem, taken from Mount Scopus, from where the Roman General Titus had commanded the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Kidron valley runs from below us to the south, east of the east wall of the old city. The golden Dome of the Rock and the nearby El Aksa Mosque (grey dome to left of the golden one) emphasise the proximity of Muslim holy sites to the Western Wall (Wailing Wall) of Judaism shown in the second discussion notes.





An aerial view of Jerusalem (not on our itinerary) looking East to the Dead Sea and Jordan beyond.

As the Sea of Galilee is the lowest fresh water lake on earth (about 700 feet below sea level and the Dead Sea the lowest saltwater lake, now more than 1,400 feet below sea level), it is easy to see why the bible refers to Jesus *going up* to the Old City of Jerusalem, about 80 miles away and 3,800 feet above sea level, when he predicted his betrayal to the religious authorities, his torture and crucifixion, and his resurrection on the third day (Matthew 16:21-23; 20:17-19). He made these predictions three times in the synoptic gospels and several times, more subtly, in John's Gospel.

Jerusalem evoked numerous biblical references and was the only really crowded place we encountered on the entire pilgrimage. If any reminder were needed of the worldwide spread of Christianity we only needed to look at the crowds of pilgrims and hear the variety of languages spoken by them.

But it was in Jerusalem that we witnessed the most obvious evidence of the tensions within the present Holy Land in the form of armed soldiers, security checks and the dividing wall between Israel and the West Bank.



This is the view from the Old City, looking east across the Kidron valley to the mount of Olives. The Kidron valley and the olive grove is mentioned in John 18:1-3 as a place where Jesus had often met with his disciples, and the place where he was betrayed.



The Garden of Gethsemane with ancient olive trees is close to the Church of All Nations, shown below:





The interior of the Church of All Nations is suitably dark in consideration of the events that occurred in the vicinity some 2,000 years ago.



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, traditional site of crucifixion.



The Via Dolorosa does indeed lead to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, with the final five of the fourteen stations of the Cross being within the Church.

However, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre proved somewhat disappointing in that it was very crowded with pilgrims of many nations, noisy and quite unlike the biblical scene of the crucifixion that we had perhaps imagined – or was it? Jerusalem was overcrowded at the time of Passover nearly 2,000 years ago, and Jesus's trial was conducted in the presence of a noisy, clamorous crowd. Nevertheless, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre remains the traditional site, inaugurated by the Emperor Constantine in 325 and visited by his mother, Helena, a year later, and who claimed to have found wood of the original cross of Jesus.

Thus, an alternative possible site for the crucifixion and the tomb had great appeal to us. The Garden Tomb and nearby Golgotha was peaceful and much more conducive to quiet reflection. The tomb that we saw and entered, was discovered in 1867 and has been dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. This does not accord with the accounts in Matthew 27:57-60 and John 19:41 which refers to a new tomb in which no one had been placed before. We certainly felt that the Garden Tomb was far more evocative of the events following Jesus's death than the crowded Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Perhaps even more plausible for us was the exposed rocky outcrop with caves suggestive of eye sockets (even more in the photograph taken about 1900 AD). This is known as Skull Hill or Gordon's Calvary, and is clearly seen from the Garden Tomb gardens. It was Major-General Charles George Gordon who visited Jerusalem in 1883 (two years before his ill-fated defence of Khartoum) and was a influential proponent (but not the first) of this site being Golgotha and the site to Jesus's crucifixion.

The Garden Tomb site is well maintained by a Protestant UK-based charitable trust.







The empty tomb.

There are many arguments about the true site of the crucifixion, the tomb and the location of the city walls at the time (Jesus was crucified outside the city walls).

The truth is surely that we cannot be certain of these sites; the spiritual reality is that for us, the Garden Tomb site made a major impression, particularly as the quiet, uncrowded surroundings allowed appropriate reflection on the events of 2,000 years ago that are so central to our faith.

As Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:19, 'If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men,' and in verse 20 'But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead . . .'. In our last meeting notes I referred to Morris's commentary on Matthew 4:16 which is part of a prophecy in Isaiah 9:1-7 that God will in the future honour Galilee of the Gentiles and that 'the people walking in darkness have seen a great light' and 'on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned' (v 2). Morris refers to these people as 'those whose horizon is bounded by death.' How apt is that thought today when so many think that death is the end, there is nothing else! The empty tomb, first witnessed by *women* – whose testimony would not have been believed - (Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-7; Luke 24:1-8; John 20:1-18 and Matthew 28:11-15 for the Jews' concerns to prevent the body being removed) refutes that thinking and the empty tomb we entered on the pilgrimage brought that thought clearly into focus.