

Bethlehem

As we prepare to receive the Bethlehem Peace Light here tomorrow it is good for us to think about the place of our Lord's birth. We are perhaps used to the idealized images of the stable and the surrounding town in countless Christmas cards.

The television news the other evening featured the village of Youlgreave in Derbyshire where a model not just of the nativity scene but of the whole town of Bethlehem has been made out of cakes. The cakes are being auctioned off to raise funds for the local primary school. Apparently last year they made a model of their own village in that way.

Such images are good in themselves but are a far cry from the reality of life in first century Palestine and the difficulties experienced by the holy family at the time of Jesus' birth. Even more so are they far removed from the reality of Bethlehem today.

I was privileged to visit Bethlehem as part of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in February 2014. I have two particular memories of the town.

The first memory is of the ancient Church of the Nativity and the descent to the place where Jesus is traditionally believed to have been born. There is a connection with York and our own parish in that the church was originally commissioned by Constantine the Great and his mother Helena in the year 327. Though much changed and added to over the centuries it remains a powerful and atmospheric witness to faith in the incarnation, in the coming of God into the world in the form of a vulnerable baby.

The second memory is the wall that cuts off the Palestinian areas from Israeli territory. You cannot miss it. It sweeps right across the landscape. It is ugly not only in appearance but also in the effect it has on the lives of the inhabitants of Bethlehem.

One serious issue is that of access to medical facilities. We were privileged to visit and have lunch at the charity-run Arab Rehabilitation Centre whose hospital services have been expanded over the years to compensate for the difficulty in reaching hospitals in Jerusalem. The existence of the wall and all the issues it raises could be depressing. Yet in the midst of that here was good work being carried out. Here was compassion in action.

Our Bible reading just now was the well-known prophecy of Micah often read at carol services (Micah 5.2-5a). This looks forward to a time of security and peace, to the coming of one who will bring solidarity and peace. We pray that not only the people of Bethlehem but also all inhabitants of the Holy Land, Israelis and Palestinians, Jews, Muslims and Christians – we pray that they may all come to experience that peace and stability at this Christmastide.

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