

It was very strange to receive the news of the Queen's death while on pilgrimage in Israel. There are certain moments in life that are so momentous you remember where you were. That will be the case for those of us staying at the Golden Walls Hotel just outside the walls of Jerusalem near the Damascus Gate.

When the King addressed the nation the young man serving on the hotel desk tuned the reception TV to the BBC and after a false start we could hear and see King Charles make his first public broadcast as our King. I'm not sure what other guests made of it seeing us clustered around the TV. The night before they had watched football.

As well as the sadness and acceptance that Queen Elizabeth had died, we also felt for Michael who was already shouldering enough responsibility here at church without all of us. Cometh the hour, cometh the man. Holy Trinity was not found wanting for a response to the situation.

We started our pilgrimage visiting Herodian, built by Herod the Great except our guide, Michel, refused to refer to him as "the Great" and called him "the Cruel, the Brutal" and told us why.



Herodian

Herod certainly did some remarkable things in terms of building and considerable archaeological evidence is there of his reign, but

the walls are broken, the palaces no longer exist, the reputation he leaves behind is not of being great, but being narcissistic, paranoid, brutal and cruel. He comes into our Christmas story every year, taking the lives of the children in Bethlehem hoping to kill Jesus. We visited a crypt reputed to be where the children were laid.

We visited Herodian, we were told of Herod's retreat on Masada, our guide explained how he built the temple area of Jerusalem and we saw the extensive palace complex at Caesarea Maritime but none of that can change Herod's reputation.

As I heard about King Herod, it's not surprising I had in mind the reign of our Queen whose reputation is of service and humility, faith and duty and constancy.

Our tour guide, Michel, told us he was coming to London with his wife for four days after Christmas. We asked him to get in touch so that we could repay his kindness to us on the tour and maybe show him one of the sights near here. I showed him this well-known picture and he was impressed.

(I showed a picture of the Long Walk and Windsor Castle)

Windsor Castle is only 1070 years old. In another thousand years, whether the Castle stands or is a ruin...tour guides will not be speaking of Elizabeth the Cruel, but that the Monarch of the second Elizabethan era was the very pinnacle of devotion and service to her people.

During her first Christmas broadcast she said...

*'Pray for me ... that God may give me wisdom and strength to carry out the solemn promises I shall be making, and that I may faithfully serve Him and you, all the days of my life.'*

Our prayers were answered.

As time passed, she was able to be more explicit about her faith. In 2008 she said

*'I hope that, like me, you will be comforted by the example of Jesus of Nazareth who, often in circumstances of great adversity, managed to live an outgoing, unselfish and sacrificial life ... He makes it clear that genuine human happiness and satisfaction lie more in giving than receiving; more in serving than in being served.'*

Jesus of Nazareth. This is Nazareth today.



Our guide said it was the biggest city apart from Jerusalem. He also said that they STILL have the same saying that Nathaniel used when Andrew said they had found the Messiah. Nazareth? Can anything good come from Nazareth?

A pilgrimage to Israel is a mix of political history, archaeological history as well as the story of our faith. We entered into the confusing and challenging land that is divided and anything but peaceful.

We travelled through the West Bank – Zone A, Palestinians only Zone B, a conduit for anyone travelling between Zone A and Zone

C and Zone C is for Israelis only – unless you are Palestinian and have a pass to work in Zone C.

If that isn't confusing – then walk through Jerusalem, the Armenian quarter, or the Jewish quarter or the Christian quarter or the Muslim quarter.

Jerusalem featured heavily at the beginning of our tour and we walked the mount of Olives and stopped at the church of Dominus Flavit – a view over Jerusalem. It might well have been the spot Jesus stopped and wept as he saw the city.



Then the guide began to distract our attention. Where was Jerusalem? He asked? Where was King David's Jerusalem?

And he pointed to the valley and the site of the original Jerusalem and how the temple was built outside the city up the Hill. And then Jerusalem grew north, and east and west, and Herod (the not so Great) extended the temple area and built a palace. It's a lot of history to take in.

We entered present day Jerusalem, the crowded, noisy, contested, tense and divided Jerusalem and suddenly the reading we had from Revelation makes sense.

Jerusalem is more than a city. It's a symbol of the dwelling place of God with his people. Currently it shows how broken and divided we are.

Yet there will come a day of renewal – a new Jerusalem that is not a divided and broken city, but a city as beautiful as a bride and the dwelling place of God with his people.

No more mourning and crying and pain. No more a place where Jews pray on one side of a wall and Muslims pray on the other.

As followers of Jesus Christ we are called to serve and the late Queen exemplified that to the full. We express that service in different ways. The hymn we will sing in a moment takes Jerusalem as the shorthand for God's kingdom and we strive to build Jerusalem here.

Earlier I referred to King Herod and how he arranged for the death of the innocent children in Bethlehem. As I close I'll refer to Queen Elizabeth's words from her 2012 Christmas broadcast.

*'This is the time of year when we remember that God sent his only son "to serve, not to be served". He restored love and service to the centre of our lives in the person of Jesus Christ. It is my prayer ... that his example and teaching will continue to bring people together to give the best of themselves in the service of others.'*

Let us renew our commitment to be who God calls us to be. Authentically serving Him, building his kingdom through serving others.