

Date: 30/05/2011

Place: Selcuk

Kms walked: 3122kms

Well this whole journey seems to be about changing plans! First of all I decided it would be wiser to take buses across Albania, then I decided in the light of advice to change my route thru Turkey, then I had to unexpectedly go home to await delivery of replacement credit cards etc after I was robbed in Athens, and I changed my route yet again to avoid a section of the Via Egnatia in Greece when I was warned by Jeremy (the chap I met in Croatia who was walking to Istanbul) that he had been mugged there.

On top of all of this my travel insurance ran out in April and when I contacted my insurance company to extend my travel insurance as my walk was taking longer than planned, they refused to extend it because of the claim I had submitted for the robbery. "Oh well" I thought to myself, "I'll have to look elsewhere". But because I had been out of the UK for more than 6 months, UK insurance companies I contacted informed me that I am no longer resident in the UK and therefore they cannot insure me. I started looking at policies provided by non-UK companies but they were very very expensive for the extra time I thought I needed. At that point I started to think about the growing unrest in the Middle East. Consulting the advice to travellers on the Irish Government website I discovered they were advising travellers not to go to Syria. In addition the travel advice for Israel was exercise 'Extreme Caution' and they advised against travel to the Gaza strip. The prospect of having to abandon my journey and return to the UK ASAP (hoping that I didn't have an accident en route) loomed large.

In parallel with this came some slightly unpleasant incidents. The first involved "the man on a scooter". He was going in the same direction as me and stopped on the opposite side of the road (I was walking on the side facing oncoming traffic). He offered me a lift. I smiled, pointed to my feet to indicate I wanted to continue walking, thanked him and walked on. He then drove his scooter across to my side and blocked my path, gesturing me to get on the pillion seat. Again I smiled, thanked him and said "No". He then said "You, me, sex" and gestured towards the field. I looked at him incredulously and said "No". He didn't move. I waved my arm and told him to go away. He didn't move. Then a car appeared and I turned towards it and my body language made it clear I was going to flag the car down. He drove off. I continued walking but he had stopped a short way up the road and when I approached he again drove his scooter across to block my path and repeated his request. I was angry and repeated my refusal. Again more traffic appeared and he finally drove off.

The next incident involved dogs yet again. This time I was on a minor road taking a short cut and came across a group of four or five asleep at the side of the road. One got up and after I passed started barking and following me. The others then followed suite. Acting aggressively towards them seemed to only make them worse and in the end I was walking backwards waving my staff at them. The road was (fortunately) busier than I had expected and a car stopped and the driver said something to the lead dog and it slunk off, the others following it. The car started to drive off and the dogs resumed their harassment. However the driver was obviously keeping an eye on the situation and stopped again. When they saw this the dogs turned back and left me alone. It was somewhat un-nerving. I was very grateful to the chap in the car who had made sure I was OK.

So all these things conspired against me and it really looked as though my journey was over. I started to compose my last Postcard, No 15 with the words

"I have therefore decided the wisest action is to postpone the rest of the pilgrimage until matters are calmer in the Middle East. I will stop walking at Ephesus because that feels like a significant location at which to terminate this part of my pilgrimage and from which to restart."

In fact I wrote to my family to say I was going to stop. However

An insurance company from whom I had requested a quote replied to say they could insure me at a price I could afford even though I had already started my trip, and had been away from the UK for a lengthy spell and had a claim in progress for the theft in Athens and was aged over 60. The same friend who helped me out after the robbery also helped me by sorting out payment for the policy. So suddenly it looked as though I could continue. But I still was not sure.

I realise all the above sounds a bit melodramatic but I share it with you to show the power of prayer/good thoughts/whatever.

Then my two friends arrived in Izmir and we had a great reunion. I did tell them about what had been happening but very sensibly they did not try to influence my decision as to whether I should continue or not. Their arrival provided me with a mental rest about what my next move should be, then one day, as we were on a bus for a day trip it came to me that as long as I stuck to the main road I would be safe and could continue to walk. I was given different advice about how to react to dogs which I'm glad to say I have not needed to try out yet. As regards the "man on the scooter" I feel that being on a main road I was not in real danger as it was an opportunistic incident and could have happened anywhere. Whether male or female one is always a bit vulnerable when walking alone – see what happened to Jeremy above. So I resolved to continue and told my friends that before they left.

However

As I had been coming closer to Izmir I was starting to feel a little worn out. The temptation to just get on a bus became stronger and stronger. I found myself say to the Lord "Please, just get me to Izmir and then my friends will walk with me to Ephesus and I will be OK. I won't need to worry about dogs, there will be 3 of us". And indeed He did get me to Izmir, in fact the day before I reached it I walked 37kms – some of which was in the rain! I really don't like walking in the rain.

In the end my friends only walked 1 day with me, from Izmir centre out to the airport – my choice – and we spent a very relaxing time being tourists in Izmir and Selcuk. So that still left me with 3 days to walk alone from the airport to Meryemana, 6kms from Ephesus. Meryemana is the site of the house where it is believed Our Lady spent her last days on earth, having travelled there accompanied by St John the Evangelist. It is a pilgrimage site for both Christians and Muslims and during my journey in Turkey when I said I was going there many Turkish people reacted with great reverence.

I did a lot of thinking and talking to the Lord during those 3 days. I was no longer afraid to continue walking beyond Meryemana, on towards the Syrian border but very clearly the situation in Syria was not going to be resolved before I got there so it would be folly to try and continue on foot through it. Despite the 10 days rest I had had while my friends were with me I was still feeling a little worn out. Accompanying this was a desire to reach Jerusalem sooner rather than later. So by the time I was approaching Meryemana it felt like the right decision to stop walking there and continue by bus/ferry/plane or whatever to Jerusalem.

I duly arrived at Meryemana and was able to attend Mass. I have booked a flight to the north of Cyprus as it proved cheaper than travelling by bus and ferry and have not yet booked my travel on from there but there are flights to Tel Aviv that I can afford from the south side. So hopefully the next Postcard will be from Jerusalem and will include the story of the journey from Bergama.