

Date: 22/06/2011 Place: Pag island, Croatia

This Postcard covers my arrival at Jerusalem, the end of my pilgrimage.

I am at a campsite on the island of Pag. It is 23:00 and balmy. I suppose the temperature is in the low 20's. The sky is inky black and full of stars. Now there seems to be an air of unreality about what I have just done. Did I really get to Jerusalem? It feels so long ago. But I did get there and this is what happened.

After spending the night at Izmir airport where I managed to get about 3 hrs sleep I caught the plane OK and landed at Ercon, the airport to the north of Nicosia, on the Turkish side, at about 8:30. There was a bus into the town within the hour so by just after 10:00 I was trying to figure out where I was exactly and how to reach the border with Greece. A very kind girl in the bus office went off and got me a map of Nicosia but it was only of the Turkish side. No problem because it showed me how to get to the border at which I arrived about 45 mins later. There was absolutely no problem crossing and to my relief there was a Tourist Office just the other side. Here I was able to get a map of the Greek part of Nicosia and find out where to catch the bus to Larnaca airport and where there was an internet café and where there was a café with free wifi.

Heading for the wifi place first I had a coffee and then a celebratory Irish coffee! Checking my email I found a reply to an accommodation query I had sent only the previous day. It was the Ecce Homo Convent on the Via Dolorosa in the Old City of Jerusalem. I had been told about this place by a couple I had met weeks ago in Canakkale and my meeting with them had seemed significant at the time though I didn't know then why. I was overjoyed to read the Convent had space but I still didn't know my arrival date. Without delay I checked flights from Larnaca and yippee, the cheap flight for tonight was still available. I booked it and replied to the Convent hoping a bed would be available from 2nd June – my initial enquiry had been for the 3rd or 4th. Everything seemed to be slotting into place. Then I went to the internet café to print off my ticket and I was set. Although I had plenty of time before the plane which was not until 23:30 it seemed sensible to head for Larnaca airport immediately.



Landing at Ercon, Cyprus



The dove of Peace on the Tourist Office building on the Greek side of Nicosia

By 23:30 I was landing at Tel Aviv, hardly able to believe it. I was reasonably confident that a major airport such as this would have flights coming and going (and would therefore be open) throughout the night so I would be able to spend the night there. On my first arrival in Izmir city I had wandered around at 22:30 looking for somewhere to stay, feeling quite safe but I did not feel the same way about Tel Aviv. The airport was busy and there were a few other people obviously spending the night there so I found a spot and settled down with the thought that I was probably in the most secure airport in the world.

Secure from terrorists maybe but from thieves, no. It was a very foolish thing for me to have done as I now realise but next morning I plonked my rucksack at a table and went up to the counter of a fast food place to order breakfast. I had replaced some of the things I usually carried on the outside of my rucksack which I had removed while it was in transit. Among these was a pouch containing my earphones. My back was turned for a short time & I did not discover it until later but someone had cut the pouch off and taken the earphones. The string was still hanging from my rucksack. And yes I know it was my own fault. But even so I regretted the loss.

Fortuitously there was free wifi at the airport and I was able to check my email and yes, the Convent had space for that night as well. Having waited a few hours I then started out for Jerusalem by bus. Again I had no idea where the bus station was in relation to the Old City but saw signs for it from the bus just before we pulled in to the station. I headed off in that direction and found as time passed I really missed my pilgrim staff. It had become part of me and I had left it behind in Selcuk where I had stayed as I no longer trust airlines with it. (An airline mislaid it once and couldn't find it for a few days. It did turn up eventually but I vowed I would not hand it over again which is why I only take buses etc when I have my staff with me.) I carried on following signs then somehow lost them – of course this is not unusual for me! Now approaching what looked like the outskirts of Jerusalem I thought it wise to get directions.

Eventually I came to the Old City and entered through the Zion Gate. Stopping to try and get my bearings (I had photographed the location of the Convent within the Old City) I was approached by a guy smiling, with his hand outstretched saying “Welcome to Jerusalem. Can I help you? Where do you want to go?” He was really friendly so I explained where I was going and he said “Yes I know it. I can show you the shortest way there.” Off we went and he told me about some of the history of the place and informed me there were 2 Synagogues only open once a week and today was the day and they were on our way. When he stopped at a place and encouraged me to take a picture my suspicions already aroused were confirmed. He was in fact a guide and wanted money. By now I was quite weary & said I had no desire to do a tour, paid him & asked for directions to the Via Dolorosa.

I was quite upset. I had already had a not dissimilar experience with a taxi driver who offered help but when he realised I was not going to take his taxi had abruptly walked off. This second person had seemed so genuinely friendly and welcoming and I had just come from Turkey where many many people there and elsewhere had stopped to help me when I was consulting a map. They wanted to help with no ulterior motives so my guard was down. Following his directions I soon realised he had actually taken me in the opposite direction to where I wanted to go and I now came to the Arab souk with its narrow crowded streets and shops. But St Francis had obviously been keeping a watchful eye on me because the next thing I saw was a Franciscan Friar so I started to follow him. I tapped him on the shoulder and asked if he could speak English. Yes he could. I asked for directions and he said he was going that way himself. He took me to the Convent and even rang the bell and explained that I had a reservation. I heaved a great sigh of relief and thanked him gratefully.



Following (and losing) signs for the Old City



and finally entry thru the Zion Gate

The Convent was a wonderful antidote to my initial arrival experiences. It was calm and peaceful. It had open terraces above the street with views over the city and towards the Golden Dome and Mount of Olives. The sister was kind and gentle and welcoming. There were coffee making facilities and although I was in a dorm the beds were partitioned off so one had privacy. There was daily Mass and it was possible to share in morning and evening prayer with the Community. It also happened that my 'cubicle' was one of the best because it was in a corner with no neighbours and I was just opposite the bathroom. After a short visit to the Church to say 'Thank you for my safe arrival' and then a very welcome shower I wandered off to get food for the next few days. In addition I was able to get a map of the city which made life a little easier.



View from the Convent terrace



The Golden Dome from the terrace

Although I had intended not leaving Jerusalem at all the Lord had other plans! The day after I arrived I received an email from the Pax Christi contact in Bethlehem inviting me to a Peace event there. It meant not only leaving Jerusalem but also crossing the border into Palestine. I wondered how difficult that would be. In fact I passed thru the checkpoint with no delays and arrived with plenty of time to spare. It was a depressing experience though. One has to pass down a covered walkway with thick bars on one side and a wall on the other. The walkway is only about 8 feet wide if that. From there to the meeting place the separation wall towering above me was oppressive and bleak with many mournful paintings and plaintive graffiti on it.



Bethlehem border crossing.



The wall

The event consisted of a service at a Benedictine Orthodox Convent celebrated by both Orthodox and Catholic Priests followed by a walk of protest along the wall. Then I gave a short talk about my pilgrimage after which videos of messages of support from a number of different countries were shown. I was glad to have been able to be there and many people came up to me afterwards to thank me and ask me to pray for them. It was too late to return to Jerusalem and I was given a bed by one of the women involved. This gave me the opportunity next day to visit the Church of the Nativity and attend Mass. So rather appropriately I did visit the Church of the Nativity before the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

It took me several days to find my feet so to speak so it wasn't until the Tuesday that I visited Gethsemane. I had hoped to sit in the Garden and pray for all those who had requested it (by the way I forgot to mention in my last Postcard that I had also done this at Meryemana). Unfortunately the Garden was locked so I sat in the Basilica and prayed there for 2 hours. By now there were a lot of people on my list! A couple of days later I visited the Western Wall. Two people I had met on separate occasions on my journey had given me a paper with a prayer, asking me to put it in the Western Wall.



Basilica at Gethsemane



Sculpture passed on the way in to the Basilica

I still hadn't visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but this I did having walked the Stations of the Cross, led each Friday afternoon by Franciscan Friars. Previously, part of the Holy Saturday service I had attended in Izmir consisted of a member of the congregation lighting a handheld candle and passing that light to their neighbour who then passes it on and so on until everyone's candle is lit. Well I kept my candle from that service, put it in my rucksack and took it with me back to Canakkale and carried it from there to Meryemana and then on to Jerusalem, to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Having lit the candle I said a short prayer and left it at the wall of the Tomb of Our Lord.



The Holy Sepulchre at very early morning



A candle burning for you all in Jerusalem

Although I spent 10 days in Jerusalem I did very little sightseeing. Somehow that was not why I was there. It was an eerie feeling to have covered the distance from Izmir to Cyprus to Jerusalem in a little over 24 hours, when it had taken me several months walking a similar distance. Also as I said earlier my arrival in the narrow crowded streets was a sort of shock. I spent 1 whole day just in the Convent, not going out at all. But when I was emailed about the Bethlehem event it did seem to me that I should go despite my reluctance. And perhaps I was being sent there.

When in Bethlehem an invitation was given to me to return a few days later and talk at greater length to a Women's support group that meets weekly. I was glad to return and meet these women and hear them speak about their lives and how they have been affected by the wall which to me (sorry, 'soapbox moment' coming) is an abomination. Later the same day I met an English chap who is closely involved with setting up the Palestinian section of a long distance trail called the Abraham Path. He pointed to a hill in the distance and said "See those conifers over there? That used to be farmers land, olive groves belonging to Palestinians. Soldiers came and forced the people off the land and then it was built on and Israelis took residence. It is an illegal settlement."

So I found the Holy Land (the very small part of it I saw) a sad place. In the Old City there seemed to be soldiers 'everywhere'. I felt an underlying tension. As well as that I was disappointed not to have walked the whole way and disappointed not to have actually walked in the Holy Land. It was obviously not meant to be. Perhaps some day it will be possible.

However I am glad I did not give up, even if it meant leaving my trusty staff behind and taking planes. I am grateful I was able to get there at all – I could have been knocked down by a bus, I feel I did bring something positive to certain people en route who needed it, I am very thankful for having met such kind people on the way and to have received so many many supportive emails from you who are reading this and I am privileged to have been able to complete my mission to pray in Jerusalem for those who requested it

Now I have started the long journey home by bus, train and eventually ferry. There are some people I would like to see again en route (indeed I have already seen a few and spent a very enjoyable time with them). Part of my journey back will be to walk in Spain from Santiago to Muxia – a sort of 'end of pilgrimage' pilgrimage. I did this walk for the 1st time a number of years ago. The scenery was stunning and reminded me very much of being in Ireland though with much better weather! I promised myself I would walk it every year as long as I was fit though alas I was not able to do it last year as I was embarking on my mammoth journey to Jerusalem.

So this might be my last Postcard but then again maybe not. "Never say never" as they say!