

Celebrating Christmas in Nablus and Yanoun, December 2010

On Christmas Eve the four of us who are based in Yanoun, as Ecumenical Accompaniers, joined the



Christians in Nablus, our nearest town, for their annual walk to all four churches: Catholic, Melkite, Orthodox and Anglican. We were warmly welcomed by Fr Joseph, the Melkite priest, who ushered us into his home for the compulsory Arabic coffee that is offered in all homes when we visit. We were soon joined by various groups of the local police, scouts and other organisations and Father Christmases in all shapes and sizes. Outside the

young scouts, girls and boys, gathered with musical instruments and flares that seemed to transgress every health and safety regulation possible!

More people were gathered at the entrance to the church and we set off up the road accompanied by great noise and light, led by the priests from the four churches and the town governor. The street was crowded with families, old and young, Christians and Muslims many of whom came to us to say that they wanted to share our feast with us and to show that we are all together and worship the one God.

At each church we stopped for more loud music and recognition that this was a special time for its people. At the Latin Catholic Church at the top of the hill we were ushered in and sat in the beautifully decorated church with its cave-like crib while Fr Johnny delivered a message for the day.



In the adjoining hall official speeches were made and coffee and delicious chocolates

served. As EAs (Ecumenical Accompaniers) we wear our distinctive vests when we are working (which is most of the time!) and are therefore very easily identified wherever we are. At one point in this meeting we were asked to stand and were given an official welcome and also a very moving tribute for the work that is done by the teams in the area. As we were only just taking over we were glad that some members of the previous team were there to hear this appreciation.



We then attended the evening service in the Anglican church, in which Fr Joseph (Melkite), Fr George (Orthodox) and Fr Ibrahim (Anglican) all took part. We guessed at the readings and recognised the familiar carols being sung with great gusto in Arabic by the congregation and joined in, in our own languages, when we could.



Back in Yanoun, we decorated the miniature Christmas tree we had found in a cupboard and put out the little crib figures, complete with Wall, that I had been given as a gift by Joseph the Carpenter in Bethlehem, who makes all the Pax Christi olive wood carvings for us. We had a festive napkin on the coffee table and olive branches in a vase. Later, after our meal, we went out into the olive groves, into the clear night under the stars and read the Christmas Story in English, German and Norwegian, the languages of our team. We could hear the lambs, donkeys and dogs in the village above and shared something we shall probably not be able to do again. We looked up to the houses of our neighbours and were aware that the caves behind them are where their families used to live and kept their flocks at night. The fields we were standing in are where, each day, we see the shepherds lead their sheep and goats to graze and drink from the water at the well.

Just like the people two thousand years ago, we are in an occupied country. Our village is surrounded, on the hills above us, by illegal* settlement outposts with guards in the watchtower overseeing us by day and whose bright lights shine down on us at night. The conventional words of carols, that present an idealised picture of the birth of Jesus, are ones that I shall never feel the same about again.

The next morning we had an American pancake breakfast and then prepared fruit baskets as gifts for each of the families in the village so that we could share our feast day with them. We visited each house in turn and it felt very special to be able to do this and to be able to return some of the kindness and hospitality that they offer us. After this Abigajil left for Jerusalem to be with her mother and sister who were visiting to celebrate Christmas together and we welcomed Ruth, Wayne's wife, who is serving in the Jerusalem Team, to join us for a delicious Christmas meal and a relaxing afternoon. It was a very special Christmas.



Ann (UK), Wayne (USA), Petter (Norway), Abigajil (Germany)

*settlements are illegal under the 4th Geneva Convention, article 49

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