



Happy Christmas from Bethlehem 2010

On a visit to Bethlehem last week we were able to walk round some of the wall that surrounds it and imprisons the town. Celebrations are taking place within but very few of the people there are able to get out to visit friends or family elsewhere and although international visitors will be coming in for the church services and celebrations, Palestinians from nearby Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank are not allowed in past the obscene checkpoint at its entrance.

In the small village of Yanoun, near Nablus further north in the West Bank, where I am based we maintain a permanent presence because there are Israeli Settlements on all the surrounding hills (settlements are illegal according to UN resolutions). These ones are outposts and not full grown ones yet but the villagers' land has been appropriated and they have been told that they are no longer allowed to go to their olive trees on the hills and cannot grow crops, except in the lower fields. The poverty in the village is very obvious and the hospitality to us very warm.

Reading of the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in a time of occupation, we are reminded that now the same journey could not take place. Nazareth is in Israel and Bethlehem is in the Occupied Territories. No Israeli family can pass through the checkpoints near Nazareth and into the West Bank. For Palestinians there are a huge number of checkpoints within the West Bank that they cannot pass through for any reason, without a permit. Even with a permit for a specific journey on one day, at one time, they may not get through if the Israeli soldiers refuse to accept the permit. Permits have also been required for tractors and donkeys! So a journey by a small family with a pregnant woman riding a donkey the 90 miles the length of Palestine/Israel is not possible today.

We have learnt that the forebears of the families here in the village lived in the caves in the hills behind and it seems more like the original nativity scene - unlike the "fluffy" crib scenes of Christmas cards. People here would certainly welcome passing travelers who needed shelter.

Later today we shall be going into Nablus to join the people there for their celebrations and taking part in the procession that goes to each of the four churches there and ends up in one of them for the Christmas Service and will be thinking of friends everywhere. Happy Christmas, Ann

*I work for Quaker Peace and Social Witness as an Ecumenical Accompanier serving on the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Accompaniment Programme in Palestine and Israel (EAPPI). The views contained herein are personal to me and do not necessarily reflect those of my employer (QPSW) or the WCC. If you would like to publish the information contained here (including posting on a website), or distribute it further, please first contact Teresa Parker (teresap@quaker.org.uk) or the EAPPI Communications Officer (eappi-co@jrol.com) for permission. Thank you*