

Christmas will never be the same.

On the first day of our pilgrimage to the Holy Land we visited Bethlehem, driving from Jerusalem through a checkpoint to the West Bank, a stark reminder of the uneasy peace in the Holy Land. Our first stop was the Shepherds Fields, where shepherds still work with their sheep and goats. This was high on a hill looking over to Bethlehem, also sprawled across the top of a hill. After celebrating Holy Communion in an open sided building and singing 'While Shepherds watched their flocks by night', (probably the only place that you can get away with singing it in October), we drove over to Bethlehem to visit the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square. The building is not very impressive from the outside, with evidence of extensions and rebuilding everywhere. The earliest part of the building dates from the fourth century, built by Helena, mother of Constantine.

The entrance is a very low small door, through a partially bricked up and purposely lowered doorway to prevent horses and carriages gaining entry to raid and damage the interior, as they had during the time of the Crusades.

Once inside we joined a very long queue to enter the grotto or cave believed to be the very place where Jesus was born, a cave stable for the animals. This gave us time to absorb the atmosphere and take in the structure of the building, the pink marble pillars with very old paintings around the top, the ancient mosaics high on the wall and the fourth century mosaics on the lower ground floor. There were many other large parties and we slowly moved closer to the entrance. Just as we were nearly there, in the Greek Orthodox chapel to the left hand side, the Franciscan Monks closed the Grotto, as they do every day at midday, for their private devotions. We admired the gold of the Orthodox Icons and the silver lanterns trimmed with red baubles, very Christmassy!

As our party got to the semi-circular uneven steps that lead down to the grotto, Gill felt that she was unable to get down them, however Bishop Christopher heard her and encouraged the group to spread out round the steps to prevent others pushing in and give Gill the space, he took her arm and others also supported her to get down the steps into the cave. All 34 of us got into the dimly lit cave, the focal point is a small alcove with lamps across it and a fourteen pointed star with a hole in the middle where you can touch the rocky ground beneath it. There is a replica manger to one side. As we sang Silent Night, I knelt down and touched the spot at the centre of the star. I was moved to tears and completely overwhelmed, I could hardly believe that I was there.

I was the last of the group to leave, reluctantly. Bishop Christopher was waiting and said that Christmas will never be the same for me, and I am sure he is right.

