



# A WALK IN JERUSALEM

*The Via Crucis in today's Holy City*

etchings by Sophie Walbeoffe  
with a commentary by Ian Knowles



## Foreword

## INTRODUCTION

For two years, as a painter in my studio in Jerusalem I looked out over three of the most religious places in the world, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, the Western Wall, and the Dome of the Rock. Each day to get there I had the privilege of walking down the Via Dolorosa in the heart of the Old City. When I saw Peter Anson's book of *The Stations of the Cross*, with illustrations that he drew in 1929, I wanted to follow in his footsteps to draw and feel what is there today.

The Via Dolorosa is the street in Jerusalem that marks the walk that Jesus made carrying his cross to Calvary. Peter Anson was a Franciscan friar and an artist, and I took his book of drawings and stood in the same places and followed his compositions, capturing things as they are now. I added people and anything happening around me at the time of each drawing. It was fascinating to see how little has changed considering the creation of a new nation, demographic change and the conflict and military occupation that have happened since that time.

Although it is not certain that these are the exact places where Jesus walked, each spot is where the Church venerates a mystery of Christ's life, each place sanctified by the prayers of hundreds of millions of people. Pilgrims come from all over the world to pause and pray over the different places that were the

chief scenes of Christ's suffering prior to his crucifixion.

In what follows you will see my glimpses of the Way of the Cross as I saw it during my stay, with all its rawness. An English friend of mine from Bethlehem, seeing these etchings, saw something of the contradictions that face Christians living in the Holy Land and across the Middle East. We thought that these images could open the door for people living far away to gain a little insight into their lives as they are lived today.

Sophie Walbeoffe

January 2014

For the past few years I have been working in Bethlehem, painting and restoring in the churches and chapels of the area. This has given me a privileged entry into the daily life of the Arab Christian community in the land where Christianity began.

When the Israeli state was created in 1948, 20% of the population was Christian. Unbelievably, Christians now number just over 1%, and even in Bethlehem the number hovers around 40%. Once many Palestinian villages had an ancient but thriving Christian culture, at one with the Muslim society around them, while remaining distinctive. Now, as the violence between Muslim and Christians sweeps from Iraq to Egypt, Christians in Palestine can't but feel something of a cold chill in the few centres that remain under their control.

At the same time Arab Christians in Bethlehem live isolated from those in Jerusalem and Nazareth, communities that lie in Israel, beyond the separation wall that runs snake-like between Israel and the West Bank. It is often easier for a Christian from Europe, Africa and America to reach Jerusalem than for a Christian from Palestine. This wall represents a failure of politics, a failure of neighbour to

live in peace with his neighbour, a failure to love them, to cherish them, to honour them. It is a symbol of all that has happened to these ancient Christian communities that for 2,000 years survived and often thrived across the Middle East, but whose very existence is now in question.

When I first saw Sophie's etchings in her studio in the Old City of Jerusalem, I found them mesmerizing. They evoked the Via Crucis in a quite magical way, not sentimentalized religiosity or distorted by political agendas, but simply laying bear the reality of what this sacred walk is right now. Somehow they present them not as an archaeological museum piece or a site in a religious version of Disneyland, but as concrete places where people continue to pray for all sorts of different reasons and in all sorts of different ways, walking on the footprints of an ancient history and in the context of the actual lives of real people.

I wanted to explore this world which Sophie had opened up, and I would like to invite you to join me in doing the same. Here, perhaps, you will find a way to walk in solidarity with the beleaguered Christian community of the Holy Land, and weave your own heart and prayer with theirs. So come, let us take this walk together through Jerusalem.

Ian Knowles  
January 2014

First Station: Jesus is condemned to death.

*This is where the Antonia Fortress stood, which housed the Roman guard. It is at this spot that Pilate is believed to have washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus' death.*

*Now it is the Al-Omariya school for boys. The wall of the Fortress is on the left of the drawing. I was hoping to draw some of the school children coming out but they must have been in their lessons so I jotted down an Armenian priest who walked by, and some nuns in the background.*



The world always likes scapegoats; people on whose backs you can dump collective anger, hatred, and fear, of which the twentieth century saw many examples. The Armenian genocide in eastern Turkey was perhaps the first, though the most infamous was that of the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. The most enduring example in history of such scapegoating was of one particular Jew, Jesus. Here at the Antonia Fortress Pilate, like so many powerful people in history, washed his hands of his responsibility to uphold justice, to protect the innocent and instead gave way to political expediency and the baying of the mob.

In present day Jerusalem there is a lot of anger, and the various groups, especially religious groups, too often give way to dumping that on each other and seeking petty advantages at the expense of those communities least able to defend themselves. Power just can't resist gaining just a little more. Perhaps no other group has suffered more from this in Jerusalem as much as the Armenians.

Though the Armenians were once so populous that they had their own quarter of the Old City, they are now only a token presence, that holds on mainly through the sojourn of young Armenian seminarians from their diaspora. Squeezed out by the more powerful Greek, Latin and Jewish communities, Armenians jealously guard their ancient privileges, especially against the Greek Orthodox clergy who seek to take control of all the holy places and exclude all whom they see as heterodox. At times this results in physical fights

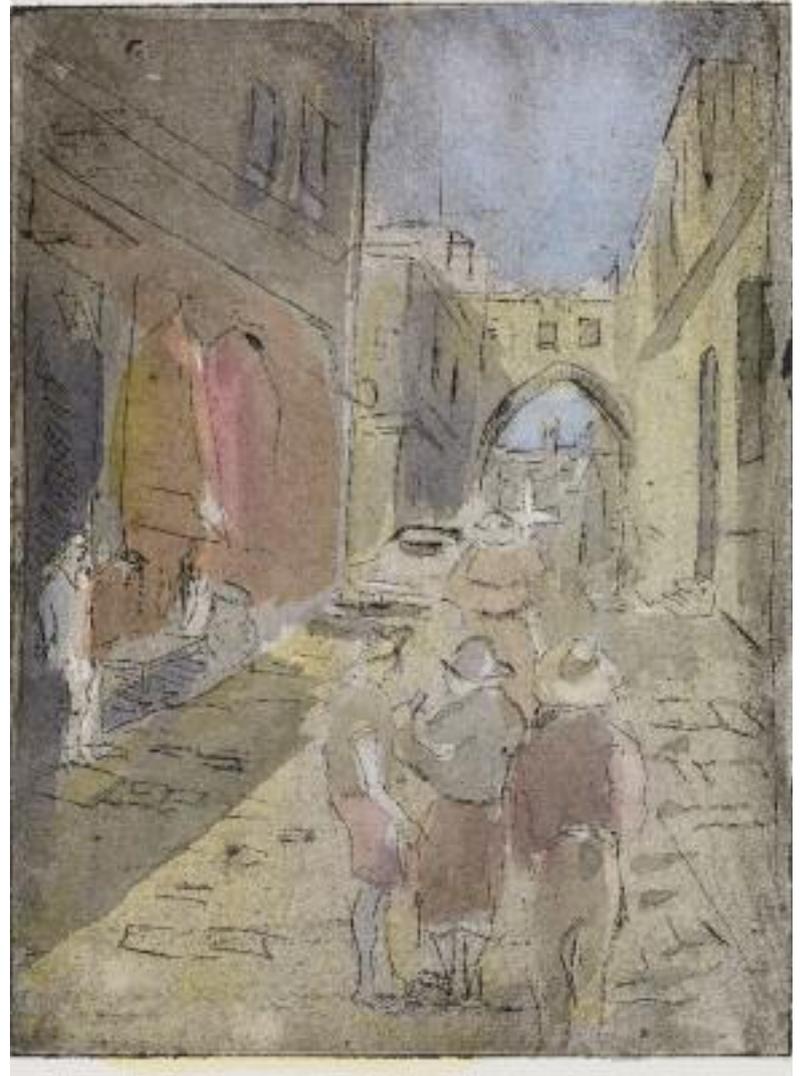
between monks, seminarians and the like, not in the streets, but in the most holy sanctuaries, even the Holy Sepulchre itself.

Sadly you cannot point to the Christians of the Holy Land and say unequivocally, see how these Christians love one another. Faced with injustice, pettiness, centuries old disputes and of course the threat of violence, the image you see too often is that of hand washing, that shrug of the shoulders which says, well, what can I do? Hopelessness, indifference, paralysis drive the Christians with ambition to seek their fortune elsewhere, especially in Europe and the Americas.

Second Station: Jesus is given his cross.

*Here there are two churches: the chapel of the Flagellation and the chapel of the Taking up of the Cross. The Roman soldiers led Jesus away and clothed him with purple; they plaited a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and mocked him.*

*Contemporary pilgrims begin to carry wooden crosses from here along the Via Dolorosa. In the drawing a priest is holding a small cross with a following behind. In front is the Ecce Homo Bridge reconstructed from Herod the Great's time. Traditionally it was here that Pilate said "Behold the man", "ecce homo".*



There is a danger, with the decimation of the Christian population of the Holy Land, that the Christian sites and shrines of Jerusalem become little more than a Christian theme park. In Sophie's etching we see the Cross carried alone by the friar, while a small group, clearly dressed in casual tourist wear, look on as spectators. The friar is a quaint, isolated figure, and his obvious devotion as he lifts high the Cross is in contrast to the informal pose and conversation of the group.

"The Cross shines out with mystic glow" ...so run the words of an ancient medieval hymn. The Cross is the sacred symbol of Christianity, and deeply connected with the City of Jerusalem. It was the empress Helena who re-discovered the remains of the True Cross where the Holy Sepulchre now stands, and the final destination of today's Way of the Cross. It was this discovery that underpinned Jerusalem's status as the Holy City, and from the time of its discovery the main cause for the endless stream of pilgrims coming to the City's gates.

Those pilgrims still come, 17 centuries later. Some come with an intense devotion, a sense of awe and wonder, seeking blessings and Divine intervention in their lives from proximity to the places associated with the Cross, while others come as the curious and as searchers for God and the faith which they see in others.

But today there are also the onlookers and bystanders, tourists, as well as the city's Jewish and Muslim inhabitants

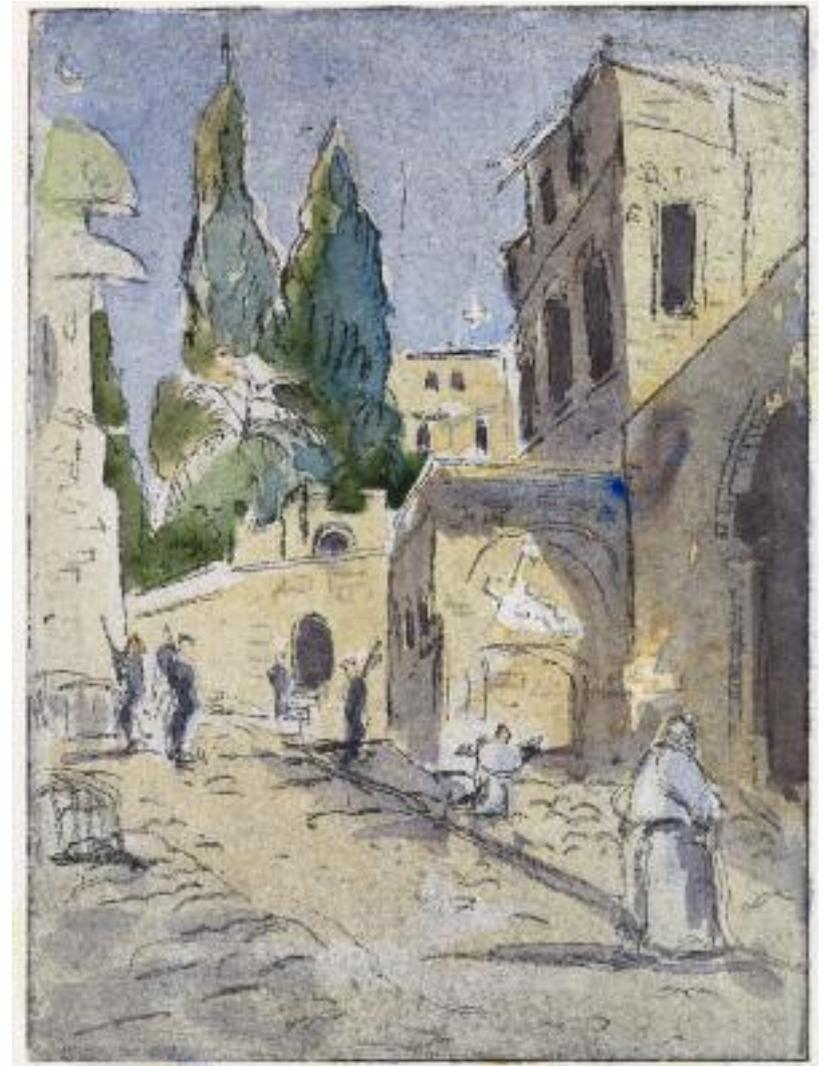
for whom the death of Jesus is an enigma. Then there are the journalists and NGO folk who dine out on the films, interviews and the vast amounts of aid which pours into the Holy Land because of the strength of attachment the place has for all faiths. At times it seems as though those who come with faith and to pray are swallowed up in the great morass of humanity that swarms through the City's streets. I guess it has always been like this, but never has the Christian population been so low since the time of Saul and the persecution in the years immediately following Jesus' death.

That lonely figure carrying the Cross, almost in defiance of the indifference of those tourists, speaks volumes about the reality of being a follower of Jesus in today's Jerusalem.

Third Station: Jesus falls the first time, or the place where Jesus exhausted rests a little .

*A few minutes walk from the Ecce Homo Arch the street slopes down to the Austrian hospice, the building at the back of the drawing behind the trees.*

*We then turn sharp left and notice a chapel that fills the centre of the sketch. Soldiers of today always stand here on guard. They carry their guns and you are reminded of the soldiers who would have been escorting Jesus with shouts and blows. Barriers are propped up all around them to be quickly used to block the street if there is any trouble.*



The Crucifixion was an act of official state violence in order for civil peace to be maintained. Jesus was handed over to a legion of soldiers, not to expedite a just punishment, but to indulge their own lust for violence and cruelty in the hope of assuaging the demands of the mob for blood. As the Jewish High Priest said, it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to be destroyed.

Soldiers, not just police, today patrol the streets of the Old City, their guns at the ready, their numbers out in force. Jerusalem is a place of great simmering tensions, between faiths and between different groups of same faith believers. It is the soldiers and armed police that try and keep some sort of lid on this, trying to keep peace where, in fact, there is little or no peace.

Jesus's stumbling and fall reveals his human frailty and weakness, his vulnerability to the violence and animosity of the crowd and the authorities and powers which have turned against him. In this he enters into the brokenness of our humanity, for if he doesn't enter into it he cannot heal it.

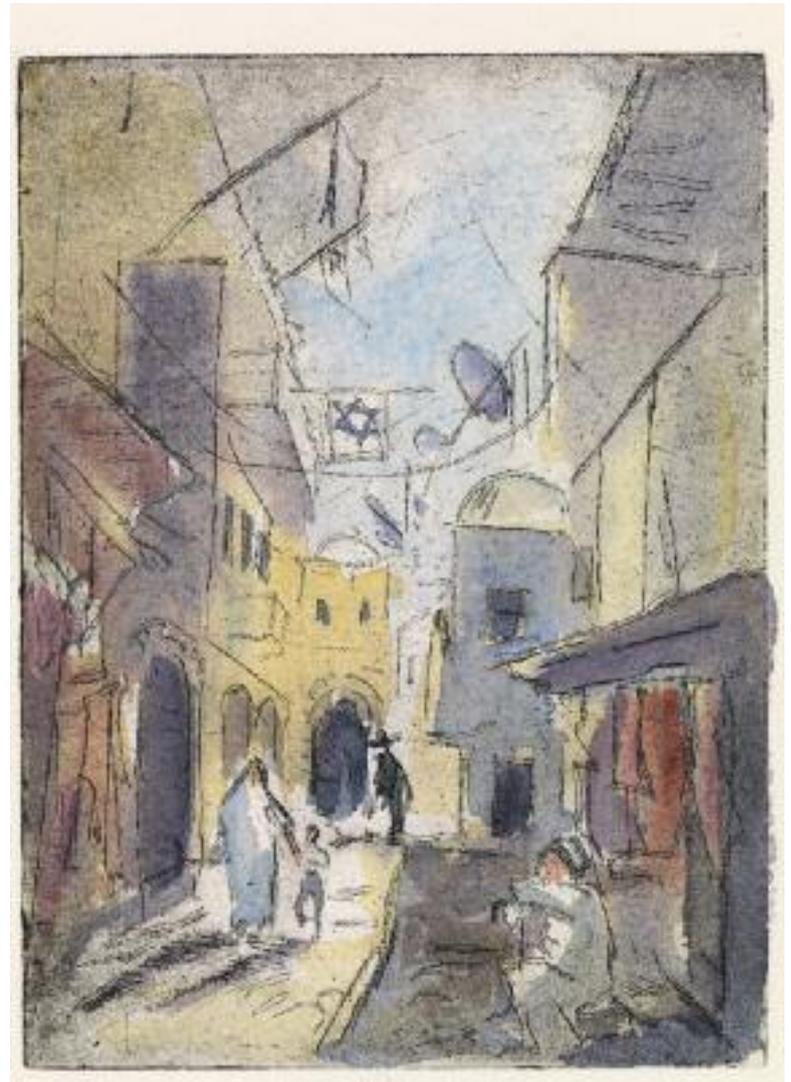
There are many heroic voices which rise up in Jerusalem out of those simmering tensions and hatreds that speak of another way, the way of forgiveness, compassion, solidarity, generosity of spirit...the way of Peace. Faced with the brutality of intolerance, occupation, dispossession, ethnic hatred, discrimination these souls conform themselves to the Crucified who humbled himself, taking the form of a

slave, and was humbler yet, even to death, death on a Cross. The humility, bravery, courage, love of these people who rise up from within the local communities or come from far away to live as witnesses to this Way of Peace are the unseen forces which offer a real peace that the presence of so many soldiers seems to deny is possible.

Fourth Station: Jesus meets his Afflicted Mother, also known as Our Lady of the Spasm.

*The fourth station is marked only by an oval pattern of stones, put in by the Israeli town planners to mark each station. The fourth station would be easily missed, as it is nothing more than an underwear shop. A rotting gate is next to the entrance.*

*As I stood here and drew, a woman walked by holding her young son's hand. I imagined Mary stood here by the roadside in order to see her son. I felt very moved as I have a son who is far away and who I miss very much. Somewhere near here, is a mosaic, depicting two sandals from the baby Jesus, though long since lost, providing a poignant link to Mary as the Mother of Jesus.*



The relationship between Mother and Child is a deep mystery. Our whole lives are defined by the bond between us and our mothers – the touch of those maternal hands that hold us, something which endures until the moment of our own death. Perhaps this is what is so poignant about the Pietá?

A mother's love endures all things, and is as such a reflection of Divine Love. As we are made in God's image and likeness, and God is, as St John tells us, Love, then in our loving we touch our divine likeness. A mother thus reveals in us the divine likeness, and never more so than when that love reaches out to us at great cost and suffering.

The Holy Land is a place etched with suffering, and amidst all the killing and hatred mothers from every community pierce that darkness with the keenness of their loving. That Sophie captures a mother holding her son's hand, at the very spot where the meeting between Jesus and His Mother is commemorated, is poignant enough, but that it is now a dirty, dishevelled place makes it even more so. Mary's love for Jesus manifested on the original Via Crucis was in a very dirty, soiled, barbaric, blood drenched place, far from the image of angelic harps and pristine nativity clothes. It was love in the raw.

For Christians in the Middle East, almost all of whom are Orthodox or Eastern Rite Catholics, it is to the icons of Mary that they turn with their wounded and sorrowful hearts. It is with the Mother of God that they find hope even

in the midst of their desperation, to her that they turn when their children are killed, their families are broken, or their societies plagued with injustice. In this way Mary still walks with her children in the filthy places where they live, holding hands, bringing comfort and courage, encouraging the suffering Body of her Son.

Fifth Station: Simon of Cyrene helps Jesus.

*As Jesus collapses of exhaustion, Simon of Cyrene comes to his aid, lifts the cross and helps him off the ground.*

*Turn next right and on your left is a small chapel, which is in the traditional spot where Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus carry his cross. On the left is a rock where Jesus is believed to have placed his hand when he leant against the wall. Millions of hands have touched the same spot wearing the stone into a polished hand print. On the way to my studio early in the morning, when there were no crowds, I often put my hand into this spot.*

*My drawing is the view looking down the street, very early in the morning before the tourists and pilgrims block the way and its impossible to get anywhere near it. Seeing a man carrying groceries on his head, which you can see on the left of the picture, when I printed out the etching it looked very familiar – someone carrying a cross.*



In this picture Sophie gives us a glimpse of a man busy carrying something – maybe food for his family, or some gift or supplies for his work or goods for his shop. His hands hold it, and his shoulders bear the load of it, and he sets out with purpose. It is daily life, simple, ordinary, but somehow the Cross resonates in it, and reveals something profound in this ordinary moment.

God is present in every aspect of life, sometimes very visibly, at others hidden and obscure. We can often feel abandoned, alone, confused by the vulnerability we feel in the situations our daily lives confront us with.

This is true of the Christians of the Holy Land, where their presence has dwindled near to extinction, and where their enemies seem to act with impunity. Even the voices of so called Christian countries in Europe and the Americas fall silent as their fellow believers in Iraq, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine face violence, discrimination, occupation and their very existence seems to be in question. They look for help and support, but God seems strangely absent as these Christians meet indifference and silence.

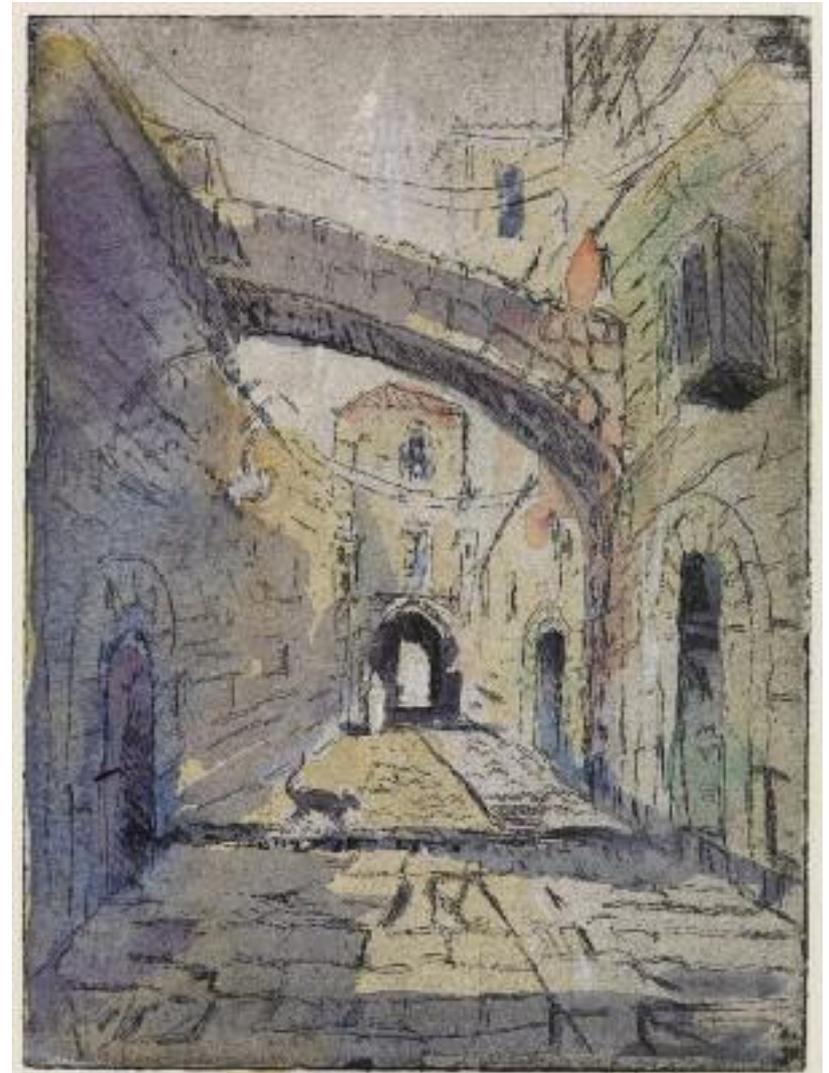
As St Teresa of Avila said, Christ has no hands on earth but yours. It is our indifference and fear, our selfish preoccupations and obsessions that leave God disabled and without a means of expressing his love and support for those who suffer. And it is also in the fragile hands that do reach out and offer a glass of water, an orange or a sandwich, that God can make Himself present to transform lives and work

miracles, as with Elijah's widow who bakes bread from the last meagre rations of oil and grain.

Sixth Station: Veronica wipes the face of Jesus.

*The story is told of Veronica, thought to be the wife of a Roman officer, who came out of her house and wiped the face of Jesus with a linen cloth, upon which was left the imprint of his face. The cloth reportedly survives as a sacred icon in Italy. In the drawing, her house is next to the dark archway on the left.*

*I included a dove which flew by. Also the cat, of which there are many, roaming feral all over the old city. The name Veronica itself is said to derive from "Vera Icone" meaning true icon.*



The dove, symbol of kindness and peace, and the cat, a predator, in an otherwise deserted street of locked doors. Veronica's legendary act of compassion contrasted with the stony hearts and hate filled bile of those who thronged the Via Dolorosa. Somehow she was able to see who Jesus really was, despite the mass hysteria that seemed to have gripped Jerusalem.

Who knows how people treated her when they saw how she acted? Did they mock her, rough handle her, scream abuse at her? Or perhaps she just slipped away and sought refuge behind her closed door, grateful that she escaped alive and believing her action would soon be forgotten.

Little acts of courage are hard to make when the world is in chaos, and the crowds are screaming hate, fear, intolerance, rage. In the conflict between Jews and Palestinians it is not easy for people to reach out, act with kindness to the 'other', to speak truth to power or contradict the stereotypes and presumptions which animate the conflict.

Christians however are called to do this, and in Christian history there are some heroic voices that have embraced the 'other', not least St Francis of Assisi. St Francis was the founder of the Franciscans, who from the 14th century have had responsibility for the Catholic pilgrims who venture to the Holy Land. It's a timely reminder of what the 'custody' of the Holy Land is all about.

Seventh Station: Jesus falls the second time.

*The street continues steeply up hill and comes to a market junction. It is crowded, dirty, dark and evil smelling still to this day. It is a tunnel like street. In the shadowy blackness there is a small chapel, where inside there is a pillar, an impressive Roman column which used to mark the city gates for the condemned. Jesus' death notice was posted here; hence the name for the site "Judgment gate".*

*It was another early morning when I found the seventh station. I wanted to buy some lemons. Instead of a fruit market I found myself in the smelliest meat souk I have ever come across, and I have been to Aleppo in Syria where pigs' trotters and eyeballs were part of the norm. Here it was the same, except the smell was astonishing – pure hell. I have not eaten much meat since.*



Sophie's picture is heavy, full of foreboding, dark brooding shadows. The warren-like maze of streets curves off ahead, and at times you can feel quite lost and overwhelmed. Life, even in a place so exotic and evocative as the Holy City of Jerusalem is, in reality, a place with its own stench.

The paradox of Jerusalem is that it is a place of so much holiness but also of so much evil. It is a focus for the cosmic battle between good and evil, and it is worked out in the ordinary, and at times extra-ordinary, lives of the people who live there. Dark spectres seem to haunt the deeper recesses, and stir up very deep, negative emotions, which are difficult to escape. It is into this abyss that Jesus stumbles and falls.

A certain hopelessness grips Christians in the Middle East, a sense of the relentlessness of the forces which simply want them to go away. There are, of course, the headline grabbing Islamic extremists who see Christians as a sort of blasphemy that needs to be driven from Islamic lands and who bomb churches and execute the clergy, but it is not the most blatant threats which are always the most corrosive. For example, there is the radicalised Jewish agenda, which sees every Christian and Arab as a foreigner, an interloper in the Promised Land, who should be driven out into the desert, an idea which seems to weave its way into many aspects that impinge on daily lives. There are many instances of a low-level attrition which eats away at the native Christian presence. It isn't all hard-core persecution, but the atmosphere is poison. There is little heroism in

resisting the dull, ache of being just unwanted.

Eighth Station: Jesus speaks to the women of Jerusalem.

*Coming out of the dark archway and leaving the chaos and smell of the butcher's souk was a lighter, airy alleyway; I was delighted it was so easily identifiable in my book. Some tourists came by and asked the way. They looked at my book and commented I had a very good tour guide in my late Franciscan artist. Hardly anything had changed.*

*As I drew, some ladies walked past. Palestinian women clothed in long black gowns with covered heads. In the two years I have lived here there seems to be an increase in the number of women who choose to cover up. Jesus was said to have met a group of women here. "Daughters of Jerusalem, weep not over me, but weep for yourselves and for your children". This spot would have been outside of the city walls, in the countryside. It is marked by a Latin cross on the wall of a Greek monastery.*



While Muslim women now seem to be covering themselves more, and in more and more somber ways, Jewish women are behaving more traditionally too, with pressure from religious groups for men and women to be separated on public transport. At times the pressure on women to conform to these trends is heavy, even for those not belonging to these groups. Religious enthusiasm seems to be transforming the value of spiritual modesty for women into an ideology across the sectarian divide.

Christian women feel this in different ways. For some it is feeling increasingly the object of male lasciviousness from those communities where women are strictly covered, and having to adjust their dress to avoid such unwanted attention. Others feel that they are looked on as lacking any virtue because their arms are uncovered and their hair flows luxuriously. And for others there is the impression that there is a sense of freedom in comparison with others, seeing their fellow women sweltering in the heat with veils wrapped tight around their head and gloves on their hands, unable to enjoy a day at the beach without having to cover every inch of arms and legs.

Yet this isn't at all simply a male imposed situation, often it is women themselves who push for this veiled and covered sense of womanhood. I once spoke with a Christian woman in her fifties who had been married at the age of 14, much against the will of her father, and at the arrangement of her mother and aunt. And when later she wanted to return to

school, which her husband was only too happy for her to do, it was the other Christian women of the community who forced her to abandon her studies once again and conform to the role of housebound wife.

And alongside this jostling array of Arab female fashion there are the tourists and pilgrims, some draped in headscarves and habits, others barely covered at all, wearing hot pants and low cut tops.

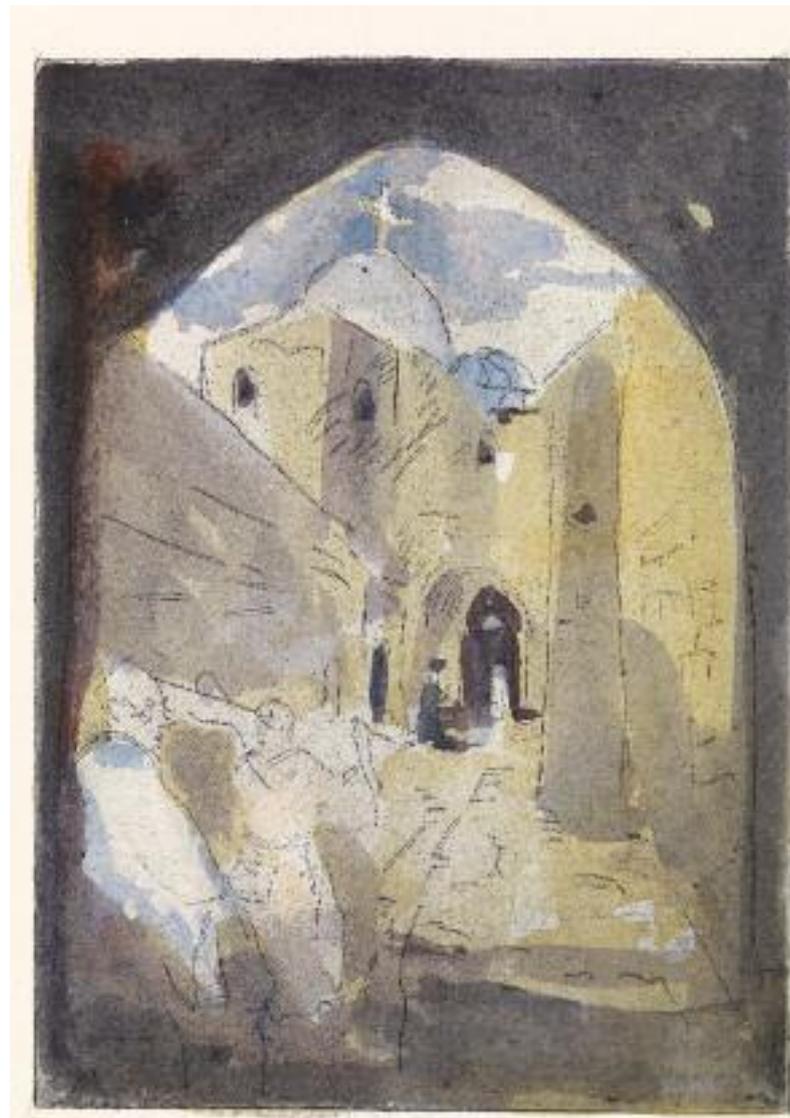
When Jesus spoke to the women of Jerusalem it was to tell them to look deeper than their shrill cries and formalized laments. I wonder what he would say to these women of Jerusalem today?

Ninth Station: Jesus falls the third time.

*The Via Dolorosa is blocked here by a Greek convent. So you have to retrace your steps back to the evil smelling market, turn left and find the entrance.*

*While drawing here I met a group of Dutch journalists trying to make a documentary about the Via Dolorosa. They didn't seem to have a clue about where anything was, so I lent them my book. They went back to the seventh station and I followed as they were trying to find the chapel where the Roman column marking the city gates was. As it had been closed earlier I had missed it and returned with them.*

*Back at the ninth station, I was kindly lent a chair to sit on by the stall owner who was selling all the paraphernalia of religion: crucifixes, rosaries, prayer books, wooden ornaments - all made out of olive wood as they have been for hundreds of years. The traders sell holy water and oil to be blessed and taken home. A priest came along carrying a huge cross with his congregation following. I squeezed against the wall and drew the picture.*



In Sophie's picture you can see the Holy Sepulchre's dome finally in sight. Until now we have meandered through a warren of streets, and now the destination of this Way is in sight. Yet, as Sophie describes it very vividly, this was getting harder to reach, having to double back to reach the spot, and then retracing steps with the bewildered camera crew, and then crushed against the wall as the horde of pilgrims follow the route with dogged determination sweeping everyone else aside.

This made me think of how working for peace, trying to build bridges, seeking justice in the Holy Land seems to go in ever decreasing circles. Peace processes and road maps come and go, while the restrictions and violations and political babble just seems to intensify, like a knot that just gets tighter the more you try to undo it. Yet, at the same time, people seem to grasp that war, conflict, bombs really don't have the answer, that immersing whole generations of people in conflict and hate brings a terrible toll on all sides. An embittered, frightened, impoverished community isn't a happy one to live in, and the joy of life drains away. Life becomes harder, more tense, less rewarding.

Christians are both in principle and through circumstances caught between the various conflicting forces, a resource for forgiveness and healing, even if they are themselves wounded and hurting. The strength you need to endure, to keep trying again and again, when you face the resolute antagonism and even hatred of those around you

needs the gift of inspiration that comes from faith in God and His love for us, if we are to overcome.

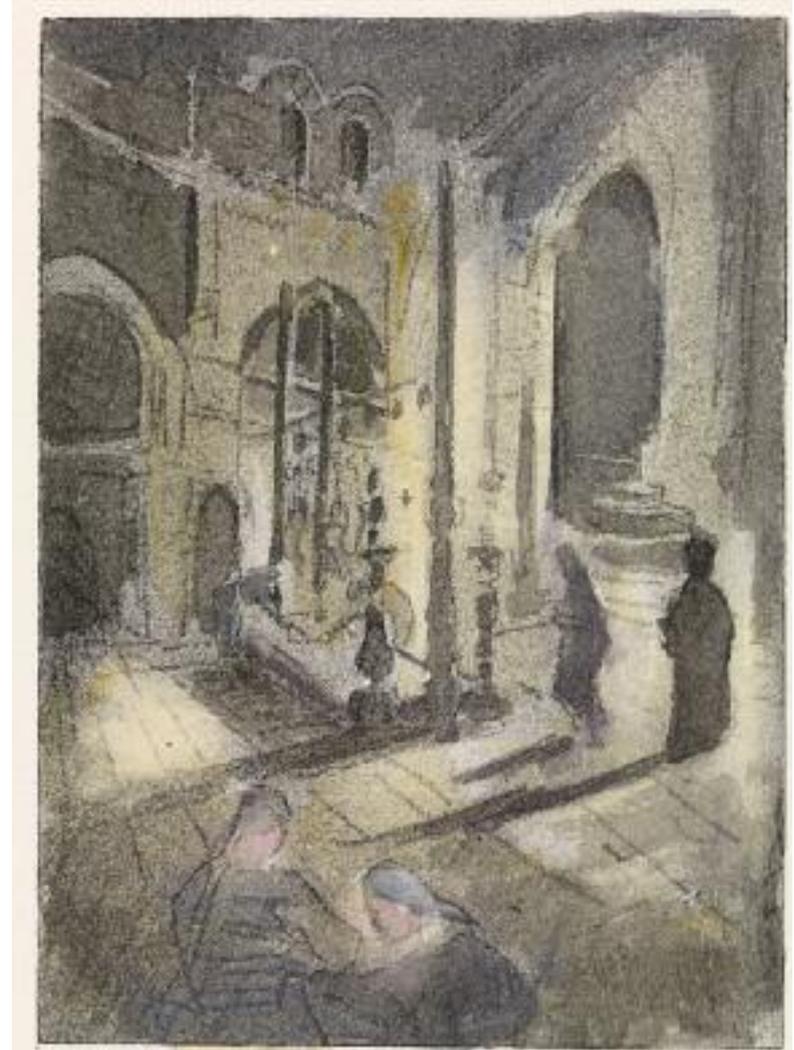
I remember one Palm Sunday coming from Bethlehem to Jerusalem for the procession of palms. To do so necessitated passing through checkpoint 300. A queue of some 200 of us waited patiently as one by one we passed through the security point. An elderly lady, perhaps in her eighties, approached the machine which readily beeped away. Gradually she removed shoes and clothing that might contain the offensive bit of metal. She was bewildered and yet very tranquil, giving off not the slightest note of anger or resentment at the humiliating treatment. In the end the soldiers, who were little more than teenagers, told her to go away as she could not pass. She did so with a rather confused smile, but without any rancour. Evil had won no converts at that encounter.

Tenth Station: Jesus is stripped of his garments.

*The soldiers drew lots for his clothes. Then he was offered wine with a sedative but he refused. We have entered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre through two huge battle-worn wooden doors. They are the most ancient weathered, beaten-up doors I have ever seen.*

*Immediately to the right is a staircase built onto the rock leading to the summit of Golgotha. In my drawing is the slab of stone at the foot of this staircase, where Jesus was washed and shrouded for his burial after being taken down from the cross.*

*I watched as a son protectively helped his elderly mother to kneel at the slab of stone and then carefully steered her up the stairs. They are in the front of the drawing. I watched as many pilgrims, from so many places, lovingly kiss the stone and touch it with pieces of oiled cloth which they take back, now blessed, to their homes far away in all corners of the world.*



Hands. Looking at Sophie's drawing you see hands of tenderness, one on an elderly mother's shoulder, the other caressing the stone where Christ was washed. In a sea of so much anger, of fists clenched and violent hand gestures, of hands clutching the trigger of a gun or the switch of a bomb, these gentle hands, strong, loving, caring help to take us back to the nobility of the human person which is the source of real strength in bringing about justice.

When the communist bloc in Eastern Europe fell it was because Blessed John Paul II and other leaders could reach down and touch a deep, long lost memory about the sort of nobility with which humanity was made and for which it was made. Bringing that to life brought a surge of courage to stand without arms against regimes bristling with violence, just as Jesus had done at Calvary. It is the great treasure hidden at the heart of the Christian community in the Holy Land which offers real hope for the future: the vision of humanity revealed in the Person of Jesus.

In the picture it is those gentle, compassionate hands that reveal the deep goodness of that first Good Friday and enable us to glimpse its reality in the lives of those who still follow the Crucified One. It is their hands that hold the promise of a vibrant future for the Christians of the Middle East, indeed for all people who long for the dignity that only a society shaped by a Christian vision of justice, peace and hope can bring.

Eleventh station: Jesus is nailed to the cross.

*At the top of the flight of stairs are two chapels built on the rocky top of Golgotha.*

*There are very small but beautiful remains of Byzantine mosaics mostly restored in the late 1930's. An altar with candles and lamps lies in front of a large mosaic representing Jesus being nailed to the cross.*

*I arrived early in the morning to draw. Mass was being led by three Catholic priests. The place was so crowded it was almost impossible to draw. This is not Hollywood but it seems to be a must see stop. Cameras flash, people joke and jostle while others are still and silent observing in solemnity the memory of our Lord.*



Sophie has given us an image dominated by the crucified Jesus, stretched out on the cross in a way that leaps into the middle of the picture. The jostling crowds that always seem to be there, rammed through by impatient guides and with a haste to take the necessary photo record, have been pushed to the sides and out of the frame so that the Mystery is allowed to appear.

I remember on my first visit to the Holy Land being profoundly attracted to the Mystery of the Holy Sepulchre in particular, and deeply frustrated that it was almost impossible to find a spot where you could actually be still and pray, where you could enter into that communion with God which lies at the heart of what this sacred place is all about.

Years later I discovered, quite by chance, that you could spend the whole night in the Holy Sepulchre for the Watch on Maundy Thursday. I went expecting hordes of people, but there were just over twenty of us! During that very long night we were free to pray in the Tomb of Christ, at the Calvary, in Adam's cave and the many other sacred chantry chapels. Greek, Armenian and Coptic clergy came and went, keeping the rounds of prayer rising in strange chants, ancient languages and sweet smelling incense. Perhaps the most poignant moment was when at midnight I knelt almost completely alone before the Calvary altar. There my prayer was answered and I could pray deep within the Mystery of the place.

The sacredness of life often lies hidden, waiting to emerge as a tender gift from God just when we least expect it. This is nowhere more true than in the Holy Land.

Twelfth Station: Jesus dies upon the cross.

*The Greek Orthodox hold responsibility for this chapel which is crowded with hanging lamps, candlesticks and icons.*

*There is a large silver cross that represents Jesus and crosses on either side representing the two thieves. Everything is very bright and shiny and very difficult with which to make a composition. I tried to paint this scene earlier on when I arrived in Jerusalem. It is a dark, mysterious, strange place. Dark figures in the foreground. Below the altar the actual rock of Calvary can be seen under glass. There is a hole to put your hand through so that you can touch the cold stone.*

*In the front of the drawing you can see a figure of someone kneeling and putting their hand on the rock; you can see their feet only. I love the star on the floor. It reminds me of an image from William Blake or Cecil Collins both who drew in the name of Jesus. Some think the star on the ground represents the Apostles.*



In this etching the Christ figure hovers, Chagall-like, as a living Presence. Somehow the earthly space cannot contain what is really happening, and the composition scatters across the space in all directions. Caught up in this, glimpsed, are those who pray: priests, monks, pious laity. Dark and light play off one another, while very recognizable human forms emerge to play their part in this dynamic encounter between Christ, Tradition and the living Body of the Church. Somehow, despite the mess and confusion, it works. It is a place alive.

The Christian churches of the Middle East, and especially of Jerusalem, are in a hopeless mess. After decades of centuries under Islamic rule, only since the end of the Second World War has their very survival become questioned. The first blow came during the establishment of the State of Israel. As the Arabs fled before the Jewish militias, this included many thousands of Christians whose families had lived there for centuries, even from the time of Christ himself. Since then Lebanon has been engulfed in an ethnically motivated civil war, and even today Iraq, Egypt and Syria are engulfed in a political firestorm between Sunni and Shia Islam which has ravaged the Christian presence as collateral damage. Bombs, kidnappings, land confiscation, intimidation; limitations on the building of churches and Christian institutions are part of a swirling darkness that seeks to devour the Church and its people.

But the Churches themselves have long been embroiled

in petty jealousies, mutual condemnations, and so on, focused on who controls which and what parts of the ancient holy sites. The clergy and their lay helpers are well known for shouting at tourists and pilgrims who step out of line and seem to breach the 'status quo'. Even cleaning or repairing the Holy Sites is a major issue of negotiation. Repairs are often only possible because of the intervention or supervision of the local non-Christian ruling power, be that the Israelis in Jerusalem or the Palestinian Authority in Bethlehem, while the annual cleaning sessions have to be carried out under the active supervision of the police. Left to themselves the Christians literally come to blows.

Yet the fervency of the faith of ordinary Christians is truly touching. Despite all the setbacks they continue to live their lives faithful to Christ and often heroically in their situation. Inter-marriage especially is a testimony to how Arab Christians make Christian unity work. Christian folk pray together, attend Mass together, celebrate the Church's year together, follow each other's very strict fasts, and aspire to the Christian virtues. It is still a living Church as Christ dances in the hearts and lives of His closest followers.

Thirteenth Station: Jesus is taken down from the cross and taken by Mary his mother.

*This station stands between the Greek Orthodox and the Latin altars. I drew it in the early morning while a Mass was going on. To be actually standing here, where all the paintings down the history of art depict the moment Our Lady took her dead son into her arms is extraordinary.*

*I have put myself into this picture, on the left in the shadows, because I was overwhelmed with a sense of the whole history of drawing this scene over the centuries.*



The Mass is the definitive act of the Christian community from the moment Jesus first instituted it on the eve of his Passion. It sets Christianity apart, a sacrifice but an unbloody one, an act of communion between God and humanity, a song of praise offered up from a community founded around the experience of Jesus Risen from the dead. The Mass is found in Orthodox and Catholic Churches, Armenian and Syrian, Coptic and Anglican ones all across the Middle East, as the definitive thing which Christians do. It was among Christians here that the first Christian rites took shape.

The vitality of this act lies in its re-presenting of the Crucified Christ, an action that unites heaven and earth. In the Mass we see Christ Present under the species of Bread and Wine, an experience which Blessed Teresa of Calcutta said should open our eyes to the Presence of Jesus in the poor. Mary, cradling the crushed Body of Christ, continues to cradle that Body as the suffering Church.

In every Liturgy we walk through Jerusalem, following the Way of the Cross, and encounter God as he walks with us in our, at times, difficult and challenging lives. It is here, in the Liturgy, that God raises us up and transfigures us with his grace. He is not indifferent to us; quite simply he loves us, and draws us into the company of his Blessed Mother and all the saints so that we can, like the Christians of the Holy Land, be joy filled witnesses to all that He has done for us and will do for us in eternity.

Fourteenth Station: Jesus is placed in the Holy Sepulchre.

*A small rectangular building encloses the tomb of our Lord. This is the holy place from where Jesus rose on Easter morning. The low doorway lets you in after queuing shoulder to shoulder for several hours with tourists and pilgrims from all over the world.*

*When I printed out my drawing I thought I would put some gold on to the paper and it got stuck in the press and came out looking like flames of fire. It is said that a candle is lit from a flame that lights itself from within the tomb each year at Easter time. So I had my own little miracle.*



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The Bethlehem Icon School is a project to restore iconography as a living part of Arab Christian culture in Palestine, and to train local Christians to be professional iconographers. The only such project in the Holy Land it offers a ray of hope, which transcends denominational borders.

[www.bethlehemiconschool.org](http://www.bethlehemiconschool.org)

