

# Province of Jerusalem and the Middle East

## News from St George's College

Dean Richard Sewell writes...

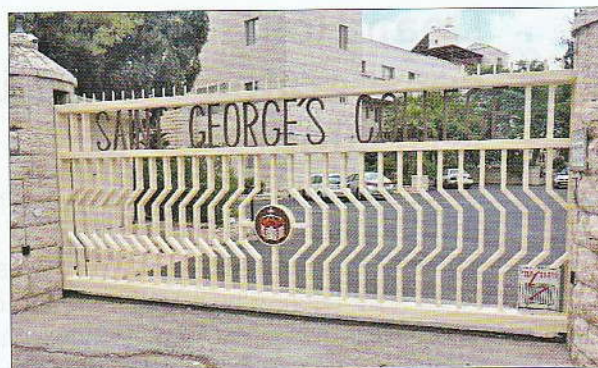
The COVID-19 pandemic hit Israel and Palestine hard immediately. The Israeli government and Palestinian Authority both acted quickly to impose restrictions on movements and social interactions. As a result, infections and deaths were few. But a few months later restrictions were lifted quickly with everyone yearning for a return to normality and a heavy price has been paid because this led to a second surge being far worse than the first.

The early actions of the government had an immediate and devastating impact on the College as it did on everyone in the pilgrim and tourist business. International travel dried up almost overnight. At the College we quickly arranged the safe departure of the pilgrims who were with us when COVID-19 restrictions began, and we have not received anyone since then. Sadly, we have had to cancel all our pilgrimages at least until the end of 2020.

Everything is quiet here: all the international staff (except the Dean and his wife, JulieAnn) have left either for a break or permanently. We still have a skeleton local staff keeping the College in good order and the rest are on the government scheme which is in place to support people in businesses affected by COVID-19. We are fortunate to have some reserves to see us through the financial crisis in the short run. We are also indebted to people who have made donations to support the College during this very challenging time.



As in so many other countries, in Israel and the West Bank, the health crisis has also become an economic and a political crisis. Everyone is battling on multiple fronts to find a way to prevent a disaster. Spiritually it has been particularly challenging that the holy sites – the Holy Sepulchre, the Church of the Nativity and many others, were closed for Holy Week and Easter



and have closed again during the second surge. Perhaps all of this makes us look to our faith even more than in normal times. For me, Jerusalem, its holy places and its natural beauty has been a continuing source of inspiration. Thousands of years back the Psalmists were inspired by the holy city too:

*"Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem so the Lord surrounds his people from this time and forevermore." (Psalm 125:1-2)*

This remains true of the Holy City today, but without the hustle and bustle of pilgrims from all over the world, something vital is missing. The city is not deserted because many people actually live here. However, it is diminished by the absence of those who travel to Jerusalem because of its spiritual significance whether they are Christians, Jews or Muslims. Whilst locals may be relieved to get about the city more easily, the city misses the pilgrims and not just for their dollars!



When we face challenges, we need to draw more deeply on our faith just as we find in the Psalms. By re-iterating our faith in the teeth of the struggle we can find the reassurance of which we might have lost sight:

*"The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge in time of trouble. The Lord helps them and rescues them." (Psalm 37:39-40a)*

Faith does not necessarily make our problems or pain simply disappear, but it can give us strength to endure or perhaps to find a route out of it. This is where the College finds itself right now. With the support of our international friends and in the grace of God, we are holding on.

Richard Sewell