

After four years of studying the Hebrew Bible, I was longing to visit the Holy Land. As a Youth Representative on the URC educational visit to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, I got the opportunity to visit the places that appear throughout the Bible: Bethlehem, Jerusalem, Jericho, Galilee. Within hours of arriving, however, I knew that it was not the historical sites or the rolling hills of Galilee that would stay with me the most. What touched me, angered me and moved me from Day 1 was hearing the stories of the Palestinians that we met and seeing the realities of a region under military occupation. It was humbling to hear children, teenagers and young people speak about growing up without the freedom and opportunities that I could take for granted in the UK. Yet despite the longevity of the conflict and the imbalance of power in the region, many Palestinians still hope that peace is just around the corner. The doves and olive branches that adorn the graffiti-coated wall around Bethlehem pay testament to this hope.

Hope is present, but young people of my age and younger are being forced to deal with the reality of occupation and oppression. Twelve-year-old Joyce told us that she is planning to leave Palestine and move to America when she is old enough. Elsewhere in Bethlehem, Muhanad told us that his family now lives abroad and that they want him to join them, but he has chosen to stay in his hometown to defend Palestinian rights. In the Judean desert, members of the Bedouin community defied military orders and built a school out of mud and old tyres as they are not allowed to build with bricks or cement. Toys and playground equipment that were donated to the school were immediately confiscated by Israeli soldiers. Throughout the Palestinian Territories, children who throw stones at Israeli cars are arrested and detained by armed soldiers.

This is not how young people should grow up.

Whilst it was a privilege to walk in the footsteps of Jesus along the shores of Galilee, down the Mount of Olives and up the Via Dolorosa, it was a greater privilege to walk in the footsteps of Jesus by sharing time with the oppressed, hearing the stories of the persecuted and eating food with the marginalised.

The educational visit gave me the opportunity to see the land of the Bible as it is today and to stand alongside young people who are suffering as a result of the conflict. It gave me the chance to use my voice to speak for those who are being silenced. Through speech and action, it gave me new ways to worship God.