

Title: Envisioning the Holy Land and SJEHG
Time: 30 minutes plus questions
Audience: An existing KT Preceptory



Notes:

Invited to speak at a KT Preceptory as a general talk with an introduction to KT Holy Land pilgrimages and then details on the Eye Hospital. No history of the Knights Templar was required. There were roughly 45 Knights present including the Provincial Sub-Prior and the Vice-Chancellor. The talk was given towards the end of the meeting and immediately before alms were collected.

ANY STATISTICS USED WERE CORRECT AT THE TIME.

Opening: Thanks for the invitation
Who you are and why you are giving the talk

Summary: 2 short areas to be covered:
A) Envisioning the Holy Land;
B) the SJEHG

They had also allowed time for questions afterwards if necessary and were given a copy of the "Introduction to the SJEHG and its work" booklet.

A) Envisioning the Holy Land:

Israel, Palestine or the Occupied Palestinian Territories, what's in a name? A lot but, for now, let's just call the land where Jesus lived, the Holy Land.

The People of the Book, or Ahl al-kitāb, is an Islamic term referring to those religions which Muslims regard as having been guided by previous revelations, generally in the form of a scripture. In the Quran they are identified as the Jews, the Christians and the Sabians, a now forgotten mystic religious group. In the Holy Land, the People of the book find a geographic convergence that has been the source of bloodshed for over a millennium.

Psalm 122, familiar to us from the closing of a Preceptory, calls for us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem but it would be more accurate to pray for peace to come to Jerusalem, which has rarely known peace despite being a holy place for all the People of the Book. For Jews, it is where the world was created and where Abraham prepared to sacrifice Isaac; for Christians, it is where Jesus rose from the dead after his crucifixion; and for Muslims, it is the place where Muhammed (PBUH) ascended to Heaven.

Sadly, not all the strife in the Holy Land and in Jerusalem is inter-faith.

At the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, control of the church itself is shared among the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox and Armenian Apostolic Churches in an arrangement essentially unchanged from 1757. Separately, control of the roof of the church is shared between the Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian Orthodox Churches as they are denied access to the main Church. Physical altercations are common and the inability to collaborate together means that the church has two Muslim families who hold hereditary positions as the guardians and turners of the key to the entrance!

Saint Helena is believed to have been the first Christian pilgrim to the Holy Land. The mother of Emperor Constantine, she visited in 324 CE. Since then, pilgrims have walked in the footsteps of Jesus, both literally and metaphorically with approximately 2.5 million now visiting the Holy Land each year. Visiting the places where He, His parents, and His disciples lived, worked and served, there are opportunities to reflect, to reconnect and to renew. For some, the highlight will be a visit to a traditional site such as Calvary or the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem; for others it will be an Eucharist on a boat sailing across the Sea of Galilee, a renewal of baptismal vows in the River Jordan or carrying a cross with other pilgrims along the Via Dolorosa; and for others it will be eating local fare or the acquisition of souvenirs such as olive wood ornaments handmade by Palestinian Christian artisans.

Palestinian Christians in the Holy Land are often referred to as “Living Stones”, a term that reflects that they are descended from the first Christians. Their ancestors were there when the Spirit descended during Pentecost, and they were the first to venerate the holy places, the actual stones, where Jesus walked and suffered until His death.

If you go on pilgrimage, I really recommend spending time with the Living Stones and learning about the persecution they face today as they maintain a presence in the birthplace of Christ. *EXAMPLES including Muristan land grab and checkpoints. [More information is available from London Support.]*

If you visit Jerusalem, I recommend spending time in the Peace Garden, at the heart of which is the Tree of Hope, a bronze olive tree with a canopy, not of leaves, but swirling swifts. It stands in a courtyard in the centre of Muristan, a Crusader hospital complex near to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The swift will, I hope, be familiar to you all as part of the Great Priory appeal that has raised over £80,000 for the St John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital Group.

B) The St. John of Jerusalem Eye Hospital:

Nowhere in the Holy Land is the message of hope better seen in physical form than in the work of the St John of Jerusalem Hospital Group.

The 'Eye Hospital' is the sole charitable focus of Great Priory and we have continuously provided financial support every year for over a century with only the Most Venerable Order of St John having a longer association.

Whenever I attend a meeting of either a Province or a Preceptory, I know that the Eye Hospital will be mentioned and yet I find that very few of our brother Knights know much about 'our' charity.

The St. John Eye Hospital Group is the only charitable provider of expert eye care in the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem, treating patients regardless of ethnicity, religion or ability to pay.

The main hospital in East Jerusalem has been operating for 141 years. The hospital sees many of the most complex eye cases from across the occupied Palestinian Territories, which are referred to them from medical centres across the West Bank and Gaza. As it is the only charitable provider of eye care, the importance of the hospital for the region cannot be overstated.

Their facilities are internationally recognised as operating to the highest standards. The Eye Hospital is the first Palestinian hospital to be **awarded the three-year Joint Commission International (JCI) accreditation** that establishes patient safety and quality service standards for health facilities worldwide. This accreditation has been in place since 2013.

The Jerusalem hospital

is a large, modern facility that includes outpatient departments, specialist retinal, corneal, glaucoma, orthoptic and paediatric units, operating theatres and 24-hour emergency services. It treated 54,600 patients and performed 3,300 major operations and has 180 medical, allied health professionals and nurses. Their School of Nursing is the envy of many hospitals.

The Muristan Clinic

in the Old City saw 1,200 patients in its screening programme last year.

The Anabta Clinic

treated 16,000 outpatients and performed 22 major operations with 16 staff and now provides access to one million residents. The centre provides primary and secondary care with specialist care in paediatrics and diabetic related eye diseases.

The Hebron Hospital

provides sight-saving treatments such as cataract and laser eye

surgery to treat diabetic retinopathy and serves a population of 690,000. It saw over 14,000 patients and performed over 550 major operations with 19 staff members.

In Gaza

one of the most densely populated regions of the world, the hospital is working in near-emergency conditions, yet to the same high standard as the main hospital. It provides specialised ophthalmic subspeciality services including retinal, glaucoma, anterior segment, paediatric and oculoplastic. It treated 39,000 outpatients and performed over 2,900 major operations. It has 45 staff.

Great Priory has, in the past provided vehicles for the Mobile Outreach service, which in Gaza reached over 5,000 patients and in the West Bank and at the Kufor Aqab Jerusalem Outreach Clinic screened almost 13,000 patients.

Across all areas of the group, the commitment of the staff is outstanding.

Something that strikes everybody who gets to visit the Eye Hospital is the dedication of the whole staff family. Over many visits, London Support has built a rapport with staff including those in the clinical, medical and surgical teams, catering, communications, facilities, finance, HR, security and theatres and the nurses who run the clinics. We have seen first-hand, how the Eye Hospital staff feel like a true family often with a tradition of service across generations.

Lest you feel that our donations are not recognised, I can tell you that, wherever you turn, there are plaques recognising our contributions. The staff all light up when told that a visitor is from 'KT' and they recognise our enormous contribution.

But why is the Eye Hospital needed? The five main causes of blindness and visual impairment in Palestine are:

- Cataracts
- Diabetic retinopathy
- Refractive errors
- Glaucoma
- Lack of prevention

Contributing factors to blindness and visual impairment in The Palestine are:

- Poor access to eye care resulting from physical, financial and knowledge barriers
- Poverty and unemployment
- Poor quality eye care and fragmentation of health care
- Socio-economic and gender inequality
- Consanguinity and inherited eye diseases

And yet 80% of blindness in the region is curable!

Ask anybody who had an eye condition (one where they would have likely gone blind without treatment e.g. glaucoma, cataracts etc.) to please identify themselves. Place on one side of the room.

A Western European society would continue to work as normal with only X from those present being affected.

Each member was then asked to be joined by 9 others from the remaining group. They also walked to the side of the room to join the 'affected' side.

In the Holy Land, blindness and visual impairment is 10 times higher than in Western Europe.

Regardless of political views, it is difficult to resolve any conflict when many of the population can't see!

80% of these conditions are curable with treatment from SJEHG, they just can't get round to everyone!

8 out of every 10 people returned to the 'society' side, leaving just 2 on the 'affected' side.

If you wondered what effect our donations have, there it is. That is the difference that the Eye Hospital makes when it can provide treatment and care.

The booklet given out was

"An introduction to the SJEHG and its work"

Thank you for your attention then Q&A

