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ON THE BEACH

The rhythmic heave and suck of the waves on the sand was hypnotic. Lying on that beach in Devon I might normally have been dozing, but the book I was reading was compelling. Carol and the children were enjoying the sea, but I seemed to be transported to the deserts and oases of the Eastern end of the Mediterranean – the Levant, or Near East, as it used to be called. I was in a different world. Before going on holiday, as an afterthought, I had packed William Dalrymple's *From the Holy Mountain*. This is an epic account of a modern day journey from Greece to Egypt in the footsteps of fifth century monks. It might not sound the most obvious topic for a gripping travelogue, but for me it was speaking directly to a deep yearning.

In the course of my work I have made a number of visits to 'interesting' places overseas, always within a tightly controlled programme. I had visited some of the countries of the Levant, but it was usually for short work-related business, with little opportunity for deep reflection. Brief contact with the people of the region over a decade led to a deep longing to experience what was happening to some of the ancient Christian communities in the Middle East and, if possible, to touch their spirituality. This they trace back to the early New Testament church.

The Christians of the Eastern Mediterranean claim a spiritual ancestry back to the time of Christ. For two thousand years they have survived onslaughts, from Islam, and from Western Christendom; they have been the

victims of genocide, they have seen mass emigration, and found themselves in the centre of many wars. As a result they have tended to be very insular. Through all this they have survived as a people of deep faith and integrity. They have had good cause to be sceptical about the West. Many Western Christians dismiss them as exotic cousins in the faith. Dalrymple's book confirmed for me that they were great survivors with a real story of faith and strength.

It seemed to Dalrymple that the fifth century marked a high point in Christian confidence across that region, but that the seeds of decline were evident even then. He went on to wonder whether he might have been witnessing the final gasp of that decline. Instinctively, without any hard evidence, I wanted to disbelieve this idea. That was how the plot to go was hatched. I desperately wanted to experience the spiritual strengths of the people. In the face of numerical decline of fearful proportions, might any of them have any confidence today? Or were they living in an entrenched ghetto? I was sure that there would be both viewpoints, but which would be dominant? Was this a case of observing the death throes, or would I experience a case of confidence?

Eventually I was cajoled into the caressing swell of the sea and enjoyed the afternoon, but my mind had been hooked. For the rest of that holiday I was engrossed in the book, and on returning to York set to work to engineer the journey. It fell into place remarkably well and I experienced a deep sense of God as I was led from encounter to encounter.

CHAPTER ONE

FLIGHT TO EGYPT

As the cold winds swept across northern England, bringing a cruel end to the late summer warmth, my plans to visit the Levant were formulating. Thinking of the indigenous Christian communities brought conflicting ideas into my mind. Were they about to be extinguished by a rising tide of Islam, or would they have the ability to survive, come what may? The Coptic, Armenian, Syriac and Greek Orthodox were strangely vague in my consciousness. The Coptic Church is credited with the origins of the Christian monastic movement, even possibly having inspired aspects of the later Celtic Christianity of Northern Britain and Ireland. I had certainly been aware that the Orthodox Churches practised rituals that appeared confusing to Western eyes and even had an underlying apprehension about them. When I was a child I can remember seeing Archbishop Makarios of Cyprus on television. This imposing man in black was not a friend of Britain and was virtually portrayed as the devil incarnate. With its impressive clergy and confusingly ornate churches, I wanted to know why I had been conditioned into distrusting this branch of the Christian church. I had the impression that ruthless politicians dressed in clerical gear led it. A mental image of a wolf in sheep's clothing emerged, but was it true?

For some time I had been sensing a strong urge to cut loose from the security of my normal existence and to rely more on my wits in a strange place. Having turned fifty, maybe I was getting on the hippie trail a bit late in life. When my employers offered me the opportunity to spend an unstructured three months overseas I jumped at it, but a fine juggling act would be necessary to find the right space in my hectic diary. The spring of 2000 offered such a gap. They call it a 'window of opportunity' in management-speak; for me it was a gift to be used. And I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

To embark on a journey with only the air tickets as fixed and the rest negotiable was part of my personal challenge. Another was to listen. I'm the maddening sort of person who has twelve answers to anyone's problems but none for my own. I decided therefore that my contract with myself was to be that I would not offer anyone advice nor would I compare wherever I was with life back home.

I love travelling. I love the journey. I'm pleased to arrive. Even so, the thought of preparing for a journey across the countries of the Eastern Mediterranean, euphemistically called the Bible Lands, was almost enough to paralyse me. Call me an ostrich, but it was the final afternoon before I began to throw things into the largest suitcase that was ever made to run on wheels. In retrospect, that suitcase was a mistake. It was gargantuan. With a journey that stretched out over the next three months, with not knowing whom I might meet or what sort of clothing would be appropriate, I was able to err on the side of caution. There was room for me to pack at least two of everything. Into the case went enough underwear and socks to keep me going for three weeks and the sort of T-shirts that really might be an embarrassment in the garden. I even included a Pakistani shalwar kameez in case it might be useful. I threw in several pairs of shoes, reams of paper, guidebooks, pens, photographic film, batteries, toiletries and towels. At last it was full. Then

came the difficult job of zipping it up and trying to stand it upright on its wheels. It was then that I had to cajole it to move without doing major damage to the carpet. Slowly I urged it along the landing, coaxing it to the top of the stairs. It seemed to have a life of its own and was almost growling at me as I bumped it down each stair. It took several attempts and a few scratches along the skirting boards before I could leave it sulking near the front door ready for the morning departure.

The journey nearly got off to a bad start. Catching early trains is not one of my favourite activities and, not having got into bed until after midnight, I nearly slept through my five o'clock alarm. Breakfast was in silence. Outside it was still as dark as pitch. Carol, my wife, came downstairs yawning. She had offered to drive me to York station. With twenty minutes to the train's departure we opened the front door and had to take a sharp intake of breath. Overnight there had been a heavy frost and the car looked as if it had been stored in the deep freeze. This was the end of March. We were now into spring following one of the mildest winters on record. The de-icer had been stored in the garage so we had to scrape the ice off the windscreen. The truculent case had to be heaved into the boot, but the lock was frozen. Frantically blowing on it I managed to persuade it to release and allow access to the boot. Even driving along the deserted streets with the heater and fan on full, the view ahead kept freezing over. Every set of traffic lights seemed to go to red as we approached but we drew up outside the station with five minutes to spare. The train was scheduled to depart from the other side of the station so, whilst Carol went to park the car, I rolled my luggage to the lift and through the subway. I got on to the waiting train with a minute to spare and Carol came up breathless just as the doors were about to close.

So that was it. A final kiss and I was on my own. The airport train roared out of York station leaving me with an image of Carol, wrapped up against the cold, waving fran-

tically from the platform. As the train raced towards the Pennines I tried to doze but it was impossible. The brightly lit carriage, the chattering of two men behind me, and my own sense of impending adventure all prevented it. I was now to make my own waves, make a lot of my own contacts, and try to make some sense out of what I might find.

I always enjoy airports and Manchester that morning was no exception. Bearing in mind the last minute nature of my preparations for the trip, those shops were going to be useful. Top of my list of items was a back-up disk for my palm top computer. I looked in vain. The assistant was a homely middle-aged Mancunian lady. 'Eh, love? Can you come back next week? We're bound to have some in by then,' she offered. Small help to me! Another purchase was the mighty dollar: travelling for no more than three weeks in any one country I certainly did not want wadges of local currency.

I flew via Paris to Cairo. It was as if I was in a culture warp. I might be going to a world of different values but the flight did all it could to reinforce Western values. The airline magazine, the food and drink, the duty-free goods on offer all shouted that Western values were best. The in-flight movie was *Rogue Trader*. It had been on screen for just about an hour when it blinked and was turned off. The steward made an apologetic announcement in French to the effect that they had been showing the wrong film and that we would now see the one advertised for this journey. *The World is not Enough*, the most recent James Bond offering, began. Of course both films were about Western obsessions with wealth and power. They both assumed a post-modern worldview that what we see is all there is. It was a totally different perspective to that which I hoped to explore by going to Egypt, and then travelling to Turkey over the following three months.