

Plymouth Unitarian Church Pilgrimage to Jerusalem Sunday 8th February 2026

Opening video/music

'Jerusalem of Gold' by the Michigan Harpist – (YOUTUBE 2.45 minutes).

Welcome + Introduction

Today's service, written by Steve, explores the theme of Christian pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the Holy Land.

As many of you know, Steve prefers writing services rather than leading them, so members of the congregation will be delivering today's reflections. Our service is in three parts and will include readings, hymns, and several short video clips.

A pilgrimage is a journey undertaken for a sacred or spiritual purpose - usually to a place considered holy, meaningful, or significant to a pilgrim's faith. It is often motivated by a desire for spiritual growth or renewal, as an act of penance, a search for God's guidance, or by a longing to connect with sacred history, tradition, or the divine.

In the Christian tradition, pilgrimage includes travel to the Holy Land -Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and the Sea of Galilee.

Other sites are associated with Christian denominations. For Catholics, these include the Vatican, Santiago de Compostela, Lourdes, and Fatima. For Orthodox Christians, Mount Athos is a major centre of pilgrimage, while for Anglicans, Canterbury Cathedral holds special significance. Think of the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer for example, 24 short stories detailing a pilgrimage to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket.

There are of course, many more pilgrimage destinations, both within Britain and throughout the world, and I am sure you can think of others that have personal meaning for you.

What inspired today's service was Steve's childhood memories of Jerusalem. He spent part of his childhood and teenage years there in the 1970s and 1980s due to his parents' work. He has warm memories of living in both Palestinian and Israeli areas of the city, and his experiences in Jerusalem have given him a lifelong interest in religion and in the region's complex geo-politics.

One distinct memory of Jerusalem that Steve has is it that he could spot any British tourist a mile off, as the men always wore the fashion faux pas of socks and sandals, and the women were either lily white or bright red due to sun burn.

Jerusalem is the holiest city for both Jews and Christians, and the third holiest for Muslims after Mecca and Medina. No other city on earth can claim such a profound sacred heritage, and it remains an endlessly fascinating place to visit.

In Judaism Jerusalem is called YERUSHALAYIM meaning the Lord will provide peace and in Islam it is known as AL-QUDS meaning The Holy. For today's service we will refer to Israel-Palestine simply as the Holy Land.

The ongoing conflict in the region - and particularly the events of recent years - continues to polarise opinion. But let us set politics aside this morning and hold this sacred space as a place of neutrality, reflection, and peace, at least for the next hour.

Our opening music was 'Jerusalem of Gold' played by a musician called The Michigan Harpist.

We start as always with the lighting of our chalice, a symbol of our free religious faith.

Chalice is lit

1st Hymn: Purple 186 – ‘We are travellers on a journey’.

We are travellers on a journey
which brought us from the sun,
when primal star exploded
and earth in orbit spun;
but now as human dwellers
upon earth-planet’s crust,
we strive for living systems
whose ways are kind and just.

We are travellers on a journey
which grows from human seed,
and through our birth and childhood
goes where life’s path may lead;
but now we are delving deeper
in quest of greater worth
and reaching unknown regions
and planets of new birth.

We are travellers on a journey
through realms of inner space
where joy and peace are planets
that circle stars of grace;
and when we find the stillness
which comes at journey’s end,
there’ll be complete refreshment,
a resting place, a friend.

Words ©Andrew M.Hill b. 1942, used by permission. Music, Tune ‘Ascension’ Henry Hugh Bancroft, 1904 - 1988.

Opening words are from the Book of Psalms in the Hebrew Bible, what we commonly refer to as the Old Testament. Psalm 84 verse five from the New International Version: ‘Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage’.

Part A

Since the earliest days of the faith, Jerusalem has held profound significance for Christianity.

It is the spiritual heart of the tradition – the place where Jesus preached, was crucified, and most importantly, where Christians believe he was resurrected.

In the centuries before Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, pilgrimage to Jerusalem was nearly impossible. This changed around 313 CE when Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and issued the Edict of Milan, legalising the faith and allowing open worship.

Both Constantine and his mother, St Helena played pivotal roles in establishing Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

St Helena travelled there between 326 and 328 CE, and she is credited with identifying several key biblical locations. These include the site of the Crucifixion and the tomb of Jesus, which later became the location of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. She is also believed to have discovered the cross on which Jesus was crucified, along with the crosses of the two thieves who died alongside with him. According to tradition, a miracle revealed which cross was the true one – an event which may have given rise to the lucrative trade in religious relics that continues to this day.

She also identified significant Christian sites on the Mount of Olives and in Bethlehem, and her pilgrimage remains one of the most influential in Christian history.

Thanks to Constantine and his mother, Jerusalem became a major pilgrimage destination for Christian travellers, motivated by faith, penance, and a desire to experience the physical geography of their religion.

To this day, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre remains the most important church in the Holy Land, and arguably in all of Christendom. It marks both the site of Jesus's crucifixion at Calvary and the location of the empty tomb associated with his resurrection.

Within the church are also the final four Stations of the Cross, making it an essential destination for pilgrims since the fourth century. Construction began in 326 CE, and the church was dedicated in 335 CE. It serves simultaneously as the seat of the Armenian, Greek Orthodox, and Latin Catholic Patriarchates of Jerusalem, while also sharing this sacred space with the Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian Orthodox churches.

Relations between these denominations have not always been harmonious, and disputes have at times escalated into physical confrontations between rival priests and monks within the church.

By the fourth and fifth centuries, pilgrimage had become an established element of Christian religious life. The Byzantine Empire actively supported this movement by maintaining roads, inns, and churches to accommodate the growing number of pilgrims. As a result, Jerusalem and other holy cities such as Bethlehem, flourished not only as centres of devotion but also hubs of commercial activity.

In its early years, Christian pilgrimage was regarded as a form of penance or spiritual purification, with travellers willingly enduring hardship to deepen their faith. Death during a pilgrimage was not feared, it was sometimes even welcomed as a new form of martyrdom.

One pilgrim who left behind a valuable written account was EGERIA, a Spanish nun who travelled to the Holy Land in the fourth century. She authored *The Travels of Egeria* which details a pilgrimage lasting several years, including three spent in Jerusalem.

Unlike the modern era, in which a journey abroad last about a few weeks, pilgrimages in late antiquity often took years, as reaching the destination alone could require weeks, or even months of travel.

The situation for Christian pilgrims changed in the seventh century with the rise of Islam and the Muslim conquest of Jerusalem in 638 CE.

Contrary to popular belief, Islamic rule was generally tolerant of both Christians and Jews, and Christian pilgrims continued to visit Jerusalem with relative freedom.

The ruling Caliphs recognised the economic benefits of pilgrimage, and under the Umayyads and later the Abbasid caliphates, Christians retained access to their holy sites, often paying a tax in exchange for protection and safe passage.

Travel, however remained extremely difficult, and pilgrims were often victims of banditry. Political instability and warfare also disrupted their journeys, much as they continue to do so today. By the eleventh century, stories – often embellished or exaggerated – of suffering and the desecration of Christian sacred sites gradually shaped European attitudes to Muslim rule of the Holy Land, ultimately leading to the outbreak of the Crusades.

Pope Urban II (the second) launched the First Crusade in 1095 CE, and one of his primary objectives was to reopen safe access for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land.

The Crusader period lasted from 1095 to 1291 CE, just under two centuries.

Jerusalem was captured in 1099 CE, and the Kingdom of Jerusalem was established alongside other Crusader states: The County of Edessa, The Principality of Antioch, and The County of Tripoli. Collectively, these territories were known as OUTREMER, a French term meaning overseas.

The European settlers who arrived in these lands become known as Franks.

Christian pilgrims were not limited to knights or soldiers; many were ordinary lay people seeking salvation, penance, adventure perhaps, or healing at sacred sites.

The principal pilgrimage destinations during the Crusades included The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Bethlehem, The Mount of Olives, Nazareth, and the region of Galilee.

Travel was dangerous and costly, but pilgrimage brought a steady flow of visitors who spent money on lodging, food, and souvenirs. A comprehensive pilgrimage infrastructure developed within the Crusader Kingdoms, including hospitals and hostels, and organised routes to major holy sites.

Military-religious orders such as The Order of St John, known as the Hospitallers, and The Templars established networks of waystations for pilgrims across the Holy Land. These orders also provided protection, including armed escorts for pilgrims travelling through particularly dangerous regions.

Local populations including Muslims earned a living providing food, guides, interpreters, and as merchants; they still do so to this day.

Pilgrimage proved to be a vital source of revenue for the Crusader States, which taxed both pilgrims and merchants.

Port cities such as Akko or Acre in the north and Jaffa near modern day Tel-Aviv became major hubs for ships arriving from Europe.

Additional income was also generated through taxes on imported goods and port fees paid by European visitors.

European maritime republics such as Venice, Pisa, and Genoa also profited by transporting pilgrims and crusaders to and from the Holy Land – an early equivalent of budget airlines, not EASY-JET, but perhaps EASY-PILGRIM.

How little the world changes, as religion has long been closely intertwined with commerce.

It was the Knights Templar who developed an early cheque-based system, often compared to a medieval version of American Express. Pilgrimage was dangerous and seasoned travellers understood the risk of carrying large amounts of cash. To avoid robbery and financial ruin on route, pilgrims or crusaders could deposit their money at a Templar house before departure. In return, they received a written note or coded receipt – effectively a medieval cheque. Upon reaching the Holy Land, this document could be presented at another Templar house, where the funds could be withdrawn, minus a small commission. This system allowed pilgrims to travel without carrying cash, safeguarded their wealth, and provided a standardised financial network across the region. In this way, The Templars became pioneers of international finance – a development that ultimately contributed to their downfall.

The Crusades also laid the foundations for organised travel, including safer routes, structured accommodation, and religious sponsorship.

Jerusalem fell to Saladin in 1187 CE, and although Christian pilgrimage continued afterwards, it was placed under stricter regulation and required special permits. In 1291 CE, the last Crusader stronghold at Acre fell, bringing direct European control in the Holy Land to an end.

Pilgrimage continued under Muslim rule, but the golden age of Crusader-sponsored pilgrimage was over.

For a cinematic portrayal of the Crusades in the Holy Land, Ridley Scott's 2005 movie - Kingdom of Heaven offers a depiction of events leading up to the Third Crusade.

Our second hymn is To Be a Pilgrim, also known as 'He Who Would Valiant Be' .It's an English Christian hymn using words of John Bunyan from The Pilgrim's Progress written in 1684. The hymn treats life as a pilgrimage, in which the individual should try to keep their faith and patiently endure life's setbacks and challenges. This is something much easier said than done.

2nd Hymn: Green book Hymn 150 'He Who Would Valiant Be'

(To Be a Pilgrim) – American Puritan Hymn (YOUTUBE - 2.50 minutes).

Who would true valour see
Let him come hither;
One here will constant be
Come wind and weather.
There's no discouragement
Shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent
To be a pilgrim.

Whoso beset him round
With dismal stories,
Do but themselves confound:
His strength the more is.
No lion can him fright,
He'll with a giant fight,
But he will have a right
To be a pilgrim.

Hobgoblin nor foul fiend
Can daunt his spirit:
He knows he at the end
Shall life inherit.
Then fancies flee away,
He'll fear not what they say,
He'll labour night and day
To be a pilgrim.

Music 'Monksgate' Coll., adpt and arr. R.V. Williams, 1872 – 1958
Words John Bunyan, 1628 - 88

We now have a short prayer written for a safe journey before we move into the second part of our service.

Prayer

'Spirit of life and love, source of wisdom within and among us.

As we set out on this journey we pause to breathe, to centre, and to give thanks.

May we travel with care and attentiveness, aware of the world around us and our place within it.

Grant us patience in moments of delay, calm in moments of uncertainty,
and clarity in the choices we make along the way.

May our paths be guided by compassion and respect.

For one another, for strangers we may meet, and for the earth that carries us forward.

If challenges arise, may we meet them with steady hearts, and thoughtful minds.

If beauty appears, may we notice it, and be renewed by it.

Carry us safely to our destination, and return us home with deeper gratitude, wiser spirits,
and a renewed commitment to care for one another.

So may it be.

Amen'

Part B

In the second part of our service, we examine pilgrimage to the Holy Land from around 1860 to 1948. This period spans Ottoman rule, the British Mandate, and culminates in the creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 – an event known to the Palestinians as AL-NAKBA or The Catastrophe. It was an era in which inter-national travel was largely the preserve of the wealthy.

From the late nineteenth century onwards, the Holy Land underwent profound social, political, and cultural transformation. It evolved from a neglected provincial backwater into a major destination for international travellers, with growing numbers of European and American visitors journeying not only to the Holy Land but also to Egypt.

Three key factors combined in this period to generate a boom in pilgrimage tourism.

The first was an artistic movement known as ORIENTALISM; the second was the emergence of a clientele with financial means to travel; and the third was the development of faster and more reliable modes of transport.

ORIENTALISM was a nineteenth century artistic and cultural movement that portrayed Eastern societies as mysterious and exotic. Seen largely through a European lens, it often presented a highly romanticised vision of the Orient featuring glamorous depictions of harems, Bedouins, souks, and forbidden wonders.

In later years, the movement fell out of favour due to its reliance on stereotypes rather than authentic cultural representation and its close association with colonial attitudes. Like most artistic movements, it was ultimately a product of its time.

One prominent Orientalist painter was David Roberts, originally from Edinburgh, who travelled extensively throughout the region between 1838 to 1840. During this period, he produced more than 200 lithographs, many of which depict scenes from the Holy Land.

Steve recalls his parents owned several prints of David Roberts's work in their home - copies of course - and he was particularly captivated by them.

And we now have a short video clip, about 90 seconds to show you some of his paintings.

David Roberts 1796 to 1884 paintings - YOUTUBE (1.32 minutes).

See it here: <https://youtu.be/nRB2GNjvbfE?si=WQ26RSZ-Ad0AHvJo>

The rise of luxury steamship and railway travel made pilgrimages increasingly accessible to a growing middle class eager to visit biblical sites firsthand.

Journeys became faster, and more importantly, safer. Luxury trains and floating hotels were created for wealthy tourists willing to spend generously on exotic adventures. Think of the steamship in Agatha Christie's *Death on the Nile*, or the Orient Express which started journeys from Paris to Istanbul in 1883.

Pilgrims of this era included the nouveau riche of Victorian Britain and America's Gilded Age – industrialists, entrepreneurs, railway millionaires, merchants, financiers, and colonial profiteers.

One landmark journey was led by Thomas Cook, yes, THE Thomas Cook in 1869.

This was one of the earliest escorted tours to the region travelling through Egypt and the Holy Land including Jerusalem. The trip is widely regarded as a milestone in the development of modern international tourism.

Another notable pilgrim to the Holy Land during this period was the author Mark Twain, who visited Jerusalem in 1867 as part of a tour. His experiences were later published in *The Innocents Abroad*, which became a major success. Twain, however, was far from impressed with Jerusalem. In his book he described the city in terms of rags, wretchedness, poverty, and dirt noting that lepers, cripples, the blind, and disabled accosted visitors constantly. He observed they seemed to know only one word in one language - the eternal BUCKSHEESH. This term derives from the Persian word BAKSHEESH, meaning a tip or gratuity given freely. It remains in use across much of the Arab world today.

Interest in the Holy Land during this period was also stimulated by formal scholarly initiatives such as the Palestine Exploration Fund established under the patronage of Queen Victoria in 1865. Their original mission statement aimed to research biblical Palestine and the Levant, including its archaeology and history. Its mission including mapping the Holy Land and documenting its cultural heritage and was one of several religious and cultural societies founded in the nineteenth century with similar interests.

All these developments – travel literature, scholarly research, and organised tours served to increase the allure of the Holy Land for potential pilgrims. So where did these wealthy pilgrims stay? Several luxurious hotels and guest houses were built, including one constructed in 1884 for Catholic pilgrims.

Today it is known as the Notre Dame of Jerusalem Centre, a beautiful hotel just outside the Christian quarter. And we have a short video clip (about a minute and a half) about this hotel.

YOUTUBE clip of the NOTRE DAME – What is going on at the Notre Dame Hotel (1.40 minutes). <https://youtu.be/52wezetjGbs>

Another guest house, church and hospital was The Russian Compound built under Imperial Russian patronage by The Russian Palestinian society.

Several neighbourhoods in Jerusalem are named after this period of colonial European influence, including one called French Hill, and another called the German Colony built by a German Christian sect in the 1870s who arrived in Jerusalem to prepare for messianic salvation.

The American Colony Hotel, founded in 1902 by Sir Peter Ustinov's grandfather Plato von Ustinov (that's quite a name), is situated in a Palestinian neighbourhood of Jerusalem and remains popular with international journalists. It has long been regarded as neutral ground.

The most famous hotel in the Holy Land, however, is the five-star King David hotel in Jerusalem, which opened in 1931. Founded by the wealthy Egyptian Jewish banker Ezra Mosseri, it quickly became one of the leading hotels in the world, hosting royalty from Persia, Egypt, and Jordan, as well as other high-profile guests. During the British Mandate, the southern wing served as the administrative and military offices, and it was famously bombed in 1946 by the Zionist paramilitary group, the Irgun.

Even Hercule Poirot visited Jerusalem in Agatha Christie's novel, Appointment with Death. The book inspired by Christie's travels in the Middle East, is set in Jerusalem and Petra in modern day Jordan. Whilst on holiday in Jerusalem, Poirot overhears a character (as he so often does) tell his sister, "You do see, don't you, that she's got to be killed?" The SHE in question is later found dead during a trip to Petra.

A film version starring Peter Ustinov as Poirot was shot on location in the American Colony Hotel and at Government House in Jerusalem, which served as the British Mandate administrative centre.

Poirot also makes an appearance in Jerusalem in the 2017 version of Murder on the Orient Express starring Sir Kenneth Branagh, where he solves a theft at the Holy Sepulchre church prior to travelling onto Istanbul.

Pilgrim tourism during the British Mandate was increasingly affected by political unrest. In the 1930s, tensions rose in response to increased Jewish immigration, leading to unrest and uprisings – events depicted in the recent film Palestine 36, which explores Arab opposition to both Jewish immigration and British rule.

The outbreak of World War II, the Holocaust, and the 1948 partition of the Holy Land severely disrupted Christian pilgrimage, likely reducing it to minimal levels until the early 1950s. Before we move to the final part of our service, we have a short video clip about the Church of Scotland in Jerusalem.

St Andrews Church, sometimes called the Scots Memorial Church was built as a memorial to Scottish soldiers who were killed during the Sinai and Palestine campaign of the First World War.

Built between 1927 and opened in 1930, it was popular with Scots during the British Mandate. There are many churches in Jerusalem, from all denominations, but this is one that Steve has visited, attended a few times, and likes the most mainly due to his Scottish heritage.

Feast of St Andrew -The Scottish Church in Jerusalem ‘ YOUTUBE (2.34 minutes).

Part C

The final part of our service focuses on Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land since 1948.

Support for Israel among Christians, particularly in America, is a significant and well-documented reality. This alliance has become one of the most influential partnerships in modern American political and religious life.

Many Christians view the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 as linked to end times, the fulfilment of biblical prophecy, and the anticipated second coming of Jesus sometimes termed the rapture.

This close relationship has significantly shaped U.S. foreign policy, generating both cooperation and controversy. The United States provides Israel with strong diplomatic support, particularly in the United Nations, as well as billions in economic and military aid.

A central reason for Christian support of Israel is religious conviction, rooted in the belief of a covenant between God and the Jewish people. Many Christians see Israel as having a divinely ordained role in human history. This theological perspective has emerged into what is known as Christian Zionism - support for Israel as an expression of obedience to scripture. For example, the Abrahamic covenant in Genesis 12 verse three states: ‘I will bless those that bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse’.

The influence of the American Christian Right is evident in the form of advocacy organisations, lobbying networks, and coordinated political action in Washington.

Modern Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land is strongly influenced by pro-Israel evangelical movements. One prominent example is Christians United for Israel, or CUFI, which has the support of millions of American Christian evangelicals. Another is Christian Friends of Israel with branches in both the United States and Britain. There has even been an International Christian Embassy in Jerusalem for over 40 years. These organisations advocate for continued military and economic support to Israel. Many visit Israeli settlements in the West Bank – referred to by Israel as Judea and Samaria – providing both political, and financial support.

A strong Israel is seen as significant for end-times theology in mainly evangelical denominations and many travel in times of unrest, or conflict as an expression of support and solidarity.

South Korea also represents a significant source of modern pilgrimage with 20 to 25 per cent of South Koreans identifying as Protestant, many of whom are pro-Israel evangelicals. South Korean churches frequently pray for Israel and host events in its support. Pilgrims also come from sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, regions where evangelicalism is growing rapidly, further contributing to the global flow of modern Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. And of course, Catholic pilgrims from Spain, Portugal, France, and Italy, as well as Latin America which is still predominantly Catholic.

The current American Ambassador to Israel is Mike Huckabee who is known for his pro-Israel stance, rooted in his evangelical Christian faith. He describes himself as an unapologetic, unreformed Zionist, rejects the idea of a two-state solution, refers to the West Bank as Judea and Samaria, and openly supports Israeli settlements.

Ironically, life for Christians in the Holy Land is increasingly affected by the far-right government of Benjamin Netanyahu, considered the most extreme right-wing government in Israel's history. Jewish extremists have harassed and assaulted Christian clergy and damaged property in the Christian quarter of the Old City, as this extremist element seeks to transform Jerusalem into an exclusively Jewish capital.

The Palestinian and Israeli Arab Christian communities continue to shrink each year, particularly in Gaza. This exodus is driven by violence, harassment, vandalism, and persistent socio-political instability.

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land is no longer reserved for the wealthy. Until the 1970s, flying was expensive, but larger aircraft capable of holding hundreds of passengers now mean cheaper flights for the estimated 500,000 to 700,000 Christian pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land each year.

A pilgrimage can be spiritually overwhelming, sometimes triggering a phenomenon called Jerusalem Syndrome. This is a diagnosed psychological phenomenon in which mainly Christian visitors experience intense religious themed thoughts, beliefs, or behaviours. In 1969 an Australian tourist tried to set fire to the Muslim holy shrine of the Al-Aqsa Mosque, believing he was on a divine mission. Others feel compelled to preach publicly, wear biblical clothing, or even identify as figures such as Jesus, or John the Baptist. Many visitors to Jerusalem report an almost palpable spiritual energy, a vibration. Across the centuries, countless pilgrims have reported similar experiences, encountering a spiritual presence that continues to resonate today.

Thank you for listening.

3rd Hymn Purple 30 – 'Each seeking faith is seeking light'.

Each seeking faith is seeking light,
and light dawns on our seeking,
when clashing tongues combine
to pray that light will shine,
and guide and gather all on earth
in peaceful greeting.

Each seeking faith is seeking truth,
for truth is lived by seeking,
and though our faiths conflict,
no dogma can restrict

the power of truth set free on earth
in honest meeting.

Each loving faith is seeking peace,
And peace is made by seeking
To spin the strands of trust
In patterns free and just,
Till every family on earth
Is in safe keeping.

Each living faith is seeking life,
And life flows through our seeking
To treasure, feel and show
The heart of what we know.
In every faith the Light, the Life,
is shining, speaking.

Words Brian Wren, b. 1936 ©1989, 2003 Stainer and Bell Ltd, 23 Gruneison Road, London N3 1DZ
Music 'Middleton' David Dawson, 1939 -2021 Used by permission.

Closing words

From the Book of Psalms; Psalm 122 verse six in the King James Bible.
'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee. And that peace and love should be for all inhabitants of Jerusalem, regardless of their faith'.

Closing video

PATHE news clip from the 1950s about pilgrimage to Jerusalem. Steve likes the cut glass English accent of the announcer which was de rigour at the time until regional accents became more acceptable in the late 1960s and 70s.

YOUTUBE Pilgrims flock to Jerusalem (1.20 minutes)

Chalice is extinguished