

***Pilgrimage to:  
The Seven Churches of Revelation  
with Istanbul and Cappadocia***

***13th to 24th May 2024***

***Fr Jim O'Keefe***



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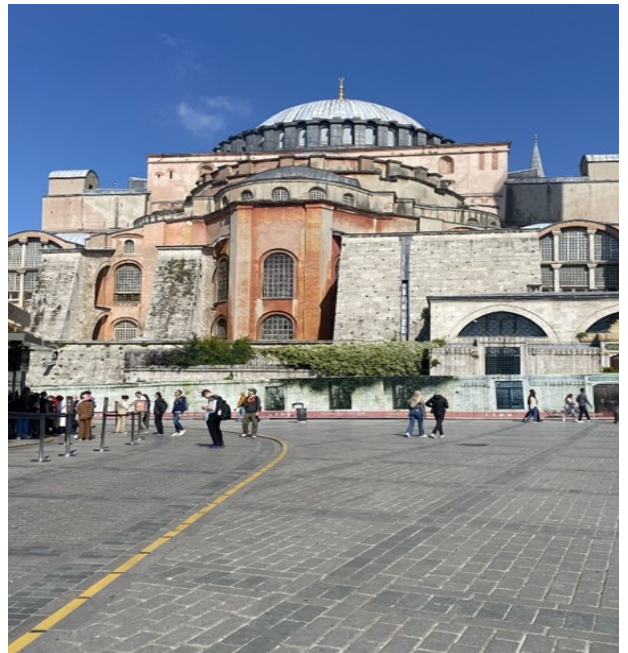
PS – I do know it is a bit early for a PS... but I was hoping to follow in the footsteps of St Paul! Rather a tall order really, given he sailed around the Eastern Mediterranean on 4 occasions over many years. We did, however, follow in some of his footsteps during this fascinating 12-day Pilgrimage. So, a huge thank you to the parishioners of the parish of John XXIII (and beyond) who made a financial contribution to my 50<sup>th</sup> ordination anniversary two years ago, in 2022. I did promise to use it for something I wanted, and this Pilgrimage was what I wanted to do. It was a wonderful experience to be in touch with our Christian sisters and brothers from almost 2000 years ago in Asia Minor – modern Turkey. I hope the following random thoughts make some sense and that you continue to be very curious about the lives of those who've gone before us and who can teach us so much. Many thanks once again.

I arrived at Newcastle airport at 4.00am on 13<sup>th</sup> May to link up with the 6.00am flight to London Heathrow. I expected the airport to be totally silent! I expected all of the other travellers would be bowler hatted businessmen (and in the interests of equality – business women). I was wrong. The place was crowded with holiday makers about to jet off to the Canary Islands and other parts of Spain. Many of them seemed to be very thirsty, I don't think I've seen so many pints being quaffed at 4.30 in the morning in my life...

I met most of the 16 strong group of Pilgrims at Terminal 2 in Heathrow. Two flew direct to Istanbul from America and 2 direct from New Zealand. We were led by the Revs Penelope and Kim Swithinbank, a husband and wife team who are both Church of England priests. There were two further CofE priests in the group along with a psychotherapist married to a GP, a retired computer analyst who at one stage in his life helped to build submarines in Barrow in Furness and a former RAF pilot who flew 'diplomatic missions' later in his career.

Turkey has a population of about 85m people. 3% of it is in Europe and 97% in Asia. Its biggest city, Istanbul, has a population of around 16m and is split between the two continents, the west of the city in Europe and the east in Asia. Our guide, the brilliant Samire, told us that the real population of Istanbul is around 18m, if all the refugees from Syria and Afghanistan are included. There are 3.1 million refugees officially registered, but independent observers calculate there may well be another 2 million on top of that. 'Sammy' as he was known, quickly told us that traffic lights in the cities were only there to 'decorate the streets' and the idea that car drivers might slow down when approaching a Zebra Crossing hadn't quite caught on yet. Traffic in the city was pretty horrendous.

Over the first couple of days we visited some of the most stunning mosques in the world. **Hagia Sophia** (Holy Wisdom) was originally a church built at the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, probably over a temple. They did a lot of that in those days, building churches over temples, to show who was now in charge, making it clear to everyone that Jesus took over from Zeus or Jupiter or Aphrodite. In 532, the Holy Roman Emperor (also known as the Byzantine Emperor) – these lads took over from the Roman Emperors once the Roman Empire faded away - decided to build the biggest Christian Church in the world. He had it covered with beautiful icons, all of which were defaced and destroyed from the 8<sup>th</sup> century when a movement grew up within the Orthodox (Eastern Greek) church which reckoned there shouldn't be any physical statues or pictures of God, Jesus, Mary or the saints. Many of them were replaced from the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and are still preserved. They are stunning. Its all a bit of a reminder that there's always been controversy and struggle in the Christian Church. Even the Apostles had rows among themselves about who would be the greatest in the Kingdom of God!



**Hagia Sophia Mosque**

Since then soldiers from across Europe stole art work from the Mosque during the terrible battles we call the Crusades. There were at least 8 of them between 1096 and 1291, when Western 'Christian' rulers and kings fought with followers of Islam over the Holy Land and elsewhere...a pretty grim



Jesus with Constantine and Justinian holding models of the city in their hands

period of history. A key date for this mosque was 1453 when the Ottoman (later Turkish) Empire prevailed in this part of the world. Hagia Sophia then became a Mosque until 1935, when it became a museum. At least as a museum it preserved both Christian and Islamic artwork. The current President, Recep Erdogan decreed in 2020 that it would become a mosque again...endangering the Christian art there.

Incidentally, when you enter the Mosque, you have to walk up a spiral ramp to the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor. This was to enable the wife of the Holy Roman Emperor to reach her place in the Church while being carried up in her carriage pulled by horses...

About 300 yards away from Hagia Sophia is **The Blue Mosque**. It was built around 1610 and is so called because of the 23,000 blue tiles which decorate the inside of the mosque. Actually there are only 22,998 tiles, two are missing,



The Blue Mosque

one of which was sold at an auction in Sotheby's in London for £250,000!

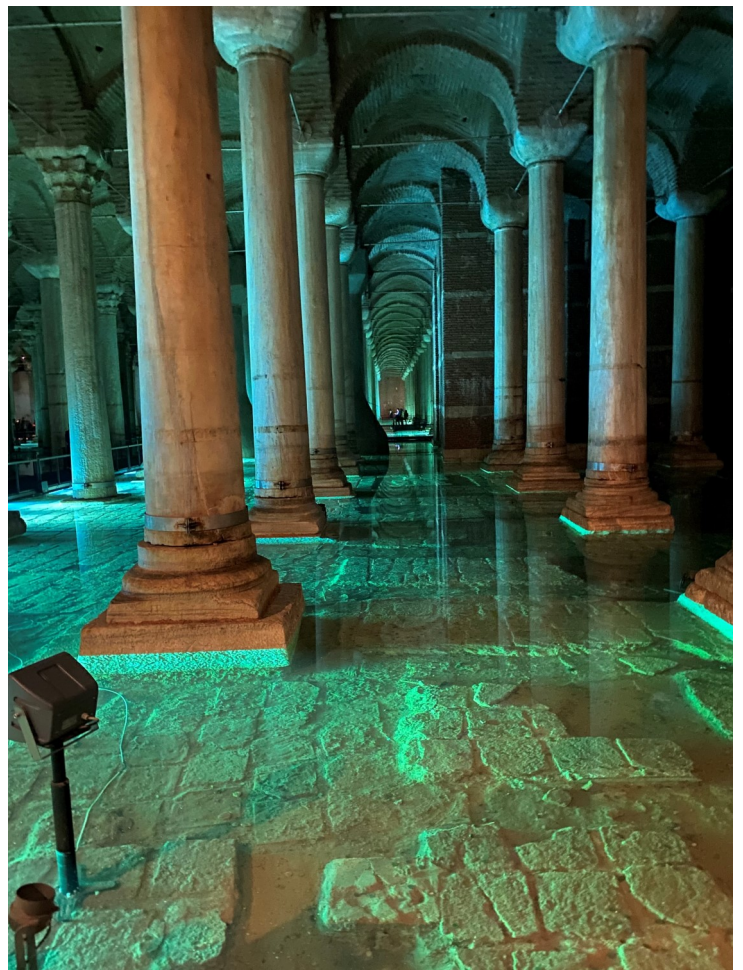
Imagine revamping the bathroom with a quarter million pound tiles...

I couldn't believe how often the Emperor Hadrian – famous around here for building the Wall – was mentioned. It was during his watch that water was channelled from 'The Highlands' near the Black Sea coast (about 500 miles away), to Istanbul and then collected in huge underground cisterns. There are over 200 of them under the City. One of the biggest is known as 'The Basilica', has 365 columns, all stolen (recycled?) from pagan temples to hold up the roof. These cisterns were all dug out by hand. There was no problem with labour in those days, thousand of slaves either did the job or were killed. If you worshipped Hadrian, this was recycling, if you worshipped Zeus, it was vandalism. Actually, not unlike 'recycling' the Coliseum in Rome to build the present St Peter's Basilica between 1505 and 1615!

The fourth visit of the day was to **the Grand Bazar** – at least it was visited by 15 of the Pilgrims, this one decided that St Paul probably didn't actually spend much time in shops so I decided I'd follow his example. If you do fancy visiting this extraordinary Bazar, there are over 2000 shops



Blue Tiles in the Blue Mosque.



Basilica Cistern

and 55 exits. On the other hand, there's a beautiful Square nearby where you can contemplate what life has been like in this part of the world for the last few thousand years. In a couple of words, pretty tough.

The rest of the time in Istanbul saw us visit the Topaki Palace and the various museums there. In one of them there is the staff that Moses used to part the Red Sea when the Hebrew people left Egypt during the Exodus. I gave that a miss given I'd once seen a smiling worker in a crib figure workshop in Bethlehem actually carving the 'original' staff of Moses for sale to an American tourist a couple of days later... One special visit was to a church on the site where the Council of Constantinople met in 381. The 21<sup>st</sup> Council of the Church which some of us will remember was Vatican II, 1962-65. The first 7 Councils all took place in the country we now call Turkey, and the Pope attended none of them! It does fascinate me how some folk get all aerated about bits of change in the Church, when our history throws up some massive and really important disputes which really do matter. This particular council in Constantinople – another name for Istanbul – sorted out belief in the Trinity, for example. Though come to think about it, the Council didn't make it any easier for us to preach about it!

On 9<sup>th</sup> May, last month, President Erdogan declared that another 'Museum' would be rededicated as a Mosque. The church originally on this site was known as **Chora**. Fortunately, many of the Mosaics have been maintained, but sadly, not all of them. It is hoped that they've been whitewashed over rather than destroyed. Some of those preserved are really quite beautiful, from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The flight into Egypt caught my eye, actually loads of them did, but I reckon this caught the isolation of the refugee family on the run – from 700 years ago.



The flight into Egypt

It might well be that the current president who is seeking support from the rather traditional Sunni Muslim community has very recently restored this building to a mosque is because it is situated right in the middle of the Sunni population in the city. The relationship between religion and politics is very complicated, and not just in Turkey.

As we left Istanbul, we visited **Gallipoli** and **Troy**. You're quite right – Gallipoli happened in 1915 during WW1, a mere 1850 years after the beheading of St Paul and Troy a mere 3600 years before his birth, but hey, if you're that close, why not have a quick squint. Gallipoli was (partly) a terrible decision by Winston Churchill to send ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Allies) to take this strategic point between Europe and Asia. It went disastrously wrong – partly because the forces were given the wrong coordinates for the landing of amphibious craft. It was made even more moving for us given that two of our pilgrims were from New Zealand. There was so much slaughter and no gain. I happen to be writing this on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the D-Day landings. We cannot but remember the phenomenal courage and commitment of totally ordinary folk and simply pray that we find other ways to resolve conflict...

As for Troy! We all know the story of the Trojan Horse? Sort of? OK Troy was real...in fact there are 9 cities built on top of each other and they've collapsed into each other which will keep archaeologists going for decades – good for them. The story is about Greeks leaving a 'gift' of a mega big horse (which is obviously in need of some



Turkish soldier carrying a wounded  
New Zealander

repair) on the beach as they left the coast. Only they'd left a contingent of soldiers in it who came out during the night and opened the gates of the city to the army – who pretty well wrecked it. This gave rise to the proverb: 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.' I reckon it means beware of anyone leaving a mega big wooden horse on your front lawn. The sad thing about Troy for me is that I lost one of my favourite bios taking notes from our really good guide. It was from 'Jarra' wood from Perth, Australia!



Trojan Horse

So **Troas**... Now we're getting there! St Paul did indeed come to Troas. Just check Acts 16.11. Not a long chunk of the Bible – but an incredibly important verse. It was from Troas that Paul set off for Europe. No big deal, maybe, but if he hadn't – then putting it simply, we may not be Catholics! That is stretching it a bit, but it is really important. Paul had a vision and he was invited to go to Macedonia (northern Greece), a very risky and very different world from the one he came from.



So Paul is off... let's now look at what is going on locally. Let's now look at the **Seven Churches of the Book of Revelation**...- they're all in **Turkey**.

Let's be honest. The Book of Revelation – The Apocalypse – is a bit different! Let's not worry too much about who wrote it. It may not have been the John who wrote the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, who, in turn, may not have been the Apostle of Jesus, the brother of James, who may not have been the 'Beloved Disciple'.... all that is true, but let's not worry about any of it!



Most of the Book of Revelation was written at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, say around 95 – though some of it might have been written 30 years earlier. By now you're all entitled to think that you're totally qualified Scholars of the Bible. **The Book of Revelation is not to be taken literally...** It does seem to have been written by someone called John who had been sent into exile on the island of



Patmos – now a Greek island just off the Turkish coast. He was writing to a community which was living through a time of great disturbance. Everyone in the Roman Empire was meant to see the Emperor as God, neither Jews nor Christians believed this, so they were under great threat for refusing to offer sacrifices to the Emperor of the time. From time to time there was dreadful persecution, during the time of Nero, for example, when both St Peter and St Paul were murdered. **The book is not to be taken literally, but is to be taken seriously...**a bit like Genesis really, a series of stories which never happened, but are always true – now there's a thought to be taken seriously! The book is an invitation to people to **use their imagination...**as Catholics we're not so good at this, we're more into 'keeping the rules'. The deal is that God is in charge. God loves us and God will ensure that those who are inspired by God's love will be saved and will enjoy the fullness of life in heaven. It's as simple as that...

So, keeping it as simple as possible. There are 7 local Christian communities...see above. John, the author, reckons Jesus tells him to let these local communities know that they have gone off the boil. They were really keen, at first to be followers of Christ, but they seem to have lost it a bit. Now this was around the year 95! Imagine how we've lost it after 2000 years! If you're really up for it, then look at Chapters 2-3...its

not a lot of reading. We visited all the Churches, well, apart from Smyrna, where there are no ruins, so we read the Letter as we sped past on the motorway. Just for the record they are: Ephesus (my favourite), Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Please don't worry, you'll only hear about two of them.

**Ephesus.** There's only 20% of the ancient city that's been excavated over the last 150 years, so it'll only take another 600 to sort out the rest of it!

St Paul was imprisoned here – some think – for a couple of years. He got himself into real bother because he condemned the worship of Artemis the goddess of the city. The

silversmiths who created the artefacts of Artemis were seriously threatened by Paul's preaching. Paul condemned false gods as powerless and not worth worshipping; the silversmiths, who made effigies of Artemis for her followers, were beginning to lose their income! So they brought Paul before the court and accused him of causing riots. He was a very courageous follower of the Lord!



The goddess Nike

Ephesus is an amazing city... We all know the NIKE swish, Nike is the Greek Goddess of Victory, and of baseball caps and T shirts. Maybe you didn't know the image of the 'swish' came from this ancient frieze?

Our old pal Hadrian is also here! He's sitting on a throne, admittedly only his right leg is present... but his foot is on top of a spherical shape, namely, the earth. He was regarded as the Lord of the whole earth. It



Hadrian as Emperor of the world

just goes to show that the earth is round was taken for granted by people in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

I could go on! The public toilets are amazing! The front of the Library is fantastic....



Public Toilets

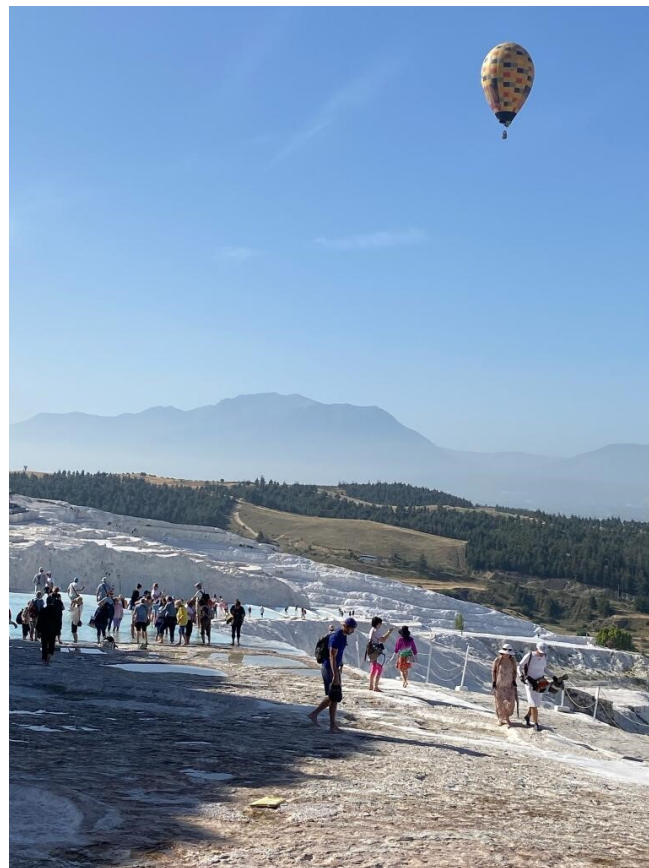
In the 'letter to the Ephesians' in the Book of Revelation. Jesus is quoted as both encouraging the locals to continue to be patient and determined. But then he has a 'But' – as there is in all the Letters. The 'But' is: 'You love less than you used to love'. He tells the people that they need to 'Repent'. I find this fascinating. The invitation to us today is to truly 'love'. I wonder if we sometimes find it far easier to 'worship', and 'attend mass' rather than love!

**Laodicea.** This is the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the Churches I'll mention. Laodicea lies half way between two other ancient towns, Hierapolis and Colossae. Hierapolis is up in the hills and on a 3 mile



Front of Library

cliff of solid calcium. It really does look like the top of the Alps in winter, pure white. The big difference is that the springs up there are bubbling with hot water. By the time the water has flowed down to Colossae, however, it has cooled considerably. This means that the natural water in Laodicea 'is neither hot nor cold'. At the beginning of the letter to the Laodiceans Jesus says: **'I know all about you, you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth.'** Pretty strong stuff – but very clever, using the geology of the countryside to



Calcium Cliff

make a strong point. Laodicea was a very wealthy city, a lot of cotton was grown in the region and there were many wealthy people trading in textiles and benefiting from marble mines. The author goes on to say: **You say to yourself, 'I am rich, I have made a fortune, and have everything I want', never realising that you are wretchedly and pitifully poor and blind and naked too.** (Rev 3:15-18).

I found myself wondering while spending time trying to get into the world of 1<sup>st</sup> century followers of Jesus how they renewed their enthusiasm. They expected the world to end soon and waited for Jesus to 'come



again', they had to contend with the threat and reality of persecution. They would never be really wealthy, unless they gave up their connection with the local Christian community. They had to really stick together to support each other. A phrase of Cardinal George Basil Hume came to mind: **"Religion is always personal but never just a private affair."**

Those early Christians were being severely reprimanded for becoming complacent and wanting to

be accepted, they were being asked to become more courageous and prophetic – maybe there's a lesson here for us today.

I did wonder if the author of the Book of Revelation could have written an 8<sup>th</sup> letter, to the 'city' of Washington, to the parish of John XXIII. I wonder what Jesus would have said to us? Are we courageous enough when faced with the plight of an ever-increasing number of our sisters and brothers seeking safety and refuge in our country? Are we sufficiently outspoken when it comes to the way we humans are destroying our planet? Perhaps Jesus would quote the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales who wrote in 1996: ***It is time we reminded ourselves that in the spirit of good citizenship all members of the Catholic Church must accept their full share of responsibility for the welfare of society. We should regard the discharge of those responsibilities as no less important than fulfilling our religious duties and indeed as part of them.*** Perhaps we need to remember that when we come to vote on 4<sup>th</sup> July.

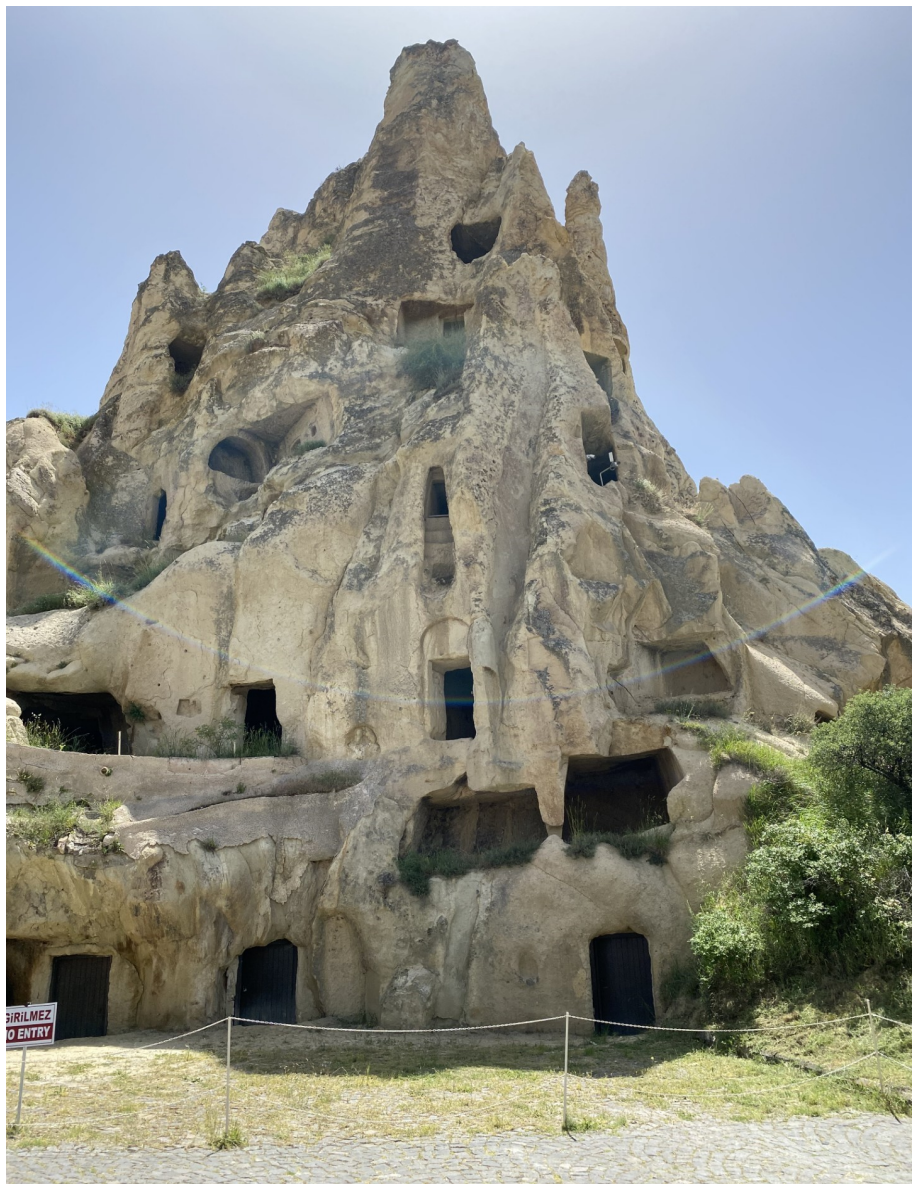
The last couple of days of our time in Turkey was in the area of **Cappadocia**. 10 million years ago, the 'tectonic plates' – loads of miles below the surface of Africa and Asia, began to move and shifted the surface of the earth. The area we now call southern Turkey began to move, lots of volcanoes and lots of rivers emerged. Over millions of years there were mountains with natural caves emerging and as migration spread from Africa to the north-east, our ancestors came to live in them. These caves have a consistent temperature of around 17 degrees centigrade in both winter and summer. People migrated into this area to grow crops – remember the reference to beer earlier on ...it is said that beer was first brewed in this part of the world around 6,000 years ago by the Sumerian people – who would know? I doubt the 'imbibers' in Newcastle airport 12 days earlier had a clue!

In the first years of the Christian era, people drifted here for safety. It seems that over 300 underground 'cities' have been found in Cappadocia, with communities ranging from around 50 to 10,000 people. It did make we wonder how tough it was for our sisters and brothers and



Underground City

how we may indeed be in danger of taking too much for granted. It was moving to share worship in a cave which may have been used for that purpose for almost 200 years.



Caves in the mountainside

Thank you so much once again. It has been a fascinating experience. The taxi driver who brought me back to St Bede's from Newcastle Airport was quite taken by the idea that I'd been on Pilgrimage. He was under the impression that only Moslems went on Pilgrimage, to Mecca on the journey they call the Haj. He arrived in this country in 1980 from Bangladesh and has only been 'home' once since then. He said he'd never go back because he loves our English weather! He has, however, been on Pilgrimage to Mecca and would love to go back. If you fancy going on Pilgrimage, maybe not Turkey, maybe not Mecca, but maybe to Holy Island on Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> July for the CAFOD/Romero Pilgrimage led by Bishop Stephen – see you there. God bless.

*Jim O'Keefe*



Holy Island  
Pilgrimage





The Pilgrims