

MY FIRST VISIT TO JALSA SALANA ~ 11th to 14th AUGUST 2016

By Brenda Benton

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Before beginning to share my experiences at the Jalsa Salana this year I would like to tell you a little of my journey with the Turin Shroud over the past 38 years.

My husband Stuart and I were married in a Christian Church in 1968 and seven years later our only child Zoe was born. At the age of nine months Zoe became ill with an inherited brain disease. When she was 15 months old she lost her sight and we were told that she only had a year to live. She died just a few weeks after her third birthday. At the point of her death we had the wonderful experience of sensing that the Presence Jesus was with us. He wrapped us in a warm blanket of love and gave us a peace which passes all understanding. We felt His Presence leave, taking her with Him, and knew instinctively that we need never worry about her again. She was safely in His care. This led us to return to our Christian upbringing and re-commit our lives to the Lord.

A few weeks before her death our Geneticist sent us to London and whilst we were there a poster on the underground caught our eye. It was advertising a film called 'The Silent Witness' by David Rolfe. We felt compelled to see this film and for us it was a life changing experience. The film re-enacted the crucifixion and it was as though the Lord's suffering and ours came together to bring us comfort. This was preparation for the wonderful experience we had when Zoe died.

It was 33 years later that we met Pam Moon, the lady who owns the Turin Shroud exhibition, through a truly amazing set of circumstances. Stuart had just retired from work which meant we were free to join Pam's team and we have been truly blessed in every venue we have visited since then.

When Pam was invited to join Barrie Schwartz at last year's Jalsa Salana we were unable to accompany her as we needed to attend a family celebration that weekend. We were thrilled when she was invited back this year and willingly agreed to join her.

On Thursday we were met by Amer Safir at an arranged venue and he escorted us to the Jalsa Salana site. It was good to have willing helpers to assist in setting up the exhibition and a lovely opportunity to get to know people of the Ahmadiyya Community. This was a totally new experience for Stuart and I that took us on an incredible journey as we learned more about their beliefs. The four days that we spent at the exhibition was a time to receive new understanding and a revelation of what God is doing to build bridges between Muslim, Jew and Christian. For me it was a life changing experience that helped me to see things in a whole new way.



As we drove to the marquee, which had been allocated to us, we saw flags from every country represented at this year's Jalsa Salana. It was an uplifting and moving experience as they fluttered in the warm summer breeze. To me they were a powerful symbol of unity between nations and religions, a unity that our world is so desperately in need of.

I had been in touch with Barrie Schwartz over a number of years by e-mail but we had never met so it was such a joy to spend time with him and learn from his vast knowledge about the Shroud. He is also the first Jew that I have met and all I learned over the weekend gave me a much greater understanding of the world around me. Arif Khan was Barrie's helper during his time at the conference, making sure he was in the right place at the right time. We had some wonderful conversations with Arif over the weekend about the Shroud. This was an ideal opportunity to share some of our Shroud experiences which gave us all new insight. It also reminded us of the way the Lord has spoken to us through these experiences.

The Jalsa Salana was also the first time we had been involved with an event that caters for so many people. We found the sheer volume of the logistics needed to organise such a large event both amazing and inspiring. The willingness of all the volunteers and the unity with which they work together is a credit to their faith. The interest of the media was incredible and the amount of publicity given to the Shroud exhibition was exceptional. We have never experienced anything like it.

Throughout the weekend we were treated with such respect and all our needs were met with such generosity. Amer and Arif made sure that things ran very smoothly for us all.

On Friday two ladies asked Pam and I if we would like to have a tour of the ladies quarters. This was a very special experience and again we learned so much from those we met. At the end of our tour we were invited to join their prayer meeting and it was wonderful to see so many women kneeling in prayer. The beautiful colours in the ladies outfits were a delight to see and this is an image that I know will remain with me always.

The volume of people and the depth of their interest in the Shroud was a new and encouraging experience for Stuart and I. When Barrie spoke to the ladies on Saturday evening the whole area was packed. A little while after Barrie had finished his talk we sensed an air of excitement buzzing in the marquee. We then became aware of a sudden silence and discovered that Hazrat Khalifa tul Masih had come to visit the exhibition. As Pam and Barrie escorted him around the exhibits one of his aides came and asked Stuart and I if we were part of Pam's team and we were invited to meet him too. This was a most unexpected honour and another part of the wonderful memories we brought home with us.

Sunday was also a busy and very blessed day. We met a young man named Shahid Malik over the weekend who was extremely kind and thoughtful towards us. Just before 1pm he asked if we would like to observe the Bai'at Ceremony that was about to take place. He kindly let us watch what was happening in the main Marquee, on his mobile phone. This really was the highlight of the weekend and seeing so many people connected by placing their hands on the shoulders of a neighbour was a very moving experience.

We knew that the ladies were coming to view the exhibition during the afternoon and we were amazed at the numbers that came. The marquee was full and there were many ladies outside, waiting to come in. Their interest astounded us and we had yet more interesting conversations with many of them.

Stuart and I were very privileged to be invited to this special 50th anniversary celebration. It was an experience we will never forget. We now intend to share the memories we have of our time at the Jalsa Salana with our Christian brothers and sisters. Hopefully we can build bridges of understanding and help to dispel the fears that the media can cause by the way things are reported.

We have experienced at first-hand how you live out your motto ~ Love For All And Hatred For None ~ and we need to share this GOOD NEWS!

God willing we may be back again next year, so until then we wish you every blessing in the wonderful work that you do.

Brenda Benton 2016