

Short Report on Israel

Reflection on my experience in participating in the course “Rediscover Jesus in the Land with Luke” from June 2 to 29 June 2015 is something that will no doubt continue for a long time to come.

What follows is the result of looking back on the experience during my first few weeks at home. For purposes of clarity, I have decided to present my short report under three headings: Preparation, Program and Present

Preparation

Of the 36 participants the overwhelming majority were from Victoria. Of these the largest cohort was from the Sale Diocese. From those attending from this region, I was made aware that the Sale Diocese sends a number to this course each year. This diocese arranged for two meetings of those going and at these meetings they were able to discuss issues related to preparing to attend and participation.

I was fortunate that I was able to discuss with Father Patrick Lim his experience of the course in 2012. Had I not been able to do so, I would not have been as well prepared. With this experience I would gladly assist anyone planning a trip to Israel. As travel to Israel is not easy, I would also advise that anyone else who does so uses a travel agent familiar with the challenges involved. No preparation guarantees success; my flight out from Perth was delayed, I missed the connecting flight and some hours later boarded the plane which took me on the scenic route: Bangkok, Amman and then Tel Aviv.

Program

The course was managed by two Sisters of Zion – Bernadette and Trudy. They were invaluable in supporting you and helping you to adjust to a unique experience. Dr Christopher Monaghan CP (Victoria) and Mr Mark Walsh (Associate Sisters of Zion) gave the main lectures. Additional lecturers were: Dr Deborah Weissman, Dr Marcie Lenk, Dr Michael Fitzgerald M.Afr, Dr Frans Bouen M.Afr, Dr Samah Jabr and Dr David Neuhaus SJ. The course also involved excursions to various places including Galilee under the direction of two guides: Ms Carol Bernheim and Mr Jared Goldfarb.

The course was attended by a wide range of people: 5 Priests, 6 Sisters, 1 Deacon, 22 teachers – 20 from Victoria, 1 retired teacher and 1 secretary. They came from Australia, Pakistan (born Ireland), Canada (born China), Kenya (born Netherlands going to New York), England (born Poland), China, South Africa (born Ireland), Rwanda, Thailand, Papua New Guinea (born Australia) and the Philippines. Only one of the non-religious attending was from outside of Australia – wife of the Canadian Deacon.

Free time was available on various days. This time was used by me and others to attend early Mass at a variety of centres or for prayer and reflection. It was also used to visit religious sites not included in the course, visit sites of historical or cultural significance and for various social activities.

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Our education also was shaped by our daily interaction with those who lived and worked in Jerusalem especially the Muslims in the Muslim quarter of the Old City and in the Arab section of Jerusalem. Being there for the start of Ramadan added colour and noise to our collective experience. I was fortunate to see the compassion shown to the poor at the end of the daily fast. I may not have been as blessed by the call to prayer at very unaccustomed times.

The course was a great way of highlighting issues within the Church and even what we mean by Holy ground and sacred space. What happens in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre fell short of my understanding of Holy ground or sacred space and was not a positive reflection on Christianity. I came to wonder about the extent to which a Christian Theme Park had been created in Israel.

The course was a good way of highlighting problems in Israel. I have visited four memorials to the Holocaust; the first being Auschwitz. The need for a safe place for the Jewish people is obvious as is the disparity in the treatment of the Palestinians. I wouldn't presume to offer a solution just the observation that there are no round corners in Israel; the edges are sharp.

The course was a good way of highlighting problems in Australia. The section of the course on the Bedouin – once nomadic now “settled” was a reflection on the Aboriginal situation in Australia. The negative application of power is obvious in both.

Present

The course was a good way of highlighting issues with my own faith journey. Certainly it provides not just a better understanding of Luke's Gospel but also a framework for reading the Bible. Walking significant Holy Sites added physical reality to that framework. My daily reading of the Bible is so much richer because of this experience.

I know the course has had and still has an impact on my faith life. You cannot but feel humbled by listening to the stories of the Priests and Religious who serve in very challenging situations. I have shared my experience with friends, family, students and fellow teachers. I have encouraged others to go on a similar journey.

For all of the above, I am very grateful for the support that The Biblical Foundation provided.