

B J Hickey Biblical Foundation Scholarship

Following my receipt of a scholarship from the Biblical Foundation at the end of 2014, I attended the Easter Encounter Programme at Tantur Ecumenical Institute in Jerusalem during March/April 2015 (programme attached). We were a group of twenty-three people from the UK, Canada, US, Korea, Philippines and Australia who shared a very intense three weeks together. I will endeavour to share something of what this experience meant to me personally.

I think the fundamental effect of this time in the Holy Land has been that Scripture has come alive in a new way. My encounter with the land where Jesus lived has imparted a depth of meaning which is, I believe, a result of this sensory experience. One of the Tantur group members described us as “running where Jesus walked” (a reference to the frenetic pace of the whole programme) but even allowing for this, there was a chance to connect with the land.

Since my time at Tantur, I find that references to this land as the fifth Gospel have taken on much more relevance. I relate to the words of Fr Bargil Pixner: “five gospels record the life of Jesus. Four you will find in books and one you will find in the land they call holy. Read the fifth gospel and the world of the four will open to you”. I have come to understand that the land (topography, water etc) of the Bible was very well known by the writers of the various books.

In some way, Jesus has become more “real” for me as a result of seeing/hearing sights and sounds that he would also have seen/heard. The land itself is the main example of this but one or two other simple examples stand out for me. In Nazareth we visited a very small, bare Synagogue/Church dating from the first century, a fact which meant it was most probably where Jesus went on the Sabbath when he read a passage from Isaiah and proclaimed that these words were being fulfilled that day. On the way from Mt Carmel to Megiddo, we saw a large round stone along the side of the road – the same kind of stone that would have been rolled over the cave to seal the grave of Jesus. Reading in the Book of Psalms that the Lord is my rock and my rampart, the image is immediate and vivid!

The programme at Tantur was divided between Lectures (from presenters with different religious and cultural backgrounds) and visits /field trips. By the end of the programme, I had a much more extensive knowledge of the history of this land, a “torn and bleeding land” (in the words of Fr David Neuhaus, a Jesuit priest who was also a Jew). I had encountered a diversity of languages, cultures and beliefs and had some understanding of the pain, suffering and everyday difficulties of many who live here. One result of this has been a heightened awareness of contemporary issues in Israel/Palestine and an interest in peace initiatives. One such initiative that we visited was the “Tent of Nations”, a peace project nine kilometres southwest of Bethlehem; another was the visit that I made to the L’Arche community in Bethlehem. Both of these will live in memory and I will try to share these signs of hope with others.

Another enriching experience for me was encountering the numerous Christian Churches and their unique traditions, including different ways of celebrating the Eucharist. I took part in some of these liturgies and became aware of the great richness of this diversity for the Church - each brought their own way of receiving, accepting and reflecting on the Gospel. Since then, I have learned more of the history of the Eastern Catholic Churches through a course at the Centre for Faith Enrichment.

I found participating in the Tantur programme demanding in a variety of ways: physical, mental and emotional. However, I was able to fully engage in all the activities (even hiking in the wilderness from St George Monastery to Jericho). There was little space for reflection during the programme and such a lot of input (both intellectual and sensory) that I believe it will take me some time to fully appreciate just what it has all meant for me. The words of the Eucharistic prayer used at the Greek Melkite Church in Jerusalem seem to me apt in this context:

“We thank You, You and Your only-begotten Son and Your Holy Spirit, for all the benefits of which we know and those of which we are ignorant, for those that are manifest to us and those that lie concealed”

One conclusion I can definitely draw is that I feel I have been very much enriched by this experience and am very grateful for all the benefits of which I know and those of which I am ignorant.

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Evelyn Tierney