

23 December 2015

As I sit here reflecting on my trip to the Holy Land I'm wondering where do I begin? How do I put into words everything I saw, heard, learnt, felt and experienced in Israel?

To be honest I am still coming to terms with the enormity of the experience.

Now a couple of months on I can say with confidence that my faith has matured and deepened and has a stronger foundation on which to build.

Particularly now so close to Christmas I remember our visit to the little town of Bethlehem located in the Israeli occupied West Bank, at its centre is Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity, the oldest church in the Holy Land built in 529 AD. We had to stoop down low to enter that holy place, the doorway made small to remind us that we should all humble ourselves before God. The church is built over a cave where it is believed Jesus was born a 14 point silver star marks the place.

We cooled our weary, hot feet in the River Jordan where Jesus was baptised by John and where we were able to renew our own baptismal vows. What an experience!

Between this baptismal site and Bethlehem is the city of Jericho, an oasis in the hot, dry Judean desert. At roughly 10,000 years old it is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world. There is a high mountain in Jericho which is traditionally known as the Mount of Temptation. Twelfth century Crusaders started the tradition that this was the place where Jesus was tempted by Satan. A Greek Orthodox monastery was built into the steep cliffs of the mountain in 1895. We visited this amazing place which we ascended by cable car. We rounded off our stay in Jericho by visiting the (descendant of the) Sycamore tree of Zacchaeus and Elisha's spring.

We drove into the Judean wilderness where we experienced the quiet, still, solitude of that place. We had the opportunity to pray and meditate out there something I found to be a profoundly spiritual experience.

We visited Qumran and saw the caves where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered. We walked through the archaeological site just below the caves which was once home to the Essenes. We theorised that maybe John the Baptist and perhaps Jesus may have lived for a time in this community in the desert. We drove on to the Dead Sea where we floated in the warm salty water.

Nazareth, the village where Jesus grew up is far to the north in the hill country of Galilee. Today in the centre of the city is the Basilica of the Annunciation built over a large cave believed to be the home of Mary.

North East of Nazareth is the Sea of Galilee. It is surrounded by mountains and valleys, which account for the sudden storms which Jesus and His disciples encountered. In 1986, during a severe drought, the sea level went down far enough to expose a 2,000 year old wooden fishing boat preserved in the mud. The 'Jesus Boat' is now displayed in the Yigal Alon Museum. The vessel is 9 meters long, 2.5 meters wide and 1.25 meters high and could hold four fishermen. It has been positively dated to the First Century BCE. Incredible to think this boat could have carried Jesus and the Apostles.

We visited Magdala a major first century port. Magdala's fame down the centuries rested on one notable person Mary Magdalene. This enigmatic woman revered as a saint by the Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican and Lutheran churches was one of the few persons named in the Gospels as being present at the crucifixion of Jesus and the first recorded witness of His resurrection. Whether she lived in Magdala or was simply born there is unknown, but she was apparently a wealthy

woman. In 2014 a new church was opened in Magdala, simple in design but rich in mosaics and murals, focusing especially on women in the Bible. It is named Duc in Altum (Latin for 'Put out into the deep' from Christ's words in Luke 5:4). The altar is in the shape of a first century boat, standing in front of an infinity pool leading the eye to the Lake beyond. In the crypt is an ecumenical chapel paved with stones from Magdala's first century marketplace.

The village of Capernaum, on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee, is the place where Jesus made His home as an adult. This is the area where much of His public ministry took place. Unlike other holy places, Capernaum is no longer inhabited, it is now an archaeological site. Excavations have uncovered the first century village and the house of Peter. Also, there are ruins of a fourth century limestone synagogue built on the black basalt foundations of what may have been the first century synagogue where Jesus preached.

The traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount is the Mount of the Beatitudes, with a beautiful expansive view of the Sea of Galilee below. At the top is an octagonal church surrounded by beautiful gardens. We had the opportunity to pray and meditate in the peace and tranquillity of this place where the Lord gave us His model for Christian living.

On the shore of the Galilee is the Church of the Primacy of Peter. It enshrines a table rock associated with the post resurrection appearance of Jesus, written about at the end of John's Gospel when the risen Lord shared breakfast on the beach with His disciples and asked Peter three times if he loved Him.

We spent a delightful morning sailing on the beautiful, tranquil Sea of Galilee. It was easy to imagine Jesus preaching on its shores, where He met His disciples and told them to follow Him and where the feeding of the five thousand took place.

We celebrated the Eucharist under magnificent trees overlooking the Sea of Galilee - a profoundly moving experience for me.

And then there is Jerusalem, a 5,000 year old city built on a series of hills that is sacred to half the human race – Jews, Christians and Muslims. The Old City in East Jerusalem, which has been occupied by Israel since the 1967 war has about 40,000 inhabitants one of the most densely populated areas in the world. The Mount of Olives is a high point just to the east, where you have a breath taking view of the Kidron Valley and the Old City particularly of the Temple Mount, where the Jewish Temple once stood. We are told that Jesus wept as He viewed the city from here. Even today the political situation in the Holy Land should cause us all to weep as nothing has changed since the time of Jesus.

On the Mount of Olives we visited the Church of the Ascension, the Pater Noster Church and the church of Dominus Fleuit shaped in the form of a tear drop. Near the base of the Mount of Olives is the Church of All Nations where we celebrated the Eucharist and the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed with His disciples before entering Jerusalem for the last time.

The Via Dolorosa or Way of the Cross is venerated as the route Jesus walked carrying the cross, from the place of His trial and condemnation to the site of His crucifixion. The Ecce Homo Convent (where I stayed) is located at the first Station and the floor of the Basilica beneath the convent is paved with stones which were originally from the Antonia Fortress where Jesus was condemned by Pilate. At the end of the Via Dolorosa stands the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, it is believed to be the site of Golgotha where Jesus was crucified and the site of the tomb where His body was laid and from which Jesus rose from the dead.

One of the most striking churches in Jerusalem commemorates Peter's triple denial of Jesus, his immediate repentance and his reconciliation with Christ after the resurrection. Built on almost sheer hillside the Church of St Peter in Gallicantu stands on the eastern slope of Mount Zion. On its roof rises a golden rooster atop a black cross recalling the prophesy made by Jesus that Peter would deny Him three times 'before the cock crows'. Gall-cantu means cockcrow in Latin. Peter's denial of Jesus is recorded in all four Gospels and three Gospels record Peter's bitter tears of remorse. The scene of Peter's disgrace was the courtyard of the high priest Caiaphas. It is believed that the church stands on the site of the high priest's house. Under the church is a dungeon thought to be the cell where Jesus was detained for the night following His arrest.

Also on Mount Zion is the Dormition Abbey, according to local tradition it was on this spot, near the site of the Last Supper that the Blessed Virgin Mary ended her worldly existence and was taken body and soul to heaven.

We travelled to the village of Ein Karem on the west side of Jerusalem, according to tradition the birth place of John the Baptist. We saw Mary's Spring and walked up the hill to the Church of the Visitation where I was profoundly moved by its beauty and panorama.

We visited synagogues and attended services there. We saw groups of young men break out in spontaneous dancing in the Western Wall Plaza. We also visited the Temple Mount, saw the Al Aqsa Mosque and Dome of the Rock. We heard the Muezzin call the Faithful to prayer each morning.

To walk where Jesus walked, to see so many of those places we have read about in the Gospels, to be able to visualise the scene of so many of Jesus miracles was the journey of a lifetime!

My spiritual highs and prayerful experiences came in places away from the crowds – the stillness and timeless quality of the desert wilderness. Listening to the familiar words of the Eucharist in the beautiful acoustic church of St Anne by the Pool of Bethesda. Visiting the Shepherds fields in Bethlehem. These are just some of the moments which bought an intense flash of insight and a tear to my eye.

There is no doubt that following Jesus footsteps, seeing the places where Jesus walked and preached, standing on sites whose names I knew from the Old Testament and the Gospels brought many familiar Bible references to life.

We travelled the Jericho Road with the Good Samaritan and experienced the solitude and silence of the wilderness. We marvelled at the beauty of the Church of the Transfiguration and the spectacular view from Mount Tabor. We stayed a while with the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane and celebrated the Eucharist in the cave at the base of the Mount of Olives where it is believed Jesus stayed with His Apostles. We journeyed with Him along the Way of the Cross through the noisy bustling streets of Jerusalem and touched the place where the cross was placed into the ground at His crucifixion.

At each place we listened to those well known Bible passages that were bought to life and will never be heard in the same way again.

And there was so much more!

Thank you for the chance to gain fresh insight into the Bible stories by seeing these holy and historic sights first hand. They acted as a stimulus to prayer and by visiting the places where Jesus lived and ministered I gained the opportunity for spiritual growth and the deepening of discipleship.

What God revealed to me in Israel is that people are people no matter whether they are Jewish, Christian or Muslim. All people want to live fulfilling and meaningful lives. They want to raise their families in peace and prosperity – they want to be happy. God sent Jesus to offer everyone an abundant life. I was reminded to see people the way God sees them, as human beings, persons of eternal value and infinite worth created in His own image.

These few inadequate lines cannot do justice to what was a most wonderful, uplifting and prayerful experience which I am still trying to fully digest. To have walked in the footsteps of the Lord, to have breathed the air that He breathed, to have seen the sights that He saw – what a privilege!

Sister Bernadette Lynch and Mark Walsh who run the Biblical Program made sure that our group received a well balanced mix of study, tours and interfaith reflections and experiences. Staying in the Muslim Quarter of the Old City was an experience that will stay with for the rest of my life.

As you can tell, visiting the Holy Land was a very full, rich experience for me. After spending four weeks there I can never read the Scriptures or listen to the readings at Mass as before especially anything from Mathew's Gospel.

Since my return to work I was asked by the Year Three teachers to give the sixty children in that year group a talk on my experiences in the Holy Land. I started with a map to show them how far it is from Perth to Israel. I chose three topics which I thought would appeal to them – the Sycamore tree in Jericho, remembering Zacchaeus, the Jesus Boat and the wilderness. I had lots of photos which I was able to show on the smart board. I was a little nervous but the children were amazing they were so attentive and interested and had the most remarkable and insightful questions to ask. It was a wonderful experience.

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