

HOLY LAND EXPERIENCE: 1-28 JUNE 2017 TANTUR ECUMENICAL INSTITUTE

In the final days of the month-long program at Tantur Ecumenical Institute, I realised that the familiar scene of Bethlehem in the West Bank from the balcony of my room would remain with me for a long time. It would take many months to process the overwhelming experience over the month-long program.

The Holy Land—the good and broad land and a land flowing with milk and honey—is the uneasy ‘home’ of the ‘living stones’ of the land—Christians, Jews and Muslims. Jews’ claim to the land is based on God’s promise to Abraham and his descendants. For Christians, the Holy Land is where Jesus was born, lived, preached the Good News of God, died, rose from the dead, and to which he will return. For Muslims, the Dome of the Rock, located on the Temple Mount in the Old City of Jerusalem, is one of three holiest places of worship. The prophet Muhammad is thought to have ascended to heaven from the rock under the golden dome. The holiest site for Christians is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Six Christian denominations have rights to it based the 18th century Status Quo agreement, which impedes its management and upkeep. On the day of our visit, different groups were worshipping in their allocated spaces seemingly oblivious to the atmosphere of contrasting prayers and rituals amidst the mass of excited and curious tourists and pilgrims of all denominations. Paradoxically, it radiated a sense of ecumenism. A sense of harmony could also be said to be present in the Old City where Jews, Armenians, Christians and Muslims reside and work. As “a mosaic of cultures and nationalities of peoples, and neighborhoods,” Jerusalem is intriguing. Yet, the peaceful coexistence of the diverse groups in the Holy Land is a work in progress.

The opportunity to share fast-breaking or iftar meals with Palestinian families living in the Aida Refugee Camp in the West Bank during Ramadan provided a raw experience of the political situation in Israel. We were overwhelmed by their hospitality, particularly in the variety of food prepared for the occasion. Initially, there was awkwardness, but as the evening wore on, we learnt to relate to each other in ways that could be described as friendly. We ended the night with mixed feelings, yet hopeful that peace between Palestinians and Israelis will ultimately prevail in the Holy Land.



Field trips to places in and around Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Galilee brought many of the biblical narratives to life. According to *Mark*, “Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi,” a city built by Herod the Great’s son Philip to honour Augustus Caesar. I could imagine Jesus walking past the shrine of the Greek god Pan in Caesarea Philippi, located at the foot of Mount

Hermon in the Golan Heights, and asking his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”

Alternatively, Jesus and his disciples could have asked the question near the ancient sanctuary of Dan (which we did not visit) about a couple of kilometres east of the shrine of Pan where King Jeroboam had installed a golden calf. The other place that stood out for me was the Judean desert and the desert around the Dead Sea, which gave me a sense of what the Negev and Sinai Peninsula are like. These places relate to significant narratives in the Old and New Testaments, for example, Elijah's flight into the Sinai desert to hide from Jezebel and Jesus' temptation in the Judean desert.



The experience was almost surreal as I had spoken about a desire to seek God in the wilderness several months before the award of the biblical scholarship. The desert is a harsh and inhospitable place. From a biblical perspective, the desert is also a testing place, a place of refuge and a place for transformation that calls for complete trust in God. The fact is that in our 'desert moment' in life, we often allow the reality before us to overshadow the bigger reality, which is God.

Visits to the holy and historical sites were complemented by lectures on geographical, social, religious and political aspects of the land. Insights provided by experts in their fields contributed to a fuller experience of the Holy Land. The experience would not be complete without a spiritual dimension. Every day, prior to dinner, we gathered in the chapel for an ecumenical evening of prayer, reflection and worship. All of us—pastors, laypersons, religious and academics from the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, Singapore, Taiwan and Australia—have enriched ourselves with experiences that will remain in the foreground of our mind for a long time. The experience has given me a new lens to read scriptural texts. I am also inspired by the experience to be more mindful of my Christian calling to be a channel of God's peace in my daily encounter with others.

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