

## Vincent Restifo

The very generous scholarship received from the BJ Hickey Biblical Foundation enabled my two-week immersion experience in Israel to study John's Gospel and the interconnections of Passover and Easter. This program brought together students from all over the world, some pursuing tertiary study credit and others engaging in rich spiritual and personal formation.

We were hosted at the Ecce Home Convent and Centre for Biblical Formation, in the Old City of Jerusalem, along the prominent Via Dolorosa. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion hosted us with the warmest hospitality, and over the following weeks, the group was treated to the most incredible sights, smells, sounds, and tastes of the Holy Land.

This was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience, having the opportunity to witness the timely liturgical celebrations of these major religious traditions unfold amidst the holy sites and through the pilgrims' own experiences. Lectures and excursions were of incomparable quality, motivating and inspiring deep theological reflection and academic critique of the topics reviewed.

One aspect that I particularly enjoyed was the exploration of various pericopes in John's Gospel, and then visiting these settings in a subsequent session. I found a uniqueness in being within this holy place and learning from the land itself as 'the fifth Gospel'. Being part of the Palm Sunday processions, sharing in the ascent to Jerusalem, and examining the landscape that gave rise to Jesus' sermons and parables were moments of profound beauty that left a deep imprint in my heart and mind. Other excursions and tours were equally captivating, particularly in seeing how the biblical lifestyle has evolved but also remained the same for centuries. Integrating ideas of the socio-political climate of Israel then and now brought an added depth and breadth to the journey.

My understanding of Scripture was especially deepened through the exploration of John's Gospel, and in particular, the eucharistic discourse in chapter 6. It was a period for significant learning in unpacking the various layers of this text. My knowledge of Jesus' homiletic style as the paradigmatic teacher and preacher, the praxis of absorbing Jesus' flesh and blood into all parts of oneself so as to live 'a eucharistic life', and a new hermeneutic of having "life within you", were extended beyond imagining and continue to play a part in my life today.

The program was full of highlights, but above all, the authentic encounters of humility and grace, mediated through the people we shared time with, revealed God to me in a new way. I was also grateful for the opportunity to communicate snapshots of my experience to colleagues at my workplace, many of whom expressly appreciated what was offered – some of whom were also inspired to undertake their own pilgrimage in coming years. Being a Religious Education teacher, many of my students also were engaged and moved to ask questions about my time in Israel, which was encouraging in yet another way.

In short, the gratitude I extend towards the BJ Hickey Foundation for Biblical Scholarship cannot be matched. It was the catalyst that absolutely enabled me to complete this program, and one which will never be forgotten.

