

# The Holy Land

June 2019

*Following in the footsteps of Jesus, through the Gospel of Mark*

I am very grateful for the financial support provided by the **Fellowship of St John** for my visit to the Holy Land on pilgrimage with ordinands from Cranmer Hall, Durham. It was a period of exceptional theological, historical and political insight – indeed, it was the highlight of my training so far. The experience certainly aided my knowledge of the Bible and will undoubtedly help me to share the Gospel in a church context. The trip has also stoked up an interest in Jerusalem and the nation of Israel which has governed much of my reading over the summer break. Most importantly, it has helped in my formation, particularly on two occasions: On the Sea of Galilee, I was reminded of the simple call to follow Christ, just as the disciples did; and on the Mount of Olives, I was taken back to my own commitment of faith as I remembered what Christ accomplished for me on the cross.

My full diary of the trip is below.



## Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> June – The early years of Jesus

*“Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will send you out to fish for people.” At once they left their nets and followed him.*

*Mark 1:17-18*

After a morning swim in the Sea of Galilee, we visited sites associated with Jesus’ childhood. Nazareth is no longer the village it was in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine. Instead, it is a busy modern Arabian city with little historical trace of the story for which it is most famous. We were guided through an interactive visitor experience called ‘Nazareth Village’ which was a recreation of the village at the time of Jesus. A bit like a biblical version of ‘Beamish’ this helped us to understand the context of Jesus’ upbringing and the Galilean way of life – agricultural methods, vineyards, synagogues etc. We also enjoyed an authentic ancient Palestinian meal of flatbreads, dates, hummus and lentil soup. We travelled to nearby Sepphoris which was the site of a much bigger Roman town and now is an archaeological hotspot operated by the Israeli National Park authority. It is believed that Joseph and Jesus, in their role as builders, would have been involved in the construction of this new town. Our final excursion of the day was to the western

shores of the Sea of Galilee, where we saw the 'Jesus boat' - a 1<sup>st</sup> Century vessel that was recovered from the mud beds at Gennesaret during a period of drought in 1986. Remarkably preserved, this boat would have been similar to the boats used by Jesus and his disciples on the lake. There is a strong possibility that this was one of the several boats used by Jesus and his disciples during their ministry:

"When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went — into villages, towns or countryside — they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed." Matthew 14:34-36

The day ended with a boat trip on the lake. After singing together 'O Lord and Saviour of mankind', we enjoyed a period of stillness and prayer together. A poignant verse for me from the song reminded me of my own calling, and how, like the disciples, I must surrender in obedience to God.

In simple trust like theirs who heard,  
beside the Syrian sea,  
the gracious calling of the Lord  
let us, like them, obey his word:  
'Rise up and follow me,  
rise up and follow me!'



### **Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> June – Jesus' lakeside ministry**

*None of the disciples dared ask him, "Who are you?" They knew it was the Lord.*

*John 21: 12b*

Today we spent our time around the fringes of Lake Galilee where most of His miracles and teachings took place during his three years in the spotlight of public ministry. Our first port of call was to Mensa Christi, a beach that, according to tradition, is the site of Jesus' resurrection appearance to seven disciples (John 21). Here we enjoyed Communion together, and Philip (Warden at Cranmer Hall) delivered a message on the simple call of Jesus... "Follow me." How often we can over-complicate these words!

From here, we ventured a few short miles to Capernaum on the northern bank of the lake. Like much of the Holy Land, the town is now a remarkably preserved archaeological site, and amidst the remains of the black basalt rock buildings, there are several dwellings, one of which is thought to be the home of Peter's mother. It was interesting to see the steps leading up the side of the houses to what would have been the roof. This helped me to picture the scenes of Mark 2 where a paralytic is carried by his friends to the roof of a building so he can be lowered through the crowds to see Jesus. Also visible were the foundations of the synagogue where Jesus taught on many occasions. On top of the remains of the 1<sup>st</sup> century synagogue is a larger synagogue from the Byzantine era. Nevertheless, as I stepped on the flagstones of this impressive structure, I removed my sandals. This is holy ground, I remember thinking. Jesus has been here. He has actually been *right* here. Of course, I know that each day, I step on holy ground because Jesus is with me wherever I go – but there was something that arrested me in my tracks as I realised that I was literally walking in his footsteps.

We then made our way up north to Banias, an archaeological heritage park on the site of the now uninhabited Roman settlement of Caesarea Philippi. The spray from the springs and streams that flow down from the mountains through the park are in refreshing contrast to the dry heat of the Middle Eastern climate. It is these waters that form the River Jordan which then flows into the Sea of Galilee, and this made it an ideal spot to reaffirm our baptismal vows.

The day ended with a drive up to the Golan Heights. Looking east, was Mount Hermon which our tour guide and many scholars believe to be the place of the transfiguration. Looking west was Syria. We stopped to pray over the war-torn country. It was a reminder to me that even in our spiritual highpoints, pain and suffering is never far away.



### **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> June – Turning to face Jerusalem**

*When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Luke 9:51*

I have always found it striking how Luke divides the Gospel – there is most certainly a turning point. This is evident in the other gospels too – The first half contains Jesus ministry in Galilee over three years, the second half consists of his journey to the cross which takes place in a much shorter period of time.

Today, we turned our face towards Jerusalem. Travelling through the West Bank alongside the River Jordan, we headed south to Jericho, the oldest continually inhabited city on the planet. Jericho came across to me as a sorry city with a wealth of archaeological potential that had yet to be discovered. A Palestinian city, it felt very much like a victim of the political tensions of the region.

I also discovered that Jericho is the lowest permanently inhabited site on earth – a staggering 846-feet below sea level. A short drive south brought us to Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1947. The rapidly decreasing Dead Sea, the lowest place on Earth, lay a couple of miles to the east, beneath the mountains of Jordan.

From here, we drove north-west to Jerusalem. I understood why the Bible often refers to the journey ‘up’ to Jerusalem. We climbed over a thousand metres from the Dead Sea to the Holy City – a journey of about ten miles. Thankfully, we did it on an air-conditioned coach on a modern dual carriageway, and not the ‘road’ between Jericho and Jerusalem referred to in the Bible. Having said that, we did stop in the Wadi Qelt valley to see what would have been the Roman route between the two cities in the time of Jesus. This narrow path carved into this deep ravine of the hostile Judean desert was the inspiration for the Good Samaritan, and some scholars also believe it to be the ‘valley of death’ referred to in Psalm 23. It was clear from spending time here that the narrative of Jesus’ story was changing from the hope and excitement of Galilee to the pain and desolation of the cross.

### **Friday 14<sup>th</sup> June – Back to the Beginning**

*And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased." Luke 2: 13-14*

The day started with a run with Matt, a fellow ordinand. As we got our bearings with Jerusalem at 5:30am, we heard a cock crow twice in the silence as the sun rose over the Mount of Olives.

Our official programme for the day was a diversion from the narrative of Mark’s gospel. We visited Bethlehem, which doesn’t appear in the Markan account. It also took us back to the beginning of Jesus’ life. The reasons for this were logistical. Bethlehem is just six miles from Jerusalem, but half a day’s travel on coach from Galilee. Still, a trip to the Holy Land must include a visit to the place where Jesus was born. Some trips, however, avoid Bethlehem because it is in Area A of the Palestinian Authority’s jurisdiction. A visit to the city involves driving through a military checkpoint and over a fortified boundary. We were instructed to bring our passports. It can also lead to lengthy

interrogations when leaving the country to ascertain the purpose of the visit (as some members of our party can testify!).

We started out at Herodium – a palace of Herod the Great, well known for his building exploits. Such was his vanity and his insecurity, Herod wanted his palace to be the highest point in the Judean desert, and as such, built a colossal artificial mound. In 2007, archaeologists discovered what they believed was the tomb of Herod on the site, but this dig was highly controversial as the Palestinian Authority state that Israel has no right to undertake digs there. The mound gave us a great vantage point of the Judean hills with Bethlehem sprawled across them. The rolling hills and simple nature of the buildings reminded me of the pictures you see on Christmas cards, albeit with a lot more dwellings than in 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine.



*Looking over Bethlehem from Herodium*

Our next stop was the Shepherds' Fields, believed to be the area where the angel appeared to the shepherds 'and glory shone around'. In the unrelenting heat of a Middle East summer, we sang 'O come All Ye Faithful', 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' and of course, 'While Shepherds Watched'! We had lunch at a Palestinian hospital and heard from the General Director about their work in providing medical care in the West Bank. Starting out as a Leonard Cheshire Home, the hospital relies on donations in order to provide a service for the impoverished people it serves.

Our final stop was the city centre where we visited the Church of the Nativity. Below, in a cave, is the site traditionally associated with the birth of Jesus. I didn't feel the need to visit the grotto along with the other tourists and pilgrims. To be honest, in our quest to encounter Jesus, I found it hard to imagine Him in modern Bethlehem.

Back in Jerusalem, we had an early evening walk through the Damascus Gate to the Western Wall. Hundreds of orthodox Jews stood in prayer facing the wall. Some chanted, others were in small groups listening to Rabbis. This was their holy moment in their holy place. I found it moving to be surrounded by people communicating with the God of Abraham. I couldn't help but think that this is the same God we serve. Jesus changes everything, but that apart, are we really that different?

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> June – Holy Week in the Holy Land**

*"How I wish today that you of all people would understand the path to peace." Luke 19:42a*

Today was our Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday all rolled into one. It was always set to be an emotional day, not just through the sites, but through the bible passages, hymns, reflections and prayers that we shared so movingly along the way.

We made the short drive from the hotel to the Mount of Olives. We had the place to ourselves. Over the last three millennia, this has become a necropolis for tens of thousands of wealthy Jews. With a fine vista over the Kidron Valley to the Temple Mount and Old City, it is easy to understand why this has become a favourite destination for Christian and Jewish pilgrims. In the Christian tradition, this would have been the first site of the city for Jesus and his disciples before the triumphant entry. This was the place where Jesus stayed to rest each night from Palm Sunday to Maundy Thursday (Luke 21:37). This was also where he ascended to Heaven (Acts 1:9-12). We sung together the wonderful words from Samuel Crossman in 'My Song is Love Unknown'. It was a special moment of reflection for me – He died for me.



Sometimes they strew His way,  
And His sweet praises sing;  
Resounding all the day  
Hosannas to their King:  
Then "Crucify!"  
Is all their breath,  
And for His death  
They thirst and cry.

From here, we walked down to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus was handed over to the soldiers. From Mount of Olives to Gethsemane, I just wanted to bottle up what God was saying to me and savour it. I found it intensely emotional.

Here might I stay and sing,  
No story so divine;  
Never was love, dear King,  
Never was grief like Thine.  
This is my Friend,  
In whose sweet praise  
I all my days  
Could gladly spend.

We then walked up through the Kidron Valley, the walls of the Old City to our right, and the City of David to our left; to St Peter's Gallicantu, built on the reputed site of the High Priest, Caiaphas. Spending time in the dungeon believed to be a Jewish prison, it is suggested that Jesus spent time here before being sent to Pilate. A large party of Korean tourists who visited clearly experienced a spiritual encounter. Amidst the sound of their prayers and tears, it was hard to avoid being hit by a wave of emotion. Although I would question whether Jesus had actually been here, I understand that for some pilgrims, sites like this hold great significance in their quest to walk alongside the suffering servant. Every pilgrim has a different story to tell, and my experience is no more or less authentic than anyone else's.

From here we walked along the Via Del a Rosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built by Emperor Constantine on the site reported to be that of Calvary and the tomb. The presence of so many tourists and pilgrims made this 'an assault on the senses' (as described by our group leader), and it wasn't a space that I wished to dwell in for too long, though we were promised a return visit early on Sunday morning when it would be much quieter.

Our 'Good Friday' finished at the Garden Tomb, another site that some scholars believe to be the site of Jesus' burial. Slightly away from the Old Town, the Garden Tomb was discovered by General Gordon in 1883 on the basis that the surrounding rocks looked remarkable like a skull (Golgotha – place of the skull). Sadly, we didn't get to see exactly what he saw – a storm in 2007 destroyed the 'nose' of the skull, and there is no archaeological weight to the claim that this is the burial site of Jesus. Still, the more natural setting, the well-cultivated surroundings and the peaceful nature of the place were preferable to reflect as a group on Christ's death and resurrection. Together we sang 'Thine Be The Glory' before returning to the hotel.

## **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> June – Celebrating the Sabbath**

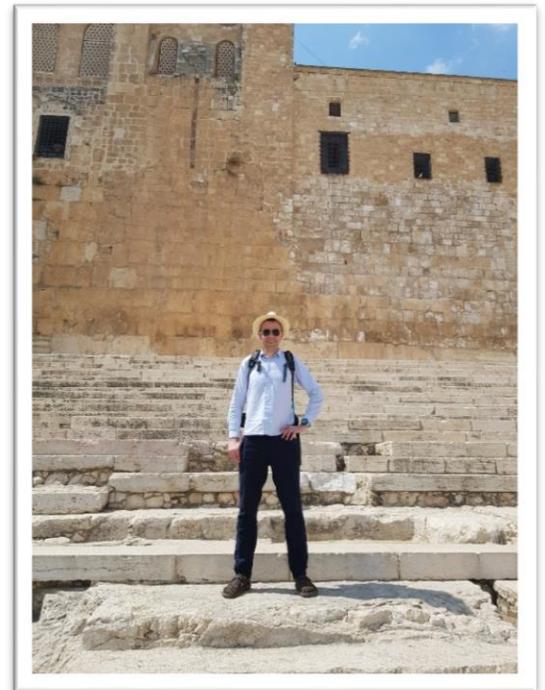
*"There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down." Mark 13:2*

We started with an early morning trip to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, arriving at 6am. The most remarkable thing for me was not that this was the site of Christ's death and resurrection, but that denominations seemingly compete for God's attention in a confused medley of different services. The Greek, Russian, Armenian and Ethiopian Orthodox congregations took part in their traditions, while the more familiar Roman-Catholic mass took place amidst the marching and chanting service of the Syriac Orthodox church. I couldn't work out whether this 'Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre' was a triumph for ecumenism or a sad reminder of the division in the church. In either case, it was fascinating to be part of this worship experience, and enjoy the sacred space of the church without the throngs of tourists.

Later that morning, we experienced a much more familiar service – an Anglican service in St George's Cathedral. This traditional church was founded in 1899 and built in an English style. Situated north-east of the Old Town, a short distance from the Garden Tomb, it is the mother church of the Diocese of Jerusalem – a vast and diverse Diocese that oversees Christian communities in Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The Bishop must have his work cut out! We enjoyed Communion together. It felt quite special saying the Eucharistic Prayer and taking the sacraments in Jerusalem.

After lunch we visited the Temple steps on the southern edge of Temple Mount. Here on the site where Peter and John healed a lame man; where Mary and Joseph presented Jesus as a child; and where Jesus Himself would have walked up and down many times, it was hard not to feel a sense of awe. And just as the disciples commented in Mark about the impressive buildings (Mk 13:1), the remnants of the Temple wall above the steps still dominate and intimidate – one can only imagine the sheer scale of the Temple before the Romans destroyed it in AD70. A couple of hundred yards to the west, the huge stones that the Romans hurled from the Temple down below lay unmoved after almost 2000 years, evidence of its destruction and a reminder to Christians about Jesus words – "There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Mk 13:2).

Our final destination of the day was the Israel Museum. I've always loved museums and much to the family's frustration, I can pore over every single item description. I would have loved that to be the case here, but we arrived an hour before closing so it was a whistle-stop tour. I did manage to see the text of Isaiah from the Dead Sea Scrolls, however. One day, I would like to return for a full day visit!



## **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> June – Standing on Holy Ground**

*Where can I go from your Spirit?  
Where can I flee from your presence?  
8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there;  
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.*

<sup>9</sup> *If I rise on the wings of the dawn,  
if I settle on the far side of the sea,  
<sup>10</sup> even there your hand will guide me,  
your right hand will hold me fast.*

*Psalm 139:7-10*

Our final day in Jerusalem before our journey to Tel Aviv Airport this evening. After breakfast, we headed through the wall of security to the Temple Mount. This is now occupied by the Dome of the Rock, the third most important site in Islam. It remains a hotly disputed site: it is fair to say that Israel want to get their hands on it, and the it's not difficult to sense the tension. A rabbi close to us was speaking with a Jew surrounded by eight armed guards for protection. The Dome of the Rock is a beautiful building and the Temple Mount is perhaps the most historically important patch of land in world history. But I felt it a slightly odd place to be. I didn't get a sense of what the Temple would have been like, or the Jerusalem of the Old Testament. I didn't feel the same connection with Jesus as I had had in Capernaum or the Sea of Galilee or the Mount of Olives. I was aware, however, that beneath my feet were layers of archaeological treasures that would provide reams of evidence for the history of three religions, yet due to restrictions of it being such a sensitive holy site, will perhaps never the see the light of day. As we left, I watched a Bar Mitzvah take place beneath the domes of the mosque, the Mount of Olives forming the background. Three religions in one picture – a fitting snapshot of modern Jerusalem.



From here we spent some time in the markets of Jerusalem before heading to what many of us looked forward to as a highlight of the trip – a walk through Hezekiah's tunnel in the City of David. As we made our way to the tunnel, I was struck by the layers of the history that we descended through. Jerusalem is so rich in archaeology, you can see the layers in the ground, much as you see layers of rock in geology: From the modern day, to the city that Jesus would have known, to the land of David. At the foot of the shaft, we waded through the spring water in the 533-metre long tunnel, which ends at the pool of Siloam. This was thought to be dug during King Hezekiah's reign almost three thousand years ago to protect Jerusalem's water source from Assyrian invaders. Two teams worked at either end of the tunnel, remarkably meeting in the middle.

And that was our last activity of a fascinating Pilgrimage. Reflecting back, there are two things that my visit highlighted: On the Mount of Olives, I was reminded of my commitment to Christ and all He has done for me. On the Sea of Galilee, thinking about those first disciples, I revisited my calling to drop my metaphorical nets and follow Jesus, trusting Him to lead me on the way.

But I know that Jesus isn't just present on the holy sites such as the synagogue at Capernaum or the Garden of Gethsemane. I can sense the presence of Jesus more intimately in the sacred spaces of Durham Cathedral, or on the windswept headland at Flamborough, or even in the back garden, more so than in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Being in the Holy Land has made me realise that wherever in the world I am, I stand on holy ground – in the presence of a loving creator God who sent his son to live in Galilee and die at Calvary for me.

