

The Impact of Holy Land on Faith

Colleagues,

We got back from our 2-week pilgrimage in Palestine and Israel—all 26 of us—just in time for Epiphany worship at home. Four “goldie oldie” Crossings people were in the bunch along with a kaleidoscope of relatives and friends and friends of friends—some Germans, mostly Americans. Age span: from a 20-year-old college Joe to two eighty-something women with marvelous wit and missionary histories of mega proportions. Half of the group were retirees. Presiding at our closing eucharist, Robin Morgan noted that we had become a congregation by virtue of daily morning and evening devotions, reading of Biblical texts at their original venues (e.g., Matt. 5-7 in full out loud when on location at the Mount of the Beatitudes), our meals together, our debriefing evening conversations, the jokes, the shared strengths and weaknesses, and more.

Though most of us were Lutherans, that congregation included a Roman Catholic from Kenya with Opus Dei commitments, and our dear secular Jewish friend, who wanted to hear the stories and see the places that were his heritage, but never his personal life. None of us will forget his words as we boarded the bus after going through the Holocaust Memorial: I found my grandmother.

As we left Tel Aviv this past Sunday, Robin and I discussed how to pass on to ThTh readers what we had seen and heard, without it being another Holy Land travelog. Sure, we were tourists, but there was a twist: we were doing theology daily. First and foremost because we were hosted by Palestinian Lutherans for all but the two days in Galilee. The bishop and three other pastors

of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and Jerusalem spoke with us at length on their callings to cross Palestinian daily life with the word of God. With them as hosts that means we lived in the West Bank. Our digs were the guest hostel of the century-old German Lutheran school for Palestinian children just west of Bethlehem in Beit Jala. Initially a girls' school, it still bears the name it had at its beginning, "Talitha Kumi" ["Little girl, get up." Mark 5:41]. We even spent a day in the Gaza Strip.

We got theology too from Jewish sources, e.g., a Rabbi-politician with commitments to negotiate with Palestinians about land. He showed us the resources his group finds in the Hebrew scriptures for the political agenda they have. Muslim theology was in the mix as well during our visit to the Temple Mount, and in daily practice of our endearing bus driver, Ahmed. For him it was Ramadan. So from sunrise to sunset he took no food or water. Every day shortly before 5 p.m. (we were usually on our way home to our guest hostel at Talitha Kumi) he turned up the volume on the radio just in time for all of us to catch the signal from the muezzin that the sun had set. He then stopped the bus, reached over to a box, took out the water bottle and a big pita sandwich and took his 5-minute "break-fast."

Our focus (Robin's and mine) for this ThTh 31 is the impact the holy places had on our own faith and piety.

For me the answer is:

not much. And I really wonder why. One reason, I think, is the clash between my interiorized image of a Biblical place—yes,

starting from those Sunday School leaflets of 60 years ago—and the “edifice complex” that meets the pilgrim at every turn. Every sacred site now has a church built over it—even Peter’s house in Capernaum where Jesus healed his mother-in-law. That is also true of the Shepherds’ Fields outside of Bethlehem where several denominational options are available—not only the ancient Christian traditions, but even a Methodist Shepherd’s Field sanctuary!

Frequently these churches are covered with artifacts from centuries of religious veneration, and are still in use by present day congregations. Most extreme for artifacts of veneration is the holiest site of all, the Church of the Resurrection, which itself has 4 or 5 distinct denominational sectors—including the Ethiopians on the roof. Such artifacts, of course, are “at home” in the piety of the many Christian traditions maintaining the sites—Greek, Armenian, Russian, Coptic, Syriac, Roman, and more. Even though my head comprehends that, I too can’t crawl out of my own skin, nor the cultural wineskins of my Christian heritage. Thus the impact on me (even when I “tried hard”) was unedifying. More than once I swallowed hard not to say “kitsch.” Granting the subjectivity of such judgments, the sites that did speak to me were the ones architecturally and artistically “chaste” to my sensibilities. Here the impact was not that Jesus did such-and-so here, but that the space, the forms, the symbols proclaimed core Christian themes.

This attachment to the turf where some holy event happened, though it crosses most all Christian denominational lines, is rooted, I think, in bad theology. Muslims may have theological grounds to support their need to “have” the Dome of the Rock, the foot-printed spot from which Gabriel raptured The Prophet into heaven. Orthodox Jews may think they need to “have” Hebron lest God’s promise of land suffer disrepute. But do Christians

need to “have” any of the “Christian” holy places? I think not.

That was the bad, bad theology, that drove the Crusaders of the Middle Ages to such incredible extremes of dedication and sacrifice—and finally pillage and massacre once they got to the Holy Land. The patron saint of the town where I live, St. Louis (=King Louis IX of France), along with the multitudes that he and other leaders took with them, was just plain wrong to think that the “holy places” needed to be wrested from Islam or else the honor of the Christian Gospel would be discredited. Even the simplistic current fad “WWJD”—What would Jesus do?—is sufficient to negate Crusader theology.

Such fixation on turf, then or now, surely is idolatry when screened by the Christian Gospel. It’s people, Christ-connected people, who are the dwelling place of God, the place where God’s honor dwells. They “have here no abiding city,” but seek a homeland up ahead. They have no substantive grounds for revering any piece of geography, even those where Jesus walked and talked, even where he died and was raised again. At the first Pentecost the “holy places” are forever transferred to places from which that international first Christian congregation came and to which they returned—Phrygia, Pamphilia, Parthia, and Pontus, et al.

Seen through that glass our pilgrim group’s worship on December 24 at Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem was a holy place. Not because Jesus was born (possibly) a few hundred meters from where we were worshipping, but because his Gospel was ricocheting among us in the liturgy. It would have been even holier if we had feasted on the sadly absent eucharist that evening, and if the guest preacher for the occasion, an American (sob!), had had an inkling of what the Christmas gospel was all about. But even so the lessons, the prayers, the singing—in Arabic, English and German—were Gospel-enough to sanctify the

congregation, making us a “holy place,” a spot on this earth where “holying” happened.

It was in the people, especially those Palestinian Christians we encountered, that holiness epiphanied to me. In them a theology of the cross shone forth vis-a-vis the theology of glory at many of the official sacred sites. In some future number of ThTh we want to tell you more about them and their theology.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

To this theme Robin says:

When I think of how this trip impacted my faith life, I’d have to say positively in a negative sort of way. Positively in that the end result has enriched me. In a negative sort of way meaning that often what we experienced in the Holy Land didn’t match my perceptions of holy.

I was never more conscious of my own northern European/upper Midwestern piety than the day we walked the Via Dolorosa through the Old City of Jerusalem amid shops selling anything from chasubles to “authentic” Scandinavian knick-knacks. Buy figs, change money, get a “Holy” Rock Cafe t-shirt – the way of sorrows, the way of capitalism.

The last stop on our pilgrimage there that day was the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in which, supposedly, were entombed – I mean enshrined – Golgotha and Joseph of Arimethea’s cave. It is a large Greek Orthodox church given to elaborate iconography which memorializes these two most sacred places. Entering the sepulchre itself took some time because the space was so small; only five people were allowed in at once. A priest monitored our

ingress and egress while he stood on a ladder refilling oil lamps and doing general cave maintenance.

I tried to fend off my growing cynicism by heeding the words of our leader, Paul Hoffman, who told us that Orthodox piety was about being in a holy place, at a holy time, with a holy person. So I contemplated an icon of Mary and Jesus in the Church of the Nativity (again Greek Orthodox) in Bethlehem (on Christmas Eve no less!) trying to see the divinity behind the image, but all I felt was a penetrating look from Mary, "Lady, this isn't your piety."

Even the Protestant version of Golgotha and its adjacent tomb, which are situated about a block outside the Old City walls in a beautiful garden, left me wondering. This garden tomb was much closer to what I'd envisioned, but when our guide pointed out the most likely spot for the crucifixion to have taken place, it was over the garden wall down in a bus station parking lot. I felt something less than religious ecstasy.

But it was Mary, again, who finally helped me understand that our universal Savior can be worshipped in a multiplicity of ways. One of the last days of the trip we traveled to Nazareth and visited the Church of the Annunciation (where Gabriel came to Mary with THE NEWS). Inside this church and even spilling out into the courtyard were mosaics, paintings and sculptures from around the world depicting the Madonna and Child. From every continent and many, many countries I saw how we all need to be able to express our love and devotion for our Lord in the way we are inspired to do so. The French Mary was very sophisticated, the African one was exuberant, the one from the United States looked like a Borg (non-Star Trek fans, ask a Trekkie friend what this means). The whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

Our God is one, but we are many.

P.S. (from Ed again)

At one of our morning devotions in Talitha Kumi, Marie was the leader and opted for using the newer translation of the Lord's Prayer. After the benediction our ebullient "college Joe," really a dear guy, told her emphatically that his preference was the old version, the one he'd grown up on and loved. That evening one of the "80-something" sisters told Marie how much she appreciated her choice of the newer wording. Marie then relayed to her the comment she'd received earlier, which elicited this response: "Well, well. He's older than I am."