

Newman Pilgrimage 2011 – Return to the Holy Land

Fifteen years ago I organised a Newman Pilgrimage to the Holy Land and was surprised by the question afterwards “Where are we going next?” To cut a long story short, after following in the footsteps of Paul, John, the Israelites etc across the Middle East, the Tenth Newman Pilgrimage returned to the Holy Land in March.

Like many members of the group I wondered what would be the major differences after fifteen years and what struck me was the vast increase in tourism and the tighter security situation. Our previous visit was at a time of serious conflicts and many tourists stayed away, but, since then, they have returned in force and even remote sites are crowded. In 1996 we found several quiet places where we could celebrate an open air mass but this seemed impracticable in 2011. The major change in security has been the wall round Bethlehem and across the West Bank and the various checkpoints. As “English tourists” we had few problems but we were held up sometimes and we also saw the time wasting exercises of the young soldiers on duty.

On this visit our guide, Morad, was an Arab Christian and an Israeli citizen. He was also an archaeologist; hence he was very knowledgeable about the various sites and brought a Christian perspective to his talks. Morad also seemed to know everyone in Israel which was incredibly useful with arrangements such as Mass venues and suitable places for lunch. Staying in the old city of Jerusalem many of the holy sites from the Old and New Testament were within walking distance, even though some members of the party found the terrain difficult. We were very privileged to be able to celebrate our initial



Pilgrims outside Holy Sepulchre Church

pilgrimage mass in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in a quiet Crusader chapel. Our chaplain, Fr Fabian Radcliffe OP, had to think on his feet as, depending on our venue, we celebrated feasts from across the liturgical

year in no particular order starting with the Resurrection and ending, a few days later, with the Annunciation! The Church of the Holy Sepulchre itself is, of course, chaotic but seemed cleaner than on previous visits and, thanks to Morad’s explanations, so much more interesting.



Mass inside Holy Sepulchre Church

Before starting the via Dolorosa we visited the remains of the pools of Bethesda and the Church of St Anne, traditionally Our Lady’s birthplace. Then, mindful of our Pauline pilgrimages, we visited St Stephen’s Gate with great difficulty because of the crowds rushing through it to attend Friday prayers at the El Aqsa Mosque, a valuable reminder of another faith in the

city we associate with Christianity. From what may have been the site of the praetorium, we followed the route along the narrow crowded streets to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Whilst the buildings were different the road was much as it would have been when Jesus carried his cross along this route. Mount Zion was our next visit and, whilst the architecture of the “upper room” is obviously from the Crusader period, it is very impressive and could be the site of the last supper. We then visited King David’s tomb and later enjoyed the view across the Kedron Valley to the Mount of Olives.

The Mount of Olives was the starting point for our second day with the delightful small Crusader Chapel of the Ascension on the summit and the views across the old city. We then followed the Palm Sunday route and wondered how Jesus managed to stay on the donkey going down such a steep hill! There are several modern churches and viewpoints on the hillside before reaching the remains of the Garden of Gethsemane which, in spite of the crowds, is delightful. Our mass here was in the hideous modern Church of All Nations on the site of part of the garden and we were disturbed throughout by noise and cameras; certainly it was Fabian’s shortest homily of the pilgrimage! Our initial plan was to



Garden of Gethsemane

walk from here along the Kedron Valley and up the steps to the house of Caiaphas as this must be the exact route up the Roman steps, which Christ must have followed on Maundy Thursday. However these steps are now closed to tourists and we reached Caiaphas’ house from Mount Zion. The most impressive feature here is an ancient cistern thought to be Jesus’ overnight prison. The upper part of the house has been converted into a chapel with a bigger church above. The nineteenth/twentieth century mosaics in the upper church are very colourful, tell important religious stories and must appeal to some people.

Near the Damascus Gate is the Garden Tomb, a finely preserved First Century Jewish tomb in extensive gardens. It is exactly the type of tomb in which Jesus’ body must have been laid and certainly made me feel closer to His burial place than all the lamps and marble in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Our only visit to the new city of Jerusalem was to the Shrine of the Book to see the wonderfully displayed Dead Sea Scrolls. Close to Jerusalem we visited Ein Karem, the traditional site of the Visitation, and celebrated mass in the gardens of the chapel on the site Elizabeth’s home. Nearby is Abu Gosh, traditionally Emmaus, with a fine Crusader church surrounded by well tended gardens.

Although we stayed two nights in Bethlehem we had little time to investigate the “little town” but again were privileged to celebrate our mass in the Chapel of St Jerome before exploring the Justinian Church of the Nativity and visiting the site of the nativity beneath the church. At the nearby Shepherds’ Fields we saw interesting caves where shepherds and sheep could have sheltered in cold weather but not enough grass for even one sheep! Menacingly on the surrounding hillsides were the illegal Jewish settlements almost surrounding the district. One evening, after dinner, a speaker from the University of Bethlehem explained some of the difficulties experienced by Christians in the Holy Land and the Catholic educational system which relies for funding on foreign religious orders. The University itself is officially “supported” by the Vatican: hence the Palestinian government of the West Bank uses its very limited funds for other educational purposes.

From Bethlehem we travelled via Jerusalem to Jericho and saw more of the extent of the separation wall and fence. The atmosphere of the story of the Good Samaritan has been totally obliterated by a very new dual carriageway but the surrounding wilderness is still the same with the Bedouin and their flocks of sheep. After a brief visit to the tell and the remains of the round tower, which is Jericho’s claim to be the oldest city on earth, we travelled south to Qumran and the Essenes’ “monastic” site, close to the caves where the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered. Naturally, an off programme dip in the Dead Sea followed this visit.

A lengthy detour on our way to Galilee enabled us to rejoin St Paul’s footsteps in Caesarea. Much archaeological work has been done here since our last visit and the site is even more magnificent giving an insight into the splendours of Herod’s city, the palace, hippodrome, temples and harbour. Lunch here, beside the Mediterranean, in the sun proved a minor disaster as no one wanted to move. Eventually we departed, pausing to examine the remains of the splendid aqueduct which Herod built to bring water from Mount Carmel to Caesarea.

After a somewhat chaotic visit to Mt Tabor, our mass site for the day, we drove to Tiberias and were all entranced by the sight of the Sea of Galilee.

In the following days we sailed on the Sea of Galilee, an unforgettable experience, saw the beauty of the waters flowing out of the hillside at Caesarea Philippi, saw the snows on Mt Hermon and the magnificent remains of Capharnum. The churches of the Primacy of Peter and of the Multiplication of the Loaves and Fishes are beautifully set beside the lake and we all wanted to linger in this magical region. An open air mass on the traditional site of the Sermon on the Mount was another special memory we will all take from this visit.

Morad, a Nazarene himself, was very proud to show us his home town and again we were privileged to be able to celebrate mass in the Basilica in front of the Cave of the Nativity followed by a visit to the Church of St Joseph and the cave which is the traditional site of the home of the Holy Family. Our pilgrimage ended at Yardenit, the Israeli Baptismal site on the Jordan.

My final thoughts were; what would Jesus think if he were to return after 2000 years? In Galilee he would recognise the broad features of the largely unspoiled landscape; in the towns such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth so much has changed. However He would soon recognise that He was in an occupied country, even if the soldiers now have guns rather than swords, and He would immediately meet His old sparring partners the Scribes and the Pharisees!



Mass at the Beatitudes site

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