

ECUMENISM

An ecumenical pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Paola Grazia, Marie-Christine Fournier and Cathy Beer reflect on their recent visit to the Holy Land with Baptists, Anglicans and Roman Catholics.



Photos(3): Wanganui Mouria-Sol



Just a few days after our return from the Holy Land on 1st December 2017, we see on the news tragedies unfolding in some of the very places we visited. We immediately met together and renewed our commitment to live and pray for a united world, certain that Jesus, in whose footsteps we had walked, who had died in the place we had seen, and who had risen from the tomb, had not done so in vain.

The Mount of Olives

On the first day of our pilgrimage, we had a service on the Mount of Olives at Dominus Flevit where Jesus wept over Jerusalem. We sat on stone slabs before a simple altar on the hill, overlooking Jerusalem below, the chants of the Moslem call to prayer intermingled with our singing of Christian hymns. We were so moved that the reading of the day happened to be:

‘And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation’ (Luke 19: 41-44).

This was what was actually happening today. We could see the walls, the divisions in front of our eyes. It reminded us of a meditation by Chiara Lubich: ‘Looking with the eyes of Jesus’. “...*He gazed upon the crowds around him, whom he loved as himself, whom he created. He wanted to forge the bonds that would unite them to him, like children to a father and unite them to one another as brothers and sisters... He looked at the world as I see it now, but he did not doubt...*”

Pilgrims, not Tourists

We were an ecumenical group of thirty-eight people, Roman Catholics, Anglicans and Baptists, almost all from Welwyn Garden City, led by the local Roman Catholic priest and the Baptist minister. Many of us had never met each other before, and yet we all jelled immediately. We were all of the same mind-set – all



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pilgrims, not tourists. This was not only in the way the guide and our leaders encouraged us to relate what we saw to our own lives, but also in the generosity of spirit within the group which manifested itself in the practical sharing of things and the cheerful acceptance of diverse needs and limitations, in an atmosphere of simplicity and peace.

A witness of faith on the Via Crucis

We had a Roman Catholic mass and a joint ecumenical service every day in significant places, most memorably on a boat on the sea of Galilee, away from the crowds, contemplating so many accounts of Jesus's life on those same waters. Although it was a suffering that we couldn't all receive Holy Communion together, these daily moments of joint prayer were when the unity amongst us all was strongest. This continued at mealtimes, on the bus and on the long stretches of what were difficult climbs for some. Everyone was on the lookout for the needs of everyone else in the most practical ways.

Significant and moving for all of us was when we took turns to carry a large heavy wooden cross through the narrow streets of Jerusalem on the Via Crucis. It was bustling with shoppers, locals selling their spices, shawls, tapestries, pomegranates and other wares on street stalls. The locals and tourists stopped what they were doing, looking at our faces, and taking photos on

their mobile phones. We felt we were giving a witness to them of our faith. Jostled by the crowds it was not difficult to imagine how it must have been for Jesus, carrying his cross and being shoved by the crowds just as we were; in fact, in some places we were so hemmed in we had to turn the cross on its side to get through.

There were crowds and long queues wherever we went, which we could see as: either a tiring hindrance or an enrichment – a marvel that so many people, from all over the world, are drawn to these holy places and the possibility of literally rubbing shoulders with countless people on a similar journey – 'Where are you going?' 'Nazareth' 'Where have you come from?' 'Galilee'. Fragments of humanity on the same journey.

At Cana, after our ecumenical service, some of the couples with us renewed their marriage vows. It was a privilege to witness this love in a simple and deep exchange and it triggered the desire, as one of us said, to renew our own personal commitment to respond to the call to follow God.

Being there

So many places seen, so many unexpected feelings evoked, walking the roads that Jesus actually walked, sitting in the fields where the shepherds were the first to receive the good news of the birth of Jesus... seeing where Jesus may have spent the night in prison, the place in Nazareth where Mary lived, the sea where he went fishing... his daily life. What effect did this all have? We all felt that it had been touching the humanity of Jesus – the man. He became flesh in this town; he fed the five thousand in this place... He lived and cried, he had the same emotions as us.

Then to switch on the TV on our return and see that familiar view of Jerusalem that we had admired with the golden dome in a different context: the violence in Bethlehem and the protests at the Wailing Wall where we had been just a few days before. And yet, strangely to be unphased by it while praying more fervently for a place that is now so dear to us and so firmly in our hearts. In a world so full of division and violence, the great sense of joy and peace we had come away with remains intact, and a strong conviction that love, the extreme love of Christ, means that we can't let him down. We continue to walk together here in Welwyn Garden City with him, jostled by the crowds in the shops and we Christians, together with those of other faiths, can witness in small and big ways that love overcomes all. 🍷