



The road to hope

Part 1: The land of our Lord

Story and photographs by Ian Adnams

Muslims visiting Saudi Arabia can travel to Medina and visit the tomb of the prophet Mohammed. It is considered the second most holy site in Islam, Mecca being the first.

In Moscow, people still line up to view the embalmed remains of Lenin.

Buddha's body was cremated and the remains placed in various monuments.

However, Christian pilgrims to Israel rejoice at the empty tomb of Jesus Christ.

Earlier this year I had the privilege of joining 16 other Canadians on a Global Encounter to Israel and Palestine. Sponsored by Canadian Lutheran World Relief, the tour not only included visits to development projects with which CLWR is involved, but also to key biblical sites.

We didn't follow the chronology of the gospels as we toured the Holy Land, nor did we see everything. What follows is a travelogue and report drawing from the places we visited but in the timeline of the Gospels.

The door to The Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem dates back to the Crusaders. To resolve access disputes between Christian churches, its keys are entrusted to a Muslim family.

Conceived by the Holy Spirit

As you would expect, the modern city of Nazareth bears no resemblance to the hometown of Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Archeologists are still discovering remains from the first century that confirm its existence. Back then, it was a village of about 50 homes and perhaps 200 people. It was not on a major route because of its location on a mountain. Roman historians make scant reference to it. So you can understand why Nathanael, when asked by Phillip to go with him to see Jesus, responded with “Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?” (John 1:46).

Yet in this obscure village, the Lord God chose a young woman to bear the Saviour of the world.

Today, a large, modern Roman Catholic Church in Nazareth helps Christians remember this remarkable event in what is now a major Palestinian city. Lining the road up the hill upon which a church now stands are souvenir vendors pandering to the eternal quest of pilgrims for the ultimate memorabilia. The Basilica of the Annunciation, built in the mid-1950s stands upon ruins of two previous churches. It incorporates the “cave” home where tradition says Mary heard the news that she would give birth to God’s Son.

Think about the social implications of a young woman becoming pregnant in such a small village. Up until a few decades ago in Canada, a family was likely to send a pregnant unmarried young woman to live with relatives to avoid embarrassment or derision.

In that context, it’s easy to understand why Mary would leave Nazareth and visit her cousin Elizabeth in Ein Kerem, about 8 km west of Old Jerusalem, nestled in a valley (Luke 1:39-56).

The journey from Nazareth to Ein Kerem is 144 km by modern highway, although a good part of the route dates back to Roman times.

Ein Kerem sits in a steep-sided valley with slopes terraced for farming. The Church of the Visitation is up hill from the ancient town’s centre. Tradition says it is built over the house of John the Baptist’s parents, Elizabeth and Zechariah where Mary stayed. At the bottom of the hill is Mary’s Spring, an ancient source of water. Thousands of years old, it is likely Mary would have stopped there to drink.

After a three month stay, she returned to Nazareth only to travel again a few months later in a similar direction, this time very pregnant, alongside Joseph. Bethlehem is south of Jerusalem, 155 km from Nazareth. The countryside is hilly and dusty. There isn’t much ground vegetation, mostly sand, gravel and rocks. Although, olive trees and vineyards thrive in the area.



The Basilica of the Annunciation in Nazareth

Born of the Virgin Mary

Bethlehem today stands behind Israel’s eight-metre-high security wall, so entering the area requires stopping at a check point staffed by armed Israeli soldiers. It is a Palestinian city, populated by Christians and Muslims.

For many visitors, myself included, Bethlehem is a highlight. Standing inside the Church at the Shepherds Field which overlooks the city, we sang “It Came upon the Midnight Clear.” As we left, in the distance we saw the steeple of the Church of the Nativity built over the place where Jesus was born and the shepherds visited.

Every Christmas news reports about the crowds attending midnight mass at the Church of the Nativity come from Manger Square. When we visited it was toward the end of the day and it was quiet. We entered the church through a small doorway, the Door of Humility,



In Bethlehem’s Church of the Nativity, the area surrounded by the star marks the site of Jesus’ birth.



Driving through the hills surrounding the Sea of Galilee it is easy to visualize crowds gathered on the gentle slopes to hear Jesus speak.

which forces visitors to bow as they enter. The Greek Orthodox Church, lit with lanterns, dates back to the third century.

Midway through the first century, Justyn Martyr writes about a cave being venerated as the place of Jesus' birth. Our Western image of a "stable" is a far cry from reality. Jesus was most likely born in a cave which was commonly used for housing livestock.

To the right of the ornate altar is a set of 16 steps which take you down to the cave, the place where Jesus was born. There, our group sang "Silent Night."

The previous Sunday, at the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church the congregation sang "O Little Town of Bethlehem." The Christmas story becomes very real when you are in the place it happened.

Throughout Galilee

The Gospel writers report Jesus travelling between Jerusalem and the area around the Sea of Galilee. The 175 km trip would take five or six days on foot if you didn't stop to preach, teach or perform miracles.

The trip north from Jerusalem or Bethlehem can take you along a highway that parallels the Dead Sea and Jordan River. It's a desolate landscape. A mountainous wilderness. An inhospitable place to spend 40 days suffering temptation.

The other route goes through the middle of the country where the Judean mountains around Jerusalem turn into rolling hills and lush, fertile valleys. This is the route that goes near Nazareth and then across to Capernaum, where Simon Peter and his family lived.

Churches commemorating important events in the life of Jesus dot the hillside around the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum. The Church of the Multiplication celebrates the feeding of the 5000; the Church of the Beatitudes rests in the general area where Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount and a small dark-bricked church, near the shore recalls Jesus' post-resurrection breakfast with His disciples.

The city where Jesus spent a lot of time, Capernaum, is the only site we visited where the uncovered ruins

actually date back to the first century. We know with certainty that the synagogue is built on the foundation of the original where Jesus' reading and teaching amazed the people; where once outside He drove out a demon and then walked the short distance from there to Simon and Andrew's house where he healed Simon's mother-in-law (ref. Mark 1:21-34). This village was His home base.



A tour boat, built on a larger scale but based on ancient fishing boats awaits passengers on the Sea of Galilee.

Suffered under Pontius Pilate

Often in the Gospels we read about Jesus going "up to Jerusalem" even though He is heading south from Galilee which one would normally consider "down to Jerusalem." But the city is up in the Judean hills, built around hills and is surrounded by hills. Someone on our tour quipped "I didn't know so much of life here would be uphill!"

When your itinerary says will visit the 'Old City' part of Jerusalem, you immediately think of walking where Jesus walked. While in some ways that's true, in reality, you are walking more in the general vicinity, likely on centuries of rubble left over from the numerous times the city was conquered and rebuilt since the time of Christ. Despite that, the city is fascinating. It's a labyrinth of up

and down narrow pedestrian walks, and roadways barely wide enough for both cars and people, all paved with stone polished and slippery from use. Sidewalk shops display a vivid assortment of clothing, religious memorabilia, fruit and jewelry.

Streets vary in width; cars struggle to navigate the streets and generally have no opportunity to reach anything approaching a dangerous speed. Throughout the city are synagogues, churches and mosques. Church bells peel the hours and loudspeakers on minarets call the Muslim faithful to prayer.

In Jesus' time the most important building in the city was the Temple. There, in the days before His arrest, He taught and challenged the religious establishment.

Now the site is covered by a mosque: The Dome of the Rock. Yet immediately below this holy site of Islam, is the Western Wall—aka the Wailing Wall—basically part of the foundation of the original temple. We visited on Friday afternoon, the beginning of the Sabbath. Hundreds of Israelis flocked to pray. What strikes the visitor is the devotion to prayer of those standing before the wall. Copies of the Psalms are available in Hebrew to recite as prayers. People press small pieces of paper upon which they have written prayers between the huge building stones. Hasidic Jews in their black hats and suits, sideburns trailing, sway and nod as they pray.

As young people headed in the hundreds to begin Sabbath at the wall, the young men danced and sang spontaneously.



The walls surrounding Old Jerusalem show signs of the centuries of rebuilding. This is the tower at Jaffa Gate.

According to the Gospel writers, Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, which we remember on Palm Sunday, triggered similar enthusiasm. But it didn't last.

Was crucified and buried

As we stood outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, our tour guide placed Holy Week in geographical perspective. Where we stood was at one time outside the city wall. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre houses both Golgotha (Calvary) and Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, where he and Nicodemus placed Jesus' body. (See page 5 *As I see it* for more details). There are some who claim other sites for Calvary and the tomb but the best evidence rests with the site over which the church is built. For many pilgrims visiting this church is the highlight of their

time in Israel. Inside the entrance is a slab of stone where tradition says the body of Jesus was prepared for burial where many stop to pray. People line-up to touch or kiss the rock of Calvary and pray before the altars placed there by the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches. It is an emotional moment as pilgrims remember the sacrifice Christ made on the cross for our sins.

On the third day He rose again

One would expect an atmosphere of celebration on the other side of the church where the empty tomb is covered by an early 19th century chapel. We weren't able to go inside as there were visiting dignitaries. An aura of reverence surrounds the place. People light and extinguish



The Church of the Holy Sepulchre from the bell tower of Lutheran Church of the Redeemer in Old Jerusalem.



On this shore, the Risen Christ prepared breakfast for His disciples and restored Peter for service to Him and His flock.

candles, handfuls at a time, to take home and share as souvenirs.

Standing in such a crowd of people I couldn't fully appreciate the enormity of where I was. Within metres was "the" empty tomb; the essential difference Christianity claims from all other religions. You can't point and say "He's buried there." You can only point and exclaim "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed."

Few Sundays pass now while listening to the appointed lessons I don't try to picture in my mind the landscape or surroundings that put God's Word in a geographic context. All my life I've heard and read stories from the Bible. To physically visit where so much of biblical history took place deepens your understanding. You are always aware that so much has changed since the times of Jesus, but in the end so little has changed in the land and politics. When Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem, they echoed with the footsteps of Roman soldiers. Now you encounter Israeli security. In those days the Jews raged against an oppressive, occupying force. Now Palestinians raise the same cry against the Jews.

Life is not easy. Peace seems a distant dream.

In the end, not just in the Middle East but around the world, everyone suffers the consequences of the basic

alienation from God that dates back to the beginning of time. Easter reminds us that we are reconciled

with God through Jesus Christ and therefore our message to every dispute is reconciliation. Christians can bring a unique message of hope because it rests within us. "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their slander" (1 Peter 3:15-16).



A kindergarten student at a Lutheran School in Ramalah learns how to live and play with both Israelis and Palestinians.

The Holy Christian Church

In the next edition, Part 2 of *The Road to Hope* tells the story of how projects of Canadian Lutheran World Relief bring hope to Palestinians.

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