

## Hope and the Holy Land

*In February 2019 Michael Wilson travelled to Israel and Palestine for personal study and to share in the experience of his daughter Leah who was working on a practicum in Human Rights Studies by volunteering with an organization in Bethlehem. The four presentations below were written by Michael and offered as a Lenten Study at Charleswood United Church in March 2019.*

### **Holy Land as Heaven: Faith and the Geography of Jesus**

The most famous site in Jerusalem, if one were to judge from postcards and hotel websites, is the Dome of the Rock. And it is a spectacular sight, especially if one catches a glimpse of it under a blue sky with the sun's light reflecting off of it. It is large. It is shiny. It is highly placed on top of Mount Moriah on the eastern edge of the Old City. The Dome of the Rock is literally what it says it is. It is a golden dome that covers the bare rock at the pinnacle of Temple Mount, a place that three of the world's great religious traditions claim as having profound significance.

Judaism maintains that this was the mountain that Abraham climbed and on which he bound his son Isaac in preparation of a sacrifice that ultimately was not required (Genesis 22). Another tradition claims that this was the place Isaac's son Jacob dreamt of a ladder to heaven which angels used as a gateway (Genesis 28). Given the history of the mountaintop as a place of divine presence in Jewish thought, it is not surprising that Solomon chose the peak of Mount Moriah as the location of the first temple in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE, nor that Herod the Great would select the same site 1000 years later for the third, and last, Temple. For Herod's Temple the orientation was such that the Holy of Holies, the innermost court of the Temple and the dwelling place of God on earth, was at or near the highest point on the rounded top of Moriah.

Christianity recognizes the temple as a place of great importance to Jesus, and where Jesus most assuredly would have visited both as a child (Luke 2) and as an adult. While it is fairly certain that Jesus never set foot at the peak, as only the chief priest was permitted to stand inside the Holy of Holies, the Dome of the Rock now stands a short distance away from where the court of the Temple where Jesus turned over the tables of the moneychangers (Mt. 21; Mk. 11; Lk. 19; Jn. 2).

Islam's attachment to the Temple Mount, and the reason the large Al-Aqsa mosque (accommodating 5000 worshippers) and the Dome of the Rock were built there is that this is the place where it is said Muhammed ascended to heaven. What can easily be forgotten is that by the expansion of the Ottoman Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims had control of Jerusalem for 400 years beginning in 1517. It was the Ottomans who gave shape and dictated the look of the Old City with the construction of impressive fortified walls around the perimeter of Old Jerusalem. The Ottomans claimed the Temple Mount as a sacred place in Islam and built the structures atop of it. And so it is that Muslims control the Temple Mount today including the prohibition against Jews from setting foot on it.

On the day that my daughter and I visited the Temple Mount, we were initially awed by the dome itself, this enormous golden semi-sphere adorned in beauty and majesty. So naturally as tourists we yielded to the impulse that tourists everywhere experience and that is to take pictures. A group of four women were doing the same thing and asked us if we would take a picture of them with the Dome in the background. Happily obliging, we then asked if they would reciprocate and take a picture of us. As my daughter and I posed for our picture an older Muslim man came bounding towards us yelling something that at first I could not understand. Soon I discerned that he had taken offence that my daughter and I had posed for that picture with our arms around one another's shoulder. I realized from an encounter some years earlier that he was appealing to a Muslim understanding that men and women do not touch one another in public. This man's rebuke of us was that we were a male and a female who were making physical contact. That we were a father and daughter was immaterial as was the fact that neither of us were Muslim. His reason, announced loudly so that many people could hear, was that this was a "Holy Place".

What is a Holy Place? And what determines the measure of its holiness? And can a place be holy to one person and rather ordinary to another at the same time? Israel is general, and Jerusalem in particular is filled with Holy Places. As a Jewish state this most often means places of significance in Judaism's spiritual history, places where an event may have taken place that contributed to ancient Israel's developing self-understanding of themselves as a people in a covenant relationship with God. There can be little mistaking that within Judaism the most holy place of all is the Western Wall of the Temple. I experienced it as such and will speak of it later when addressing Israel's connection to the land.

Christians though, are a funny people. It seems that wherever there is a Holy Place in the sense that here is a location of significance in the life of Jesus, Christians responded by building a church over it. Some ancient, some relatively modern. It is true in Jerusalem. It is true in Bethlehem. It is true in Nazareth, Capernaum, and most places around the Sea of Galilee. And while many of these churches are beautiful, if not impressive, I wonder if they truly assist in the discernment of holiness in the geography of Jesus.

Tour guides say that in the Old City of Jerusalem there is the 'holiest place in Christianity' when referring to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The church is run by six different denominations in an agreement that the only way to preserve the sanctity of this place cooperatively it to never alter it in any way. So it is that religious orders of the Roman Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, and the Syrian, Coptic, and Ethiopian rites act as stewards of Christianity's most holy place. What the Church of the Holy Sepulchre actually is is a structure over top of what would have been open space in the time of Jesus. Tradition holds that the church marks the spot where the final events in the life of Jesus took place, along with one understanding of the location of the tomb where he was laid. Consequently, it must also be understood according to this tradition that this is the location of the resurrection, as the place of burial and the place of rising are one and the same. In Jesus' day this would have been at the western end of a Roman road in Jerusalem known as the Via Delarosa.

Pilgrims still walk the road and come to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre considering it the site of the last events in the Stations of the Cross. Therefore within the church one finds the place where Jesus was nailed to the cross, immediately beside the rocks in which the cross was raised. A few feet away is the 'stone of unction' where the body of Jesus would have been anointed for burial and twenty yards from that the place of the tomb. At each station there is an altar for the pilgrim to pause, reflect, and pray. In the case of the place of anointing and the stone of unction, there is permission to touch the respective stones themselves.

It is solemn to consider these things and thousands of people file past each altar every day just to touch the 'holy place'. The historical accuracy of these sites is questionable which doesn't negate that these events took place in history and geography (they must have happened somewhere) and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is the best representation. It seems unlikely to me that the place of Crucifixion (determined by Romans) would be but a few yards away from a new tomb (of Jewish ownership). But neither can one disprove it. The indeterminacy arises from the fact that Christianity was not of great significance immediately after the death and resurrection of Jesus. While the Bible holds that Jesus appeared to Mary and a few in Jerusalem on the first day of the week, the earliest record says that the disciples should return home to Galilee and that he would meet them there (Mark 16). More than that, Jerusalem remained under Roman control, even more so after the destruction of the Temple in 70CE, for several hundred years and Christians would not have been able to move freely in Jerusalem until the early 4<sup>th</sup> century. Three hundred years is a long time to lose where actual events may have actually taken place.

When I first arrived at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre it had the feeling of organized chaos. Many tour groups were milling about conversing in a multitude of languages. Inside there was no real order to visiting it. More than that there were monastic groups moving through the church chanting for whom other 'tourists' were required to get of the way. People lined up for the various shrines, the longest of which was for a small enclosure wherein the tomb and place of resurrection were honoured. Clearly for some people it was a remarkably moving experience that brought them to tears. But I have to admit that for me the 'churchiness' of the place took something away from the 'holiness' of it. However I did kiss the 'stone of unction' just in case.

The question becomes, how successfully can a 'place' represent an 'event'. An event happens and, most often, leaves no evidence of what occurred there. An event can leave behind witnesses to that event and perhaps 'place' can bear witness to the testimony of those who were there. I found this to be a more evocative experience in Galilee than in Jerusalem.

Galilee is both a region and a freshwater Sea (from the Hebrew word for shore). It is at the northern end of the Rift Valley in Israel through which the Jordan River runs directly south to the Dead Sea and into the Gulf of Aqaba on the Red Sea. My tour of the area started in Tel Aviv and approached the Sea of Galilee from the west, having first travelled through Nazareth and Cana. It is a relatively small body of water which allows one to see the mountains of Jordan on the west side and the Golan Heights off to the northwest. It is slightly longer than it is wide and there is no view where one cannot get a sense of its proportions.

In the time of the year that I visited the water always looked cradled in a green valley in every direction. While contemplating that this was the location of the ministry of Jesus and the call of the disciples, the first impression is how close the biblical references are from one another. Walking from place to place is easily imagined. Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene, is not far from the northern shore of Galilee. There the Mount of Beatitudes has the appearance of a natural place for the Sermon on the Mount. It, in turn, is close to the source of seven springs where the miraculous catch of fish may have taken place. Moving slightly east one comes to Capernaum, a frequent place of visiting for Jesus and the hometown of Peter, and likely the other fishing disciples.

There is a large archeological site in Capernaum that includes a 2000 year old stone ruin claimed to be the home of Simon Peter. Not surprisingly, the Roman Catholic Church has built a church over top of it. Literally. It is incredibly beautiful as they have constructed a glass floor in the middle of the sanctuary through which one can see the ruins of Peter's house. The pews wrap around the glass floor while a modern chancel surrounded by windows is at the east end. But it is not historical accuracy that inspires in Capernaum and throughout Galilee. Rather it is the ease with which one gains an awareness that the biblical events in Galilee took place in these close environs. At the water's edge one can gain a sense that here a boat would have been a natural place from Jesus could preach to a crowd in a natural amphitheatre hugging the shore. Nature and story create a sense of holiness that structure and institution cannot duplicate.

## **Holy Land as Haven: The Holocaust and the Obligation to Remember**

The first reference that connects ancient Israel to the Holy Land is found in Genesis 12. "The Lord said to Abram, Leave your own country, your kin, and your father's house, and go to a country that I will show you. I shall make you into a great nation; I shall bless you and make your name so great that it will be used in blessings...they departed for Canaan and when they arrived there...the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'I am giving this land to your descendants.'

Of course that is not the end of the story. Even while resident in the land Abram and his nomadic clan left for Egypt during a time of famine and drought. When they returned they were much larger than when they had left and the first partition took place as Lot's tribe settled on the east side of the Jordan while Abram's tribe settled on the west.

In the story of Joseph, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah left the land again and found safe haven from famine in Egypt. There they remained there for many generations until the time of Moses and the Exodus. The hope that the freed slaves had, you may remember, is that they would return to the Promised Land, the land of their ancestors, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Israel was primarily a nomadic people when it arrived in the Promised Land after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness following its exodus from slavery under the leadership of Moses. Crossing the Jordan River behind Joshua they 'settled' the land and partitioned once more by dividing into their twelve originating tribes (12 sons of Jacob/Israel). As they entered into the Promised Land they carried with them the ark of the covenant which held inside the stone tablets on which Moses had inscribed the ten commandments. Sometimes carried into battle, sometimes lost in battle, a place to keep the ark wasn't a central issue until David became King of Israel and conquered Jerusalem to be made into his capital around 1000 BCE. There are places where scripture addresses the question of whether a temple should be built to house the ark but time and again God tells David that that isn't something that God requires and that the construction of a temple could be left until after David's time. Indeed, it is during the reign of David's son Solomon that the first temple is built, on top of Mt. Moriah, just to the north of the city of Jerusalem in David's era.

Other than location, the first temple has no relation to the Western Wall, which remains one of the most sacred sites in Judaism. Solomon's temple was destroyed in 586 BCE when Babylonian forces razed Jerusalem and carried off many residents to exile in Babylon. In 536 BCE, the exiles were freed by Cyrus of Persia as Babylon was conquered. The remnant and the returnees built a small so-called second Temple beginning in 520 BCE. This paled in comparison to the rebuild of Herod the Great during the last decades of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. The rebuilt second temple was a massive compound supported by a huge retaining wall on the western edge of Mt. Moriah. When Rome suppressed the Jewish uprisings of 66 CE it culminated in the conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. No attempt to rebuild the temple has ever taken place though the Western (or wailing to some) Wall still stands and is a venerated place in Jewish spirituality.

On the first day that Leah and I went to the Western Wall there was not a tremendous amount of activity. It is open and airy and easily accessible. A courtyard allows a person to see it from an elevated position. There is a broad ramp at the north end with a place to ceremonially wash hands. This is the male access to the wall. The female access to the wall is at the south end since an Orthodox Judaism is practiced here. I proceeded down the ramp and toward the wall when a voice called out to me from behind. It was an attendant whose responsibility was to ensure that all men approaching the wall wore a kippah or yarmulke. Since we had made contact I moved over to speak to him and telling him that I am a Christian I asked if it all right for me to touch and pray at the wall. He was very encouraging noting that it is the same God.

The Western Wall is a very inspiring place, a remnant of an ancient time and structure that remains an important place to Judaism today. There is also a connection to be made between the importance of that particular place and the legacy of the land that is modern Israel.

There has long been a Holocaust Memorial and Museum in Jerusalem but the current complex was inaugurated in 2005. It is more of a campus than a museum with a number of buildings and monuments for a variety of commemoration, documentation, research, and education purposes.

The Holocaust is far too great a story to be told from my distant and privileged perspective. But I wish to share what I learned as I walked through the museum for it is a masterpiece of storytelling. The main museum is laid out as a subterranean tunnel. One is made to walk through alternating wings of the tunnel, first to the right, then the left and so on. The horrific story is told chronologically.

One of the first lessons I took was that there was a deliberate shift in the German understanding of anti-Semitism in the period between the wars. Where historically anti-Semitism was a hatred towards the Jewish people expressed in a theological heresy, that they were not to be trusted because they were the people who killed Jesus, the Nazis took this extant hatred and altered it by describing the threat presented by a false global Jewish conspiracy. This is classic scapegoating. Playing on the fears and poverty of a country defeated in 1918, they began to spread the lie that their problems were not a result of themselves, but caused by Jewish citizens in their midst. In succeeding elections in the late 20's and early 30's the National Socialist Party led by Hitler came to power. Once in power they enacted every possible law to remain so. Permission to confiscate Jewish property and businesses and to lash out in violence against Jews were justified as a defence against the global Jewish conspiracy. All this in spite of the fact that Jewish people were remarkably integrated in German society. The scapegoats were not strangers or invaders but German's own neighbours, friends, and fellow citizens.

The movement towards the Final Solution came in stages. As World War 2 commenced as a consequence of German aggression, deportation of Jews out of Germany began, followed by their ghettoization in conquered territory, especially Poland. As the war raged German anger was further directed towards Jews in all corners of the expanded German Reich. Before concentration camps were firmly established there was an orchestrated death squad program which allowed German forces to kill Jews and others targeted indiscriminately, one of the reasons that not all victims of the Holocaust have been, nor can be, identified. Also on display are the maps and lists which demonstrate the many small camps that worked along with the familiar large camps such as Auschwitz, Dachau, and Buchenwald, and Treblinka. Detailed German records are on display that show how important misinformation and lies were to the operation of concentration camps, often administered with a surprisingly small number of officers and troops.

All of this is to remind ourselves that the facts known of the Holocaust are not simply a product of Jewish memory and story-telling but rather that it was well documented by German records, photos, film, and archives. Denying the Holocaust is nothing less than the perpetuation of the evil of anti-Semitism by which it all began.

Yad Vashem does an excellent job of telling the personal stories of those who died and survived in the Holocaust. It makes a point of demonstrating the many and varied ways of Jewish resistance to the Holocaust and of the people and places where Jews were protected and saved, in an exhibit known as the Righteous Among the Nations.

Towards the end of the tunnel there is a place of significance where art meets history. The Hall of Names is a monument to the 6 million who died in the Holocaust. In a rotunda there is a place for the names of all 6 million victims. So far they have identified and inscribed the names of ~4.5 million. But a place for all of the unnamed remains. In the centre of the round room there is a circular railing. Looking down one sees an abyss, a pit, perhaps a representation of hell. Looking up one sees a spiral to the open sky, perhaps a representation of heaven. It is a quiet, solemn, but inspiring place.

As the tunnel rises out of the earth at the museum's end, there is a large inviting outdoor space with a stunning view of the Valley of Remembrance. The message is unmistakable and powerful, this land is a Promised Land, a homeland, the only land and nation that must be the only just response to the crime against humanity that was the Holocaust. As the museum's exhibits about the end of the war make explicit, there was no quick resolution to the Holocaust. The millions of European Jews who survived the war were largely displaced, unwell, and obviously traumatized. Returning home to devastated communities was not much of an option. In November 1947, the United Nations passed a resolution that would create a Jewish State in the British mandate of Palestine (granted at the end of World War 1 primarily to protect their interest in the Suez Canal and its access to the southern parts of the British Empire). The resolution called for the creation of two states, one for Jews and one for Arabic speaking Palestinians, along with an internationally protected Jerusalem. Often thought of as a noble international response to the Holocaust, the creation of the State of Israel may also be thought of as an act of absolving responsibility, namely that few western countries emerging from war were interested in granting refugee status to a large number of European Jews.

In May 1948 Israel declared its Independence and invited Jews from around the world to a right of return and immediate citizenship in the new country. In what may have been a tremendous political mistake, the five Arab countries that surround Israel rejected the UN Resolution and invaded in response to the evacuation of Palestinians from Israeli land, a dispute that is far from resolved to this day.

If the Museum at Yad Vashem is harrowing then the Children's memorial is haunting. What the first accomplishes with stories and images, the second seeks to evoke with art and architecture. The best estimate of the number of Jewish children killed in the Holocaust is 1.5 million. On the grounds of Yad Vashem there is a separate building to honour these victims. Like the main museum one enters the children's memorial on a light descent. It is literally an experience of going down into the darkness. As you enter you are made to pause so that your eyes can adjust to the minimal light available. The memorial is relatively simple, it is a darkened room with a path that leads around a square. There is light in the darkness which is disorienting at first. You are uncertain what you are looking at or where you should fix your gaze. But as you stand still and look towards the middle you begin to realize that what you are looking at is a single lit candle in the middle of the room and that it is reflected 1.5 million times in the floor, walls, and ceiling that surround you. It is at once unbelievably beautiful and yet unspeakably sad.

A Palestinian Christian I spoke with who is committed to a peaceful resolution of the ongoing dispute and 'occupation' told me that a survey was recently done that showed for the first time in 3000 years, Jewish respondents say something other than the Exodus is the most important moment in Jewish history. That event is the Holocaust. Any understanding of modern Israel, its boundaries, disputes, and neighbours must take this tragic event to heart.

## **Holy Land as Hell: Encountering the Palestinian Reality**

The one question I have been asked more than any other upon my return from Israel and Palestine has been, 'did you feel safe?' It is a considerate question and one born mostly of the news we receive and the impression that is made by the stories we hear of events in the Middle East. And it is a fair question given that just this week there was a story well broadcast in news reports of rocket fire from Gaza and the Israeli military response against Hamas targets within Gaza. It is a dangerous and often violent conflict with a long history that does not seem to have any hope of being resolved. That being said, I can say most assuredly that at no point in my trip did I ever feel like I was in danger. Quite the contrary, the people I met were warm and friendly and the places I travelled to always felt quite secure.

That being said, one of the most unique opportunities I had on my trip was to spend time in the West Bank town of Bethlehem and to meet Palestinian people living and working there. A little geography for those unfamiliar. The boundaries of Israel include two Palestinian territories, Gaza and the West Bank. Following Israel's independence the territories were separate from Israel, they had not become a state because Palestinians rejected the terms of the 1947 UN Resolution and were supported by Arab neighbours who fought for a larger area for the Palestinian state. In 1967 in response to attacks originating in the territories, Israel took control of them in the so called 6 Day War. That is where the expression the "occupied territories" comes from. The Palestinian Authority governs some matters but checkpoints in and out of Gaza and the West Bank, as well as monetary and economic control come from Israel. Also, the governments of Gaza and West Bank are separate one from the other so that the reality of Palestinians living in each area is different from the other. I had no contact with people living in or from Gaza,

Bethlehem, a short bus ride from Jerusalem, is nonetheless in the West Bank. Nothing is required to leave Israel and enter the West Bank but upon return Israeli checkpoints control who enters. Palestinians need to have a permit to enter Israel. When we came to the checkpoint while riding the bus, all Palestinians had to exit the bus and stand by the side of the road while those with other passports remained aboard. On one occasion Leah and I crossed the checkpoint on foot. This was a distressing and somewhat humiliating exercise. A long, covered, ramp led to a locked gate. As people lined up to enter, the gate would unlock and only permit three people through at a time. Once through we had to place everything we had on a x-ray machine like at an airport and then present our passports to the soldier on the other side. For many Palestinians who work in Israel this is a process they have to go through every day.

I was tremendously thankful to discover and meet the people who are caring for Leah while she is living in Bethlehem. She found a place to stay on Air BnB and it is an apartment above the home of a couple named Lorette and Niccola. Theirs is a typical Palestinian home, the custom being that as male children grow and marry they often live in stories above their parents' house. So it is that this couple has come to care for Leah in her coming and going. On the day we were there they offered a beautiful meal of traditional Palestinian dishes, including maklouba, an upside down rice and meat casserole. One of the reasons that Leah is in Bethlehem is that a year ago she travelled there as part of a tour with a class from the University of Winnipeg. On that occasion her home stay was with another Palestinian family, Rima and Rajah and their children. Leah stayed in touch with them and they have acted as another somewhat adoptive family, often having Leah to their home and including her in family activities, most recently the engagement party of their oldest daughter according to Orthodox tradition. So it was that when Leah told them her father was visiting they insisted that we visit and I had another maklouba.

Bethlehem is of course renowned as the birthplace of Jesus. In the centre of the city is Manger Square and the Church of the Nativity. It is a large and ornate sanctuary and people line up for hours each day for a brief moment in the shrine carved out of stone beneath the altar, a moment to touch the place where Mary laid her infant son. One of the families we visited with told me that 100 years ago Bethlehem was an entirely Christian city, 25 years ago was 25% Christian, but today is but 1%. So it is that a profoundly Christian symbol is almost entirely under Muslim stewardship except for the Church of the Nativity itself. In almost every other way Bethlehem is reflective of the reality of life in the West Bank.

Osama Zoughbi is a bright, thoughtful, concerned, passionate, Palestinian man. He looks after his parents who are getting older but still live in their own home. He cares for his children, interrupting his work day to pick up kids at school, and on the day we met, making sure his son got to a dentist appointment. He scrabbles together a few different jobs to make ends meet, helping in his parents' rental properties, acting as a licensed tour guide when the opportunity presents itself, and working in support of Wi'am: The Palestinian Conflict Transformation Centre, a non-government organization operating in Bethlehem for the last 25 years. Wi'am is Arabic for 'cordial relationships' and this agency works to resolve conflicts within the Palestinian community and of course, works for a peaceful resolutions to the outstanding issues of conflict with Israel that daily impacts the lives of ordinary Palestinians.

But the reality of the conflict as Osama understands it is not revealed in descriptions or definitions but in a single view from the rooftop of the Wi'am office building in Bethlehem. Following a meeting with his uncle, the Founder and Director of Wi'am, Zoughbi Alzoughbi, Osama leads me to the rooftop. There he says one can look out and see in one glance what he refers to as the unholy trinity, a refugee camp, a settlement, and the wall.

Immediately below Wi'am is the Aida Palestinian refugee camp. A little history helps explain. Prior to and during World War 2 the area known today as Israel was under the control of the British, a consequence of the Paris 1919 World War 1 Peace Conference.

In November 1947, in large part responding to the atrocities of the Holocaust, the United Nations adopted Resolution 181 which called for the creation of 2 states, one as a Jewish homeland and another as a Palestinian nation upon the termination of the so called British mandate in May 1948. However, the five neighbouring Arab countries rejected the resolution and invaded when the State of Israel was born. Even the Palestinians I spoke with said that this may have been a terrible political error but nonetheless it meant that Israel was immediately thrust into conflict the moment it was created. Palestinians living in towns and villages were forced from their homes and pushed into refugee camps on the Arab side of the conflict. Aida is one such community. At first it was a camp with tents in which Palestinians resided in hope of returning to the homes. After a few years the United Nations created small temporary concrete housing units. Eventually more construction made the community more permanent though the hope of those who live there to this day remains that they should be able to return to the towns from which they were evicted back in 1948. The camp is not a happy place. Though there are schools and some social services it is a place of tension and violence. A 14 year old school boy was shot by an Israeli sniper just a few years ago and names of those killed in the conflict are painted on a makeshift memorial on the barrier that surrounds the camp. To be sure, there are places in Israel where the names of innocent victims of terrorist attacks are posted and remembered, such is the nature of a violent and seemingly irreconcilable conflict.

I don't want to draw too many conclusions about the life and experience of settlements as I did not have the opportunity to speak to anyone living in them but there are some things that are abundantly obvious. Settlements refer to relatively new building projects in Palestinian territory, subsidized by Israel, and occupied by Jewish Israeli residents. Not only are the new residences part of the settlement but so too, in many instances, are private roads that can travelled on by settlers but not by Palestinians living right next door. It is an example of encroachment. Palestinian land is claimed by Israel and the homes built on it are occupied by Jewish settlers thereby leaving less land for any prospective Palestinian use.

The third person in Osama's unholy trinity is the wall. A picture is worth a thousand words. There is nothing that offers any hope of neighbours getting to know one another and finding a path towards peace and reconciliation if an impenetrable concrete barrier capped by barbed wire separates them. The truth is that Israel quite rightly says that violence has been directed towards them from the Palestinian territories and Palestinians quite rightly say that violence has been directed towards them from Israel. The wall has largely been built on Palestinian land which means that it is another means of reducing the size of the territories.

No one I spoke with held much hope that a two state solution has much chance of succeeding. But if there is a glimmer of hope it may be in another idea. The people at Holy Land Trust as well as at Wi'am believe that another outcome is possible. That is a single democratic state. If the boundaries of Israel and Palestine are to be the boundaries of a single nation, then the people who live within those boundaries should have the same democratic rights and freedoms. Perhaps this is the idea that can take root and result in a more promising future for the Holy Land.

## **Holy Land as Home: Reflections on Piety and Pilgrimage**

Zion or Mt. Zion is referred to often in the Old Testament as it is in a number of older hymns. 2 Samuel 5 says that it is the fortress David took from the Jebusites as he made Jerusalem his capital. Today that area is referred to as the City of David and is a ruins and National Historic Site on the hill directly south of the Old City and the Temple Mount. Zion came to be a word used to describe various things at various times including God's holy hill (as in a few psalms), Jerusalem itself, and the allegorical heavenly city (i.e. Marching to Zion). Today, Mt. Zion is west of the City of David, outside the walls of the Old City through the Zion Gate on the south side. On Mt. Zion there are three places for visitors to see. One is the Church of the Dormition, which is built over the place where Mary, the mother of Jesus may or may not have died. Also on Mt. Zion is the tomb where David may or may not be buried. And finally, an upper room which may or may not have been the place where the Last Supper took place. Not that the signs there indicate any ambiguity.

On the day that Leah and I visited Mt. Zion I was most intrigued by the so called upper room. There a few reasons to doubt the authenticity of this as the actual place where Jesus and his disciples met to celebrate the Passover on the night of his arrest. The first is that it is unlikely that this small group from Nazareth would have had access to a room at so significant a place as on top of Zion's holy hill. Another consideration is that Mark 14 and the parallel texts in the other gospels say that the room was in the city, where Mt. Zion is located outside of the walls of the city of Jerusalem as it would have been understood in Jesus' day. Thirdly, Jesus and his disciples were not significant people in their own day and the Christian church was not a prominent place in Jerusalem for several hundred years after the death of Jesus so pinpointing a 'lost' location is next to impossible. Finally, the room that claims to be the upper room is in terrific shape, fully enclosed, and easily accommodating thousands of people passing through it each year. It couldn't possibly have remained in this condition for 2000 years. Having said all that, as I was in the room (which may indeed be similar to a typical upper story in a house from 2000 years ago), there was a dear young woman who was overcome by emotion. She stood in a corner and as she wept, contemplating the passion of her Lord and Saviour, several companions stood around her praying with and for her. For her it was Holy ground and far be it for me or anyone else to take that away from her.

According to statistics from the most recent year in which data is known, 3.6 million people travel to Israel each year, a number that is on the increase. The largest number (19%) is from the United States though great numbers come from all over the world. Tour groups abound from religious affiliation.

My very dear friend Bob Galston loved the Holy Land and he loved showing it to people who hadn't been there before. He took several groups over and as the trip drew closer his excitement could barely be contained. On one occasion he had the opportunity to baptize someone from this church (Ted Reeve) in the Jordan River who had never been baptised before.

I never spoke to Ted about that experience but I remember that it was something that for Bob was extremely powerful and moving. That being said I travelled towards the Jordan River in fear and trepidation.

The Jordan flows from north to south, out of the Sea of Galilee and into the Dead Sea. If Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist as the Bible says, it is likely that it would have been in the area east of Jerusalem, close to Jericho, and in the Judean wilderness or desert. However, the area that is described as the 'baptismal site on the Jordan' is in a green and lush region on the south side of the Sea of Galilee. My access to this site was on a day tour of Nazareth and Galilee booked through an Israeli tour company. On my reservation sheet there was a line wedged between lunch instructions and a reminder to bring sun screen that made me a bit nervous. It said "Baptism will be available."

Baptism is a sacrament of the church. By that I mean that it is a ritual of initiation into a community of Christian faith carried out by those appointed by the community of faith. Baptism is a sign of God's grace, a recognition that the love and mercy of God is offered by God freely and abundantly. It is difficult for me to see how 'baptism will be available' when offered as a tour bonus is authentic. I have two intellectual problems with this. The first is that Christianity is not solely an individual state of piety. The love of God and love of neighbour are both essential and fundamental to our understanding and so as meaningful as being baptised in the Jordan while on vacation may be it is, at the least, insufficient. The second concern I have is that many people may not understand that one is never baptised twice. How many pilgrims to the Jordan undertake baptism unaware that nothing more can be added to the statement that in your baptism you have been fully and completely accepted by God for all eternity.

Nevertheless, our tour bus was coming close to a visitor attraction called "The baptismal site on the Jordan". To his credit the tour guide, who was Jewish, made a point of saying that this was unlikely the site of the baptism of Jesus, and that it was more of a convenient tributary of the Jordan River rather than the river itself. He asked if anyone on the van wanted to be baptised and then said that when we were there, there would be lots of baptisms going on and perhaps we could find an ordained minister. I averted my eyes. And I made sure that Leah understood she was not to volunteer me for baptising anyone who had the misfortune of booking the same bus tour as us. (Not that they would necessarily have wanted that). It was a curious and peculiar place. The parking lot was filled with vans and buses and the area by the river was teeming with people. Many had put on white robes which were available in the visitor centre for rent along with towels. Along the river there was a paved walkway and below the walkway a half dozen or so staircases that led into the water. Each served as a pool of sorts and people lined up to be baptised or maybe to reaffirm their baptism. Most, it appeared had come as part of pilgrimage tour groups and appeared to have a religious leader with them. Naturally there was an enormous gift shop on the way out.

This past December we celebrated a renewal of baptismal faith with two adults at Charleswood. I commented then and still maintain that it was a tremendous privilege to participate in such a service. It doesn't happen all that often.

And the opportunity to actively nourish your spirituality in a meaningful way can be difficult to find. So I am thankful for those who could come to this religious tourist site and despite all the clamour still have that moment in which their hearts are warmed and their faith is deepened. But I have difficulty not lamenting all the pilgrims who come to this place and find it as anything other than that which increases one's love of God and love of neighbour both.

In the first section in this series I mentioned my experience of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and the somewhat chaotic manner in which thousands of people were moving through it each day with the briefest of stops at shrines which may or may not have been places where episodes in the crucifixion story took place. Judging by the wide variety of languages spoken by tour guides, it seems reasonable to think that thousands and thousands of people each year come to this place in the hope of a spiritually uplifting experience. So it was odd when Leah and I discovered that a block over from our hotel in East Jerusalem was a religious tourist site called "The Garden Tomb".

"The Garden Tomb" was established by a British Missionary Society in the late 1800's. At the entrance there is a plaque that explains up front that there is no way of knowing precisely the location of the resurrection but that is not to say that this is a random location. The thinking behind it was that the Bible says that Jesus was buried outside the city walls. Even if the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is outside where the walls of the ancient city was located, this is nonetheless further removed and in a setting that could better be described as a garden. More than that, this Garden Tomb is north of the Damascus Gate of the Old City, so named because it is on the ancient road from Jerusalem to Damascus. If the Romans were using crucifixion to send a message to Judeans to refrain from insurrection then placing the crucified on a road for all to see was an effective means of communication. Even if the original British adventurers had convinced themselves with this argument, those who came after and preserved the Garden Tomb saw it as opportunity to create an environment where one could imagine the place of burial and resurrection more easily.

Though it lies alongside a busy street the Garden Tomb is a relatively quiet and peaceful place. A meandering path leads you to a stone wall with an entrance. In here is a place that 'feels' like the tomb described in scripture. When I emerged from the tomb and stood in the small outdoor chapel at its entrance there was a woman standing nearby who, like the woman we had seen in the room of the Last Supper, was wailing uncontrollably. It was reminiscent of the story of Mary Magdalene in John 20 who while weeping tells the stranger "They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him". Fortunately there was another woman with her who was providing comfort and I do not wish to judge nor presume what all she was experiencing in that moment. But I imagine this is a scene that plays itself over and over and over again in these sites of religious tourism. What seems important to mention about religious tourism is that the impact is heavily determined by the expectations of those who visit.

I found my visit to Israel and Palestine to be incredibly interesting, fascinating, inspiring, and curious. It is also an undeniably complicated place and I can't help but think I have barely scratched a surface in my understanding.

It is profoundly sad to see the birthplace of our faith caught in perpetual conflict or to find such an impassible divide separating the people who live there. But I feel remarkably privileged to have had the opportunity and it has made what I'm sure will be a lifelong impression upon me. But did it make me believe more? Or believe deeper? Or believe something that I didn't believe before? At this point I don't think I have had an epiphany that answers these questions. But before going I wasn't one who held that transformations happen in an instant. Faith deepens by the slow cascade of experience and reflection over time. And the only answer that matters to the questions of growing or deepening or expanding faith is another question, does it help me love more? And since that transformation can take anywhere and in anyone, I have to conclude by saying, every land is a Holy Land.