

Faith and Place

The act of pilgrimage is an ancient tradition among Christians. In the early church, Christians travelled to Jerusalem and Bethlehem to see with their own eyes the places where our Lord was born, crucified, buried and rose again, and to walk in His steps. During the Middle Ages, pilgrims travelled across Europe to visit Rome, the centre of Catholic tradition. The Way of Saint James, a journey across the north of Spain to Santiago de Compostela took travellers to the site of the first uprising that led to the expulsion of the Moorish rulers from the Iberian Peninsula, after almost eight hundred years of occupation and Islamic dominance. Pilgrims from around the world still undertake the eight hundred kilometre walk. Christian groups around the world celebrate their faith with walks of meditation and celebration of community and place.

Pilgrimage was usually associated with vows of holiness, abstention from sinful inclinations and interests, giving up creature comforts, fasting to dominate fleshly appetites, praying often and with great sincerity and seeking fellowship with fellow-travellers. It was linked to the notion of taking up one's cross, being prepared to suffer and endure hardship, persevere against weariness and do good to all one encountered along the way. Destinations favoured by pilgrims included churches, abbeys, sites of miracles, the homes and graves of saintly men and women and other sites considered to be sacred.

John Bunyan described the Christian journey in his popular novel "Pilgrim's Progress", which has been translated into more than two hundred languages. The central character is a young man named Christian who flees the City of Destruction and finally reaches the Celestial City, after many dangerous adventures that threaten his life. The work is an allegory, in the form of a dream, about the Christian walk as a pilgrimage. Bunyan wanted to emphasise that the Christian life is a walk of faith, not external trappings of tradition. The Bible also describes our Christian adventure as a pilgrimage (Hebrews 11:13-16; 13:14; 1 Peter 2:11).

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre

A perennial highlight of pilgrimage down through the centuries has been a visit to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, one of two venues that celebrate the death of Jesus Christ (a second Calvary site is located in the vicinity of the Garden Tomb, outside of the walls of the ancient city). During the Middle Ages, Christians from Europe descended on the Holy Land, frequently returning home with souvenirs in the form of "anointed" oil, holy water and relics, said to include pieces of the true cross, a head or two of John the Baptist, a bottle of Mary's milk, straw from the manger, the desiccated bones of saints and other religious curios. The search for the cup used by Jesus at the last supper was celebrated as a quest for a "holy grail" and became the stuff of legend throughout Christendom. Following the triumph of Islam over Jerusalem in the seventh century Muslim overlords

generally tolerated the traffic of pilgrims. Among other things, it was good for business. However, periodic restrictions on access to these places, and persecution of pilgrims, led to open conflict. Such practices were one of the pretexts used for the launch of the First Crusade in 1095.

I was always keen to visit Israel and see for myself the land of Jesus. Not because I believed such a journey had a specific value in terms of my Christian life, as was widely believed during past eras. I was simply interested. It would be instructive to have a Bible in one hand and a tour map in the other, to enhance my understanding of Biblical times and events. The Old City of Jerusalem fascinated me, containing as it did major sites mentioned in the Old and New Testaments. Here was the City of David, Hezekiah and Pilate, the location of many of Jesus' miracles, such as the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda, the place where Stephen was stoned, Gethsemane and the Mount of Olives. I accepted that there was no certainty about many of the precise locations. When we finally had an opportunity to do so, my wife and I travelled from Amman, Jordan to Galilee and Jerusalem, to make our first visit to the Holy City. The country was in the grip of an uprising by disaffected Palestinians that had reduced the numbers of foreign tourists to alarmingly low levels and hurt the economy.

Most sites of interest to Christendom were identified by Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, who toured the Holy Land in 326 and was concerned about the state of neglect into which Jerusalem had fallen. According to one church tradition, she found the crosses used to crucify Jesus and the two thieves who hung beside Him, the crown of thorns, nails used during the crucifixion and the inscription affixed to the cross above His head. Helena believed she had identified Jesus' birthplace in Bethlehem as well as site at the Mount of Olives where He prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. Accordingly, she ordered the dismantling of pagan shrines and began construction of a huge basilica (the first church on the site), which was completed in 335.

Naturally, there are no guarantees about any location. Given that Jerusalem was destroyed by the armies of Rome in 70AD it was possible that the places venerated by the church were not the right ones. In a sense, however, that did not matter as much as the association, for Jesus certainly ministered and suffered in the general vicinity. Going to Israel, we imagined the place of Jesus' birth and death would be places of quiet reflection and celebration. We pictured the Garden Tomb as a locus of great joy, as Christians are the only people who know their Saviour has risen from the dead. As with so many things, the reality was not much like the expectation.

Deep in the heart of the centre of the world's three monotheistic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), barely 600 metres from the Wailing Wall, the double-domed Church of the Holy Sepulchre has been described as the most valuable acre in the world. This is where it all happened, where Our Lord was crucified. To many believers it is the holiest of holy places.

The church is accessed via a narrow commercial, street. Once in the courtyard, where curio sellers and guides vie for business, large timber doors form the entrance to the church itself. Inside, there is not much light, but an abundance of candles provides adequate light. There are chapels everywhere. The walls are festooned with crosses, lamps, mosaics and icons. Up one stairway is a small shrine, allegedly the site of the crucifixion. Pilgrims from around the world queue to kiss a stone slab where the body of Jesus lay when it was anointed. The lowest chapel is believed to have been the original base of Golgotha.

Faith or feuding? A lesson in priorities

However, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre has also been a site of feuding between Christian traditions, which perplexes non-Christians who cannot reconcile such behaviour with the teachings of Christ. Over the centuries Christian denominations have vied for the privilege of praying next to the holy sites. As each group gained control of the church they modified the interior to suit its beliefs and needs. An 1852 edict by the ruling Ottomans established access arrangements (including appointments, lights and service times) that obtain today. Custody of the church is shared by Greek Orthodox, Catholic, Armenian, Syrian, Coptic and Ethiopian Christians. Chapels, oratories, altars, lamps, domes, seats, books, windows, mosaics, chapels, ornaments, arches, chains, flagstones, icons and urns all reflect the individual traditions that installed them in the building.

Prior to our visit, dozens of people were injured in a fight between feuding Greek Orthodox and Franciscan priests over whether a door to a chapel should be open or closed. When we attempted to visit an area controlled by the Armenian Church we were peremptorily refused entry because our guide was Orthodox. Within each section of the huge church, the more powerful assert their rights and take advantage of any weakness in their rivals.

In another fracas, monks from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Coptic Church of Egypt, who have been vying for control of the rooftop for centuries, came to blows. Monks threw stones and iron bars at each other and police were called to separate the warring factions and reestablish order. The fight was not about differences in theology, but the position of a chair used by an Egyptian monk near the entrance to the roof. He routinely sat here to assert the Copts' claim to the rooftop of the church; the Ethiopian monks had been evicted from the main church and used the rooftop as their monastery. It transpired that the Egyptian monk had simply decided to move his chair out of the sun. This was seen by the Ethiopians as violating the status quo and led to open clashes and bloodshed.

Thousands of Palestinian Christians from nearby Bethlehem are routinely barred by soldiers from entering the church, on the security grounds.

Far from being a holy site, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is arguably un-Christian. While we were impressed with the age and size of the building, we were appalled at the poor testimony of people who called themselves

Christians competing unashamedly for control of what they believed to be the pinnacle of the ministry of the Prince of Peace.

Celebrating life

At the same time, we were encouraged in discussions about God, faith and Christian praxis with Orthodox and Coptic priests we met. Our devotion is neither to a 1,700 year old Church, nor to historical events, but to that living faith which commenced with our Lord Jesus Christ's resurrection.

As I admire an old lithograph of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre that my wife bought me from an antique dealer in Beirut, I am thankful that it is faith in Christ alone that enlivens our spiritual lives today. "Holy Water" from the Jordan River "where Jesus was baptised", given to me by Jordanian officials, and frankincense and myrrh from Yemen and Oman are among my own "relics" of time spent in the Middle East, but I know they are only of intrinsic value. The only element that will last for eternity is what is born of God. That is the essence of our proclamation, our hope and confidence.

When feuding between earthly religious institutions over control of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and other places of interest in the Holy Land pass into history the Risen Christ will continue to be celebrated by the true Church, men and women redeemed by His blood, indwelt by the Holy Spirit and heirs of His life.