

Day 2- 19/11/2014

The pilgrimage is well underway. All were safe and happy as we boarded the coach this morning. As we made our journey to Nazareth, our guide told us of the plight of Christians in the Holy Land. Recent events makes it feel rather odd that our pilgrimage is one of such tranquility amidst serious tension. In the 1920's, we are told, the Christian population of Israel is about 15%; today it is less than 1%. We are reminded of the concrete situation of our Christian brothers and sisters here: how they struggle to see hope for the future and how common it is becoming for families with long local heritage to reluctantly leave.

NAZARETH – Church of the Annunciation

In light of some of these thoughts it is hard not to journey with a sense of confusion, with heavy hearts, a degree of helplessness; with this in mind we arrived at the Church of the Annunciation. The Church, with its striking and impressive facade, did not fail to live up to expectations. As one pilgrim described 'things just keep getting better and better on this pilgrimage'.

Before we enter our pilgrimage spiritual director, Fr John Farrell OP, reminds us that the prayer we may often say without really thinking, the Hail Mary, comes from the words that were first spoken here when the Angel Gabriel and a young girl from Nazareth had an extraordinary conversation. We enter through the cast iron doors that tell their own story. The doors help to catechise us, to enter us into the world of Scripture, and like the Church Fathers who saw the sin of Eve (Latin EVA) to be reversed by the fidelity of Our Lady (EVA changes to AVE the first word out of the angels mouth 'Hail').

'Verbum Caro Hic Factum Est'

On the first floor we see remnants of Byzantine and Crusader architecture. The place is saturated with centuries of lived Christian tradition as old as Christianity itself. The excavation of the site, started by Fr Bagati, found on its ancient walls engravings related to the Annunciation in Greek, Armenian, Hebrew and Aramaic dating from the 1st century. The roof is said to represent an upside down lily, the roots of which are in heaven and its petals, its fruits on earth, evocative of the profound message of this story. Still buzzing with the profundity of the moment we went to the upper part of the Church for our Mass. Fr John Farrell OP in his homily suggested to the assembled that in order to understand this great mystery of the incarnation we really need to understand that Jesus is true God and true man. Jesus was formed in a womb, as were we all. 'If Peter was our hero yesterday, then Mary is certainly the heroine today', Fr John said. We know very little of the hidden childhood of Jesus. We certainly do know he was part of a large clan of many brothers and sisters, a tribal family. 'Jesus would have had an accent, a Northern one at that' we are told, as we are invited to vividly imagine these hidden events of Jesus' life, the goodness of his family life. Fr John then gave us three tools that should be in the Catholic Christians' toolkit:

1. The ability to recognise the deep down goodness of all that is. All is gifted, and as it tells us in Genesis God made it 'good'.
2. However evil is a reality, sinfulness in what we call the Fall (especially in human nature) is particularly highlighted in the ingenuity of cruelty inflicted to Our Saviour.
3. Finally, we must cultivate a tangible sense of the power of the Resurrection. The Resurrection which destroys all that is 'deathly' and fearful in us, that power which drives the evilness out of humanity.

These, we are told, are the tools needed to be the Disciples that Jesus is calling us to be. Pope Francis calls us to be 'agents of the Resurrection', an enterprise that began in this place when 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14). 'We are not optimists' Fr John explains, 'we are better; we place our hope in God'. In Mass we will receive His body to embody Him in our lives, His life which began in this very place.

The priests, led by the Cardinal, then renewed the promises of their priesthood in this place of divine promise. This was followed by a procession led by the clergy to the 'House of Nazareth' in the humble epicentre of this grand Church. After a moment in silent prayer and recitation of the Creed, we were addressed by a Franciscan representing the guardians of the Holy Land. He asked that we remember their work when we return home. We who are a 'living local stone' of this great universal Church. We were invited to reflect how we might better assist in prayer and deed this situation of conflict and so we are brought right back to our thoughts as we entered this place of peace. The experience as a whole was described by many as 'incredibly moving', and that it is an experience one 'can't really describe and do it justice...I am lost for words'.

SYNAGOGUE OF NAZARETH

Walking through a quintessential market-place we arrive at little church off the beaten track. This building, with its distinct Crusader flavour of architecture, dates back to the Middle Ages and in the time of Jesus, served as more of a community house. The Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of worship for the 1st Century Jew; the synagogue served as a place of worship at times for sure, but also so much more. It was a meeting place, a place to settle disputes and break open the Scriptures. It is in this place that Jesus, a young Jewish boy, who had grown up in their midst opened the scroll at Isaiah 61 and proclaimed that 'today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). It is hard to imagine how that would have been received. It may help perhaps, as it did for many of the pilgrims, to consider that in a town of that size there would have been about 250 people, 300 maximum. Everyone knows everyone. Perhaps this explains the revulsion and confusion caused by Jesus' statement claiming to be the culmination and fulfilment of the Scriptures.

We then went for lunch which we shared with Mark Byford formerly of the BBC who told us about the book he is in the Holy Land researching for on the Annunciation.

MOUNT TABOR

The traditional site of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1) follows on in the Gospel from Peter's declaration that Jesus is the Christ. This was a significant point of change in the ministry of Jesus, 'and so it is for our pilgrimage' Fr John told us. It is only now that Jesus refers to his Passion, the first instance in the Gospel, and now all eyes are now fixed on Jerusalem. Likewise, after the leafy greenery of Galilee we are fixing our gaze toward Jerusalem, perhaps with equal tension or anxiety in our heart.

Fr John emphatically encouraged us in his reflection to buy the very readable *Evangelii Gaudium*, which he says will allow us to transfigure our Christian lives in light of the Resurrection, aptly carrying on this theme from his earlier homily. We are to become radiant in our Christian life, like the face of Jesus. We are to become what we are in the sight of our heavenly Father: a disciple transfigured in the joy of believing. Fr John shares with the assembled Pope Francis' trumpet call to joy and asks why are there some in our Church that seem as though 'to live in a permanent Lent without an Easter'. The 'loud mouth Peter' confident in his steadfastness pre-Resurrection is transfigured by the Pentecost experience to become a tabernacle of the joy of the Resurrection, of the Holy Spirit living in him.

CANA

'Can anything good come from Nazareth? We are asked this question and it suggests that Nazareth was somewhat of a rough place, which it is to this day', our guide says. It is in this turbulent situation that Jesus performed his first sign (John 2:1-12) at a marriage in Cana of Galilee. Our Lady, the heroine, gives us the whole spirit of Marian theology in her last recorded words in the Gospel: 'Do whatever he tells you' (John 2:5). We must equally follow the lead of Our Lady to her Son.

How appropriate that in this place synonymous with marriage we then invited our married pilgrims to renew their marriage vows. We recognise in the story there is no mention of Joseph at this point, Joseph it may be presumed had died by the time of the wedding in Cana with Our Lady and Jesus at his side. With this in mind we invited everyone to pray for those who are widows or widowers and those whose spouses can not be here for whatever reason. A touching end to a profound day that will take time to digest.