**Listening to the Living Stones**

As always, it was the living stones who spoke the loudest.

In the middle of November I took a group of 42 pilgrims from the Diocese of Blackburn to the Holy Land. At least I say 42. Each day we ‘vlogged’ the pilgrimage and sent short videos home of what we had done which meant that we were joined by several thousand ‘virtual pilgrims,’ many of whom seemed to enjoy the experience almost as much as those who were physically present! It was great to be able to use technology to throw open something of the experience.

There is a danger in arranging such a pilgrimage that one focusses exclusively on the dead stones. Many visitors appear to want a ‘Disneyfied’ Holy Land in which the developmental clock stopped two thousand years ago. They stick to the safe places: to the timeless beauty of the Sea of Galilee, to make-believe sites such as the Garden Tomb and Nazareth Village and to other locations that confirm our children’s picture book stereo-types of the Holy Land. They cast their minds backwards as if the Christian faith were an exercise in reminiscence and the highest goal of the pilgrim is to imagine ‘how things were.’

But the reason one visits the Holy Land is to deepen one’s understanding of the Incarnation, and the birth of Christ is more than just a historical event. In the life of the Church it is a contemporary reality. Yes it is good to remember that Jesus walked this street and taught on that beach, but only if it reminds us that Jesus still walks, still teaches and still locates himself amongst the poorest and the most oppressed. So the dead stones are dumb without the living stones which are the hard-pressed Christian communities of the middle East.

On our pilgrimage we delighted of course in the dead stones. We celebrated the Eucharist each day in places such as the Mountain of Transfiguration, the Sea of Galilee and Emmaus. We pushed through the crowds at the Church of the Nativity and in the Via Dolorosa. We photographed the amazing views from Mount Beatitudes and the Mount of Olives and we renewed our Baptismal promises in the Jordan. But if that was all we had done, we would have been religious tourists, not pilgrims.

What made the Holy Land real was Jamal. We met him in the Christian run Jeel al-Amal Boys’ Home in Bethany where he had been brought at the age of two, desperately thin and with his body covered in more than fifty cigarette burns. Yet now he has found a place of love and safety with food, education and friends. It was through him that Bethany, the place of hospitality and recuperation for Jesus, spoke to us.

Or Mary, a wonderfully articulate Palestinian Christian who addressed us at the Bethlehem Rehabilitation Centre. The notorious Security Wall, placed without warning seven yards from the hospital, means she cannot expand the vital work she and her team are doing. This is a huge frustration for in that desperately poor city the sick and the needy flock in ever larger numbers seeking medical care. It was Mary who showed us the real Bethlehem, where God’s grace meets human need.

Or the Dean of St George’s Anglican Cathedral who spoke so honestly about the profound challenges confronting the ever-shrinking Christian presence in the Middle East (the Diocese of Jerusalem now has just 7000 worshippers and 36 clergy across five nations). He showed us the real Jerusalem where it is only the Resurrection that brings hope to cross-shaped lives.

Of course it made hard listening, for what we heard was raw, first-hand testimony about the reality of life under occupation. And that is the point. It is *this* tough, sinful, broken world that the Incarnate Christ touches and changes, not one that we conjure up in our complacent western imaginations. Jesus was born in an occupied nation and amongst an oppressed people, so it is no surprise that this is where we can find him today.

There are doubtless some who would object that a pilgrimage like this is political, and that pilgrimage is about prayer, not politics. But in the Holy Land everything is political, nothing more so than history and religion, the two things on which pilgrimage is based. Let’s not be so naïve as to think there is any such thing as a non-political pilgrimage to this most troubled of lands. The only question is, whose politics you are unwittingly accepting. The hotel you stay in, the guides you choose, the sites you visit – all of these are deeply political decisions. So instead of trying to escape the politics, we need to look for Jesus there. That is what pilgrimage is about.

One day we celebrated the Eucharist in the desert. As we set up we were surrounded by Bedouin families selling us scarves and bracelets. They were desperately poor, ill-shod and hungry. They sat with us during the service, not out of devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist but because they didn’t want to lose customers. A pilgrim offered one of the boys a small piece of pitta bread that she had brought with her, and he took it with glinting eyes, shoving it down his mouth with desperate glee. All except for one last mouthful which he held back. ‘This is for you,’ he said to the pilgrim, and they shared the bread together. That boy was so poor that all he had offer his new friend was that which she had already given to him.

So there is Jesus, for what can any of us offer to God other than mere scraps of what he has given us? What is the Eucharist other than us returning to God a fraction of the wonderful gifts he bestows upon us?

A pilgrimage to the Holy Land is a wonderful experience for any Christian. But if you go, don’t bury yourself away in romantic fluff and anodyne reminiscence. Let the living stones speak. Because that’s where you’ll find Jesus.

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