

HOLY INNOCENTS' PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY LAND TO MARK THE CATHOLIC PRESENCE IN ORPINGTON SINCE 1909 AND THE CLOSE OF YEAR OF PRIESTS - 16th – 24th MAY 2010

Our group of 56, led by Fr Victor Vella, included several people from outside the Parish, from Ireland and as far away as Australia, friends and relations of parishioners. Francesca Robinson from Pax Travel also came with us. We soon got to know one another and there was great camaraderie and laughter. Aside from the prayerful, emotional moments, we had a great deal of fun. We celebrated two birthdays, a wedding anniversary (33 years) and a Golden Wedding anniversary.

Our Guide, Mourad Tabar, an Arab Christian, was extremely knowledgeable and gave us a tremendous amount of historical and political information without the aid of notes. He literally quoted chapter and verse from the Bible. Israel is a beautiful country with its mountains and valleys. We saw olive trees, fields of sunflowers, bougainvillea, hibiscus, jacaranda and much more. It is very difficult to describe the beauty and magnificence of the many churches we visited. You must go and see for yourselves!

DAY 1 - We left Orpington at 5 o'clock in the morning for Heathrow, arriving at our hotel in Nazareth after dark. The town was spread out below us, full of twinkling lights.

DAY 2 - After an early breakfast we drove through Nazareth to Lake Galilee where we had an hour's boat ride. To our surprise the Union Jack was hoisted and the National Anthem played! The lake was calm and as we listened to an extract from the Bible, we were taken back in time. To many of us, this was a very special moment. On to Tabgha, the site of the Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes (Matt. 15: 29-38). We visited the church of St. Peter's Primacy. Jesus appointed Simon Peter to the office of the Primacy "Feed my lambs – feed my sheep" (John 21: 15 – 19). After lunch we ascended the Golan Heights and drove along the mountain range with a breathtaking view of the Sea of Galilee, our coach driver, Mr. Kamel, coping splendidly with the scary hairpin bends! Our first Mass was celebrated in the open air, in the warm sunshine, overlooking the Sea of Galilee on the so called Mount of Beatitudes, where the Sermon on the Mount is thought to have taken place (Matt 5:1 – 7:28). It was a very beautiful occasion with several of us offering prayers for special intentions and Bernard leading the singing. We went into the eight-sided chapel built by the Franciscans. The walls each have a blessing inscribed on them and the mosaic on the floor is decorated with symbols of the virtues of man, referred to in the sermon. Today we also visited St. Peter's House, where Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law (Matt 8: 14), and the museum where The Galilee Boat is housed and preserved. Believed to be from the time of Jesus, this was cocooned in a special covering and dredged from the lake by some fisherman. For lunch some of us enjoyed St. Peter's Fish – a tasty white fish served complete with head and tail!

DAY 3 - Firstly, we visited the childhood home of Jesus and the Basilica of the Annunciation. Our Guide, Mourad, born and living in Nazareth with his wife and two month old child, told us that Christians, Muslims and Jews live peaceably together. There are many churches, monasteries and convents, hostels, hospitals and schools maintained by various denominations. Nazareth grew from a humble town in the time of Jesus, into the important town that it is today.

After lunch we travelled by taxi up to Mount Tabor, the traditional site of Jesus' Transfiguration (Matt 17: 1 – 8). We celebrated Mass in the Franciscan Basilica of the Transfiguration which is a most beautiful building. Afterwards we all crowded into the small Chapel of Moses. From here we progressed to Yardenit, the Baptism site where the River Jordan flows out from the Sea of Galilee. People wore special robes in the water. We returned to our hotel for dinner and an early night.

DAY 4 - After an early breakfast we went to the Basilica of the Annunciation for Mass. This magnificent building with its gigantic dome dominates the town of Nazareth. This was built on the site of the rock cave, the home of Mary which was excavated by the Franciscans. We drove through Cana en route to Jerusalem, our base for the next 5 days. We passed by the Dead Sea to Qumran, south of Jericho. The Dead Sea Scrolls recording both Biblical and extra Biblical texts were discovered in Qumran in 1947. Here it was very hot and spectacular, with white sand and towering mountains. After a short film we visited the first cave where a stone, thrown by a Bedouin boy to dislodge a goat, brought to light a history hidden for 1900 years. The stone hit an earthenware jar containing a scroll. More caves were subsequently excavated. We saw a section of the original scrolls displayed in a glass cabinet. We had lunch at the Oasis restaurant.

In the afternoon some of the group chose to relax on the beach by the Dead Sea, (some even testing the water); watching the floaters and others covered in the therapeutic black mud. The rest travelled on to Masada, ascending by cable car to the famous fortress. In the Jewish war of the first century 967 zealots, after a 5 year siege, chose to die by their own hand rather than become pagan slaves of the Roman Empire. Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C built a massive palace, paved with magnificent mosaics which are still to be seen. After a very long and busy day we arrived at our residence in Jerusalem.

DAY 5 - Today we visited Bethlehem which in Hebrew means House of Bread, Beth – house, lehem – bread. Leaving Jerusalem we had to go through the checkpoint in the Wall of Separation, erected in 2005. We saw people passing through from Bethlehem to their work in Jerusalem. We were very privileged to celebrate Mass in the lower chapel of the Basilica of the Nativity. The Basilica is vast and magnificent. It is shared by the Greek Orthodox, the Armenians and the Catholics. In the Grotto of the Nativity, down some steps from the main church, is a silver star marking the birthplace of Jesus, which pilgrims kiss. This was a very special moment for us all. We also visited the beautiful Shepherds' Field Church. (Luke 2: 10 – 11).

Bethlehem is a bustling town and on weekday mornings, Manger Square is alive with a typical Oriental market, attended by women from the surrounding villages. Here are to be found everything from sweet Arab cakes dripping in honey, to statuettes and other artifacts carved in olive wood. Most Bethlehemites live off tourism and many are skilled artisans and craftsmen. Our coach dropped us outside a shop where we bought beautiful souvenirs made from olive wood. We were also supplied with refreshing glasses of juice.

After lunch we visited Ein Karem where St. John the Baptist was born, and where the Virgin Mary came to see her cousin Elizabeth. The 17th century Church of the Visitation was built over the

birthplace of St. John. Steps lead down to a natural cave – the grotto of the birth. Outside is the Sanctuary of the Visitation and on the wall the Magnificat is depicted in several languages.

DAY 6 - After breakfast we boarded the coach for a visit to the Ecole Biblique run by the Dominicans. Fr. Gregory Patun from the USA gave us a short talk on the history of the college and then concelebrated Mass with Fr. Victor: another wonderful chapel and a very prayerful occasion. From the Ecole Biblique it was a short walk to the Garden Tomb, a very beautiful, peaceful place. Henk Bonneville, a German guide, explained to us that it took 12 years to excavate and clear the site.

Via Dolorosa - Several of our men took it in turns to carry the cross as we prayed the Stations of the Cross. Jackie Low read very movingly as we made our way along the Via Dolorosa, at times quietly, then into the hustle and bustle of the market, with people going about their business. We felt transported in time, imagining how the suffering Saviour must have felt. Later we visited the octagonal Church of the Dormition, which towers above Mount Zion. This commemorates the tradition that here the Virgin Mary fell into eternal sleep. In the Crypt is a life size statue of the sleeping Mary, made of cherrywood and ivory and in the dome above, a mosaic of Christ welcoming his Mother. Other churches visited were the Church of St. Peter in Gallicantu where Peter thrice denied Jesus (John 18: 15), the Church of St. Anne with a beautiful statue of St. Anne with Our Lady, and the Church of St. Jerome, translator of the Bible into Latin. We went into the cave where he worked. After supper we had a little “get-together” with wine and nibbles and with some impromptu entertainment from some of our group!

DAY 7 - On this day we visited the Mount of Olives with a magnificent view of all of ancient and modern Jerusalem, the centre of the modern biblical world. We walked down to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed on the night of his arrest (Matt 26: 36 – 39). Here Fr Victor celebrated Mass. We also saw the Lithostrotos (the site where Pilate judged Jesus (Matt 27: 2), the Ecce Homo Arch, where Pilate showed the scourged Christ to the people, with the words “ECCE HOMO – BEHOLD THE MAN” (John 18: 28, 19: 26.)

After supper we returned to the Garden of Gethsemane for prayers at 9.30 pm on the Vigil of Pentecost. This was a very uplifting occasion. An atmospheric walk in the Garden with its stately grove of eight ancient olive trees from the time of Jesus concluded the day. These trees and their fruit have given this site the name Gethsemane: gat-shamna is olive-press in Aramaic.

DAY - 8 PENTECOST SUNDAY - Up at 5 am (The Muezzin called the faithful to prayer at 4 am every morning, so there was no further sleep for many of us!) In 1149, after the conquest of Jerusalem, the Crusaders erected the present Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre which contains the tomb of Jesus and place of Crucifixion under one roof. Magnificent mosaics decorate the place where Jesus was crucified. Here Fr. Victor celebrated Mass in the upper part of the Basilica, next to the Crucifixion site. The whole place was packed with pilgrims awaiting their turn to celebrate Mass. It was a very humbling experience, knowing that we were at the actual site where Jesus suffered and died. It was a great privilege.

After Mass we visited the Jewish Synagogue where we were welcomed by Manny Blumfield, Orthodox Jew and a great friend of Fr. Victor. We were all amazed at the beauty of the interior and we listened to Rabbi Finkelstein from New York (he had a great sense of humour), as he explained to us some aspects of Judaism.

Our next visit was to the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum. This contains the priceless biblical scrolls and scroll fragments found at Qumran, including a portion of the Isaiah Scroll. The building was especially designed to symbolize their discovery. Its dome is in the shape of the cover of the jars within which the scrolls were found. The black basalt wall symbolizes the Sons of Darkness, whilst the Shrine itself is a sparkling white for the Sons of Light, which is generally considered a reference to the Essenes. Within the Shrine, a central display case represents the wooden roller of a Torah Scroll. The Bar Kochba letters, various relics and household effects found at the site of the discovery are displayed in niches in the long tunnel-like entrance of the Shrine of the Book.

The Model of Ancient Jerusalem in the grounds of the Israel Museum - Professor Avi-Yonah of the Hebrew University put many years of research and work into producing this 1:50 scale model of the City of Jerusalem at the time of the Second Temple, the time of Jesus. It is constructed mainly from the original materials used in the buildings it represents – marble, stone, copper and wood, according to measurements given in Middot in the Mishnah, and also to fit the descriptions in the books of Josephus Flavius. The splendid Second Temple dominated the scene of Jerusalem's magnificence and beauty in 66 A.D and Herod's Palace, the twin-spired Palace of the Hasmoneans, the Roman theatre, the markets, inns and common dwelling places are all easily identifiable. When excavations reveal new information, changes are made in the model.

A special celebration lunch was held at a very smart hotel on a kibbutz. A waiter brought in a chocolate birthday cake for Hilary and Mary. This had a flaming sparkler in the centre and was very impressive. Photos were taken of all those who were celebrating special occasions – Hilary and Mary, Nicole and Godfrey and Monica and Challice.

After lunch our driver took us to the Holocaust Museum - Yad Vashem Memorial. It was very comprehensive with photographs and belongings of the many Jews, including a million children, who lost their lives during the Second World War. It was very moving and it is vitally important that we never forget them.

DAY 9 - This morning Fr. Victor celebrated Mass in the Residence (Mater Misericordiae). We prayed for all priests, especially those of our Archdiocese and in particular, our own Father Victor. Again it was another uplifting occasion. Fr Victor expressed his satisfaction with the pilgrimage and thanked everyone for the contributions made – the Eucharistic Ministers, Gerry Neame, our altar server, Bernard Schwenk who led us in song, and especially Nicole and Francesca, whose careful planning gave us an experience we shall remember for ever. **BUT IT IS NOT OVER YET!**

After breakfast, with our luggage stowed away, we left our accommodation for the last time heading for the city, the Dome of the Rock and the Temple Mount. The Dome of the Rock, an octagonal monument, was built by the Muslim Caliph, Abd El Malik, in the 7th Century. Muslims believe that this is the site of Mohammed's ascent to heaven on his winged steed. Another magnificent building, the golden dome is one of the landmarks of Jerusalem. The exterior of the building is beautifully decorated with blue, gold, white and pink tiles. "Cheeky" Fr. Victor, with the help of our guide, Mourad, managed to go inside, keeping us all waiting for some time in the hot sun! A group of Muslims, seated in a circle, were intent on their prayers despite the throng of visitors around them. Before leaving for Ben Gurion airport and our flight home, we went to the Jerusalem Archaeological

Park which reveals the discoveries of the second Temple period. In the area known as the Ophel, the visitor can climb up the original steps of the Hulda Gates leading to the Temple Mount, the place where Abraham came to sacrifice his son Isaac, and where Jacob slept, dreaming of a ladder to heaven.

The Western (Wailing) Wall lies west of the Temple Mount and has been the centre of Jewish yearning and memory for more than 2000 years. The Plaza, the cleared area in front of part of the Western Wall is used for national events and for bar mitzvahs. We saw many families with their sons and after the ceremony, they sat down to an elaborate picnic lunch. People come from all over the world to touch the Wall, to pray and wedge notes, requests and pleas between its timeless stones. It is the most visited site in Israel. To feel, to understand, to experience true awe, come to Jerusalem, to the Western Wall!

Our flight home was delayed for just one hour but it was "Mission Accomplished" despite volcanic ash and BA strikes!