

St Teresa's Holy Land Pilgrimage 2012

This year St Teresa's Parish celebrates 75 years in Morden. One of the ways of marking this milestone was to take some of the parishioners to the Holy Land on pilgrimage. Rumour has it that it was the first such trip from Morden. So on Saturday 11th February, the Feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, we left St Teresa's at 3.30am bound for Heathrow Airport. No one was late!

Several hours later we arrived in Tel Aviv, met our guide Samuel and transferred to our coach for a further 3 hour trip to Galilee. By the time we reached the Prima Galil Hotel in Tiberias, travelling fatigue was beginning to tell. Rooms allocated, dinner was welcome and no sleeping pills required. We had arrived among the beautiful and historical hills of Galilee. The landscape all around us had not really altered since the time of Jesus. Centuries of time bring their own moments of transition and we were conscious of following in the footsteps of countless millions who had graced this land before us.

On Sunday morning we set out for Capernaum, a significant town in the ministry of Jesus. On arrival, we got into a small boat reserved for the group and proceeded to cross the timeless Sea of Galilee. Midway, the Captain stopped the boat, switched off the engine, and we all listened to the sacred silence of that lake. This was the place of the calming of the storm. Here is where Jesus walked on the water. It was hard to believe we were there. Afterwards we went to Mensa Christi, one of the scenes of the post Resurrection appearances. Next we visited Tabgha, reputed to be the lonely place where Jesus often went to pray. On to the Mount of the Beatitudes, the scene of the famous Sermon on the Mount and then to Bethsaida and Kursi, long associated with the miracle of the Gaderene swine.

On Monday we climbed the Mount of the Transfiguration. Like Peter, James and John before us, we too had to admit 'it is wonderful for us to be here'. The scenery was breath-taking. In stark contrast to London's winter, the sun was shining here and even the hills seemed to echo a word of welcome. At Cana we celebrated Eucharist and some of the group renewed their marriage vows. The shop opposite the church had an extraordinary supply of wine, which of course we had to sample. On Tuesday we travelled to Qumran, famous for the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. We celebrated Eucharist on the desert floor and tried to absorb the impact of the surrounding mountains. The cable car up to Masada was next and then a short trip through the ancient Judean hills took us to float in the Dead Sea, the lowest point on the face of the planet.

On Wednesday we left the tranquil setting of Galilee and set out on our journey up to the great city of Jerusalem. This is a place that is sacred to Jews, Muslims and Christians. On the way, we paid a visit to the Yad Vasham Holocaust memorial. This honours the 6 million Jews that perished during the Second World War. The children's section was particularly moving where a single candle reflected in a series of mirrors creates the impression of a galaxy of stars. Each star represents a young life lost and remembered. The constant calling of the names of the children, their tender age and country of origin leaves a deep impression on the visitor.

By Thursday the rain had come but we still ascended the Temple Mount and visited the Al Aksa Mosque and the great Western Wall. We then followed the ancient Stations of the Cross, the Via Dolorosa, through the narrow passages and streets of Jerusalem until we arrived at the Tomb of the Holy Sepulchre. The chaos of present day Jerusalem, the hustle and bustle of markets, the constant

effort to lure every visitor into every shop, was something to keep the guide on a permanent state of alertness. Losing one of 41 in Jerusalem was something to be avoided at all costs, and we succeeded! In the afternoon we drove to Nazareth and the lovely town of Bethlehem where we had the privilege of celebrating Mass. Then it was on to the Basilica of the Annunciation, Manger Square, the Church of the Nativity, and the famous Shepherds' Fields.

Friday took us up to the Mount of Olives for a panoramic view of the old city. We celebrated Eucharist at the *Dominus Flevit* Church, a site to mark the place where Jesus wept over the city. The Dome of the Ascension, the Pater Noster church, the Upper Room, the Church of All Nations and the Garden of Gethsemane were all on the agenda today. After lunch we went to Jericho and heard again the great stories of Zaccheus and Bartimaeus. It was a hectic pace.

On Saturday 18th February we said farewell to Samuel our guide and returned to the more familiar mountains of Morden. The week among the hills of Palestine generated an extraordinary combination of precious insights that were biblical, scriptural, archaeological, social and educational. Memories and highlights were all captured on an array of digital cameras. But to be honest, there are some places and moments that we cannot really capture at all. The 6.30am morning calls, the busy timetable, the lunch stops, the shopping and the coffee breaks were all part of a jigsaw of life that for most people in the group was a one-off trip of a life time. New friendships were formed, old stories were heard and significant connections were made. Returning to the roots of the Christian story is a unique method of bringing the ancient and over familiar bible stories to new life. The Pilgrimage was indeed great. It was wonderful for us to be there. *Deo Gratias!*

Fr John Mulligan

February 2012.