

Reflections on Galilee

If you ever have the opportunity to join a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, I would strongly recommend that you make every effort to go. It is something you will never regret and the memories will live with you for the rest of your life. As you travel throughout the Holy Land, you will be reflecting not only on the life, death and resurrection of Christ, but as a Marist, you will be aware that you are in the land where Mary grew up and cared for the Holy Family and witnessed the death of her Beloved Son. For me personally, however, it was the time spent in Galilee before moving on to Jerusalem that made the biggest impression on me. It was very special and I hope this short piece will convey the love I felt for the place.

Before my first visit to the Holy Land, I was concerned that the whole experience might prove to be a disappointment, that the peace and tranquillity of the biblical scenes, which I had always treasured, would be obliterated in modern day Israel with its bustling cities, separation walls and ever present state security. I need not have been concerned. My fears were immediately allayed on arrival in Galilee.

Being October, it was after dark when we alighted in the early evening at our hotel on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. As was the practice throughout our stay, our pilgrimage leader invited us to join him after dinner for evening prayers on a small jetty jutting out into the Sea of Galilee. With only a torch to illuminate his readings, he pointed out the twinkling lights of the various holy places around the lake - Tiberias, Tabgha, Capernaum, Bethsaida and others. I realised that I had been familiar with these places all my life and had a strong feeling that I had come home. All was peaceful and quiet. It was a truly special experience.

In the morning, the beauty and tranquility of the place Jesus had chosen as His home during His ministry on earth was fully revealed. Encircled by gentle hills and rolling pastures, the teardrop shaped lake glistened in the sunlight.



Sea of Galilee near Capernaum

It is said that the Sea of Galilee is probably less busy now than in the time of Jesus, when there was a thriving olive & fishing industry and, according to the Roman historian Josephus, some 230 fishing boats worked each day. Other than around the

city of Tiberius, however, there is little evidence that 21st century man has had much impact on its 33 miles of shoreline. The holy places are all beautifully preserved and often surrounded by lovely gardens. Even the modern day tourist boats quietly plying the lake are sympathetically made of wood to a traditional design, which appears to have changed very little since biblical times



Sailing on Sea of Galilee

Before travelling to Jerusalem, we spent the next five days visiting numerous holy places located around the lake and in the surrounding Galilean countryside. Very special for all of us were our daily Masses, often celebrated in the open air at holy sites around the lake.



Lakeside Mass

With the Sea of Galilee as a backdrop, the elevated host seemed to connect us in a very powerful way to the Living Christ and his followers, who walked these shores two millennia ago. Although the exact location of some biblical sites in the Holy Land can be questioned, there is no doubt that Christ would be familiar with the hills and shores surrounding the lake today. Sitting on the beach of black basalt it is easy to ponder whether Jesus Himself may have walked on those very stones.



Lake shore by Church of St Peter's Primacy

Of all the biblical places we visited in the Holy Land, Capernaum made the biggest impression on me. Frequently described in the Bible as "Jesus' own town," this is where Jesus lived by the Sea of Galilee with Peter & his family, performed many of his miracles, recruited a number of His apostles and preached extensively in the Synagogue. We are told, however, that the inhabitants were not convinced or converted in great numbers, which provoked Jesus to say: -

"And as for you, Capernaum, did you want to be raised as high as Heaven? You shall be flung down to Hell. For if miracles done in you had been done in Sodom, it would be standing yet. Still I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on Judgment day than for you." Matthew 11; 23

As a witness to that warning, Capernaum has now laid in ruins for over a thousand years. It was only in 1968 that excavations under a 5th Century church revealed what is widely believed to be the house of Peter. Archaeological examination established that the house had existed before Jesus' time and had been in constant use by the Judeo Christians as a house church from the end of the 1st century. Numerous inscriptions were found on the walls written in Aramaic, Greek & Hebrew saying "Jesus", "Lord", "Christ," as well as "Peter." In 1990 an elegant octagonal church was built on pillars over the original 5th century church and Peter's House. In the middle of its simple interior is a glass floor through which visitors can look down on the ruins of Peter's House.



St. Peter's House

Likewise, a few metres away from Peter's House, excavations alongside the remains of a nearby 4th Century synagogue have also revealed the foundations of the 1st Century basalt synagogue, in which Jesus would have frequently preached.

"They went to Capernaum, and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to reach." Mark 1; 21

Some 15 miles inland from the lake is the ruined city of Sefhoris, a place that has clear links with Mary and the Holy Family. Early church tradition suggests Mary's parents, Anne and Joachim, lived in Sefhoris and that Mary was born and raised in Sefhoris. Excavations have revealed a city of 40,000 people with paved, colonnaded streets, an extensive underground aqueduct system, public buildings, dwellings, a theatre, a central market, bath houses, as well as ten synagogues and churches, not to mention many outstandingly beautiful mosaics. Not surprisingly, Josephus described the city as "the ornament of all Galilee." When Joachim died about 4BC, Anne moved with Mary five miles away to the small town of Nazareth. This was at about the same time as Herod Antipas began to rebuild Sefhoris, after the Romans had quelled the revolt of the Jews and burned the city. Being so close to Nazareth, it is not unreasonable to assume that Joseph, as an artisan, would have found work in Sefhoris and Jesus himself may have later worked with Joseph in the city. It would also be surprising if Mary did not have relatives and childhood friends living in Sefhoris.



Ruins of Sefhoris

In contrast, Nazareth was of little significance in Roman times and had a population of less than 250. Today it is a thriving, bustling city with an almost exclusively Arab population of 64,800. For the pilgrim visitor, however, the focal point must surely be the magnificent modern Basilica of the Annunciation, crowned with a graceful inverted lily-shaped bronze dome. Completed in 1969 it is the largest church built in Holy Land for 800 years. Excavations made before the present Basilica was built, revealed the presence of a pre-Byzantine Judeo-Christian shrine with some recognisable charcoal incisions of graffiti, proclaiming “Lord”, “Christ”, “Hail Mary” and many cross motifs. Both the historian Africanus and the pilgrim Egeria, documented the existence of a shrine following their visits in the 3rd century.



Nazareth & Basilica of the Annunciation

Not far from Basilica, is the Greek Orthodox Church of St Gabriel, also known as Mary’s Well. Down some steps at the end of long vaulted cavern built by the Crusaders in the 12th century is an ancient spring said to have been serving Nazareth in Mary’s time. Again, it is not unreasonable to assume that Mary would have come daily to draw water at the well. In fact, it is even suggested in the apocryphal Gospel of St James, that the Angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary at the well to declare the incarnation. Apparently, embarrassed at this seemingly public approach, it is said she withdrew home, where he re-appeared to make the annunciation.

When visiting this site, we can do no better than reflect as Marists on the beautiful words of David Baldwin, who in his excellent CTS book “a Pilgrim’s Companion to the Holy Land,” suggests that: -

“at this ancient water source, we can hold in our minds this lovely image – this mysterious paradox – of the young loving Mother, who had the humbling responsibility of the well-being of the Son of God, coming here daily to draw the water that would sustain the life of her precious Son, the Son from whose pierced side water would gush, giving life to the world.”

In conclusion, I am well aware that I have only described a very small part of my Holy Land journey, but I hope this short piece may have conveyed something of my experience and possibly inspired you to visit this very special place.

Chris Browne