

Sojourn in the Land of the Bible

January 27- May 14, 2009

A Diary of My Sabbatical

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First Letter

Saturday, January 31, 2009

I am in my sixth day of arriving in this place. I have been tired and busy at the same time. On Saturdays the program is not in session, so I have a chance to think over what I have seen and heard. It is too soon for me to open the door of my heart and express what these initial sights and sounds and people will mean to me. I have to begin with the "outward sign" (very Catholic). Then I pray for the inner sign, the mental impression, and finally, hopefully, for the grace, God's gift of understanding, conversion and peace. So, dear reader, be patient with me, as I will try to be with myself. My initial account may appear to be simply factual, impressions and anecdotes; hopefully, their inner truth will emerge for both of us.

Sunday, January 26, 2009: I left New York JFK on EIAI Flight 2 at 6:20pm. I want to thank you all for praying for me, and for your concern for my safety coming to Israel at this time of strife. I believe I did my due diligence on the issue of safety, and in addition I overcame my scruple that I should come to a land of conflict to study and relax. My reasoning is, that if everyone stopped studying their sacred texts, peace would be even more elusive.

My flight was uneventful, very comfortable. The flight time was about ten hours; and adding the seven hour time zone difference, I arrived in Telaviv around 11:00am. My ground transportation to the convent gives a hint of the détente here: I took a Jewish shuttle to the Notre Dame Centre in Jerusalem. From there I hired a Palestinian taxi to bring me to the convent, which is in the Arab section of the Old City. At the city gate (Lion's Gate) a military guard told us we could not enter the city. "Closed". No small problem: the convent was just a few blocks away, but up a steep cobblestone hill which, in connection with my heavy luggage, would keep my chiropractor in business for a year. I got out of the taxi and insisted that I was a resident in the old city, and the sergeant relented, but made the driver surrender his license which he could retrieve on his way out.

The convent is called *Ecce Homo*, getting its name from the moment in Jesus' passion when Pilate brought Jesus out after the scourging and said to the crowd: "Behold the Man". (Jn 19:5) This place is called in Greek *Lithostrosos*, meaning pavement, and it is observed on the convent street (*Via Dolorosa*) as the third station on the Way of the Cross. (Yesterday afternoon at three o'clock, the procession went by with many Franciscans and pilgrims, one of the friars holding up a board with four loud-speakers, saying the prayers in Latin. I said a little prayer for Brother Brendan Patrick, FSC, my high school Latin teacher. Maybe this connection is what he had in mind. The convent is occupied by two communities of sisters, one, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion, who are running the biblical formation program I am attending; the other community is

called The Chemin Neuf Community. Both orders of sisters are dedicated to greater understanding of Jews among Christians. The convent has been in this old building for 150 years (actually, a series of buildings with many levels; a street runs through it; you can stand in the archway over the street and watch the Arab families bringing groceries from the market. Even little children have to carry some bags.) The Sisters of Sion who shepherd our program are from Australia, originally from Ireland: Sr. Bernadette Lynch and Dr. Mary Reaburn. I will tell you more about them and their mission later.

There are thirty people on the program, from thirteen countries. The largest contingent is from Ireland, 8; the next largest, Canada, 4. There are nine from the far east. Just three from the U.S. Seven are women, all sisters except for one lady from Perth, Australia (originally from Scotland); she's a grandma. The men are all priests (one bishop) except for a brother from India. We each had to team up with a "buddy", so that, when we boarded a bus, we would have a check that everyone was there. My buddy is Fr. Patrick O'Keefe, a Redemptorist from Ireland. I never attended kindergarten, just started with the first grade at St. Joseph school in Babylon. So the buddy system allows me to fill in a missing experience in my education, perhaps one of the purposes of a sabbatical. I am caused to think of all the known and unknown buddies who throughout my life have looked around to be sure that I was on the bus. Thank you all.

We have had a few orientation meetings in which the invitation is repeated to slow down and enjoy. The theme is: "Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy" (Abraham Heschel). I was asked to do the first reading Leviticus 25:1-6a, about the sabbatical year. "While the land has its sabbath, all its produce will be food for yourself [and others]." These are challenging texts for me, maybe more than others. One of my favored standards of value in life is that I have been found "useful". In the sabbath year, the field is left completely at rest, no plowing, sowing or reaping: the farmer appears useless. Still, the field gives him food for himself and his family. I have to discover the shadow side of "useful". I'm sure I will have more to say about this later.

I was taught a really fine word: *Makhloket*. It means to share by dividing. To converse, to debate, even to disagree with the purpose of learning from the other. It is the ideal of teaching and learning. Our group was advised to notice how the people of this culture, both Arab and Jew, do not spare their expression of emotion or conviction or opinion, with voice rising and hands gesturing. For us, dialogue tends to be subdued; there is a fear of bruising the other's feelings. I doubt that I will change my manners, but I do appreciate the force of this kind of dialogue.

To advance our sharing, there is a curriculum of courses, each about 18 hours. I think it will be best to list them for you so you can see the treasures that are in our future here:

- Paul's Letter to the Romans
- Judaism, Ancient and Modern
- The Gospel of John
- Introduction to Islam
- Introduction to Oriental Churches
- The Torah or Pentateuch

The Book of Job: Human Suffering
In the Footsteps of History: Exploring 4000 Years of the Land of Israel
The Gospel of Mark
The Book of Amos

Can you believe it? Each of these courses given by a member of one of the several distinguished faculties that work in Jerusalem. I will tell you more as each of the courses begins. For now, I will describe the beginnings of two: The Footsteps of History, and the Gospel of Mark, as these began in our first week.

We were introduced to Jared Goldfarb, a young Jewish teacher who lives here with his wife and three little children (oldest 6; youngest: 2 weeks). Originally from New Hampshire (believe it or not: a Jew from New Hampshire). He directed a bus ride which circled the city, at each of the points of the horizon, we got off the bus and observed the city from that perspective. We began at the eastern side, a high place called the Promenade. We had to imagine the view as it would have been 4000 years ago, when God lead Abraham there and spoke to him: "Take your son Isaac, your only one, and go to the land of Moriah." (Gen. 22:2) Moriah is identified with the Mt. Sion, Jerusalem, the place of the binding if Isaac. This would have been Abraham's entry point into the land, and the place of his testing. Abraham is the foundation point of the three major monotheistic religions that occupy this region, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Some people pray that Father Abraham will be the point of unity for his disparate tribal families.

On the tour we visited a site overlooking Bethlehem. The Bible reference is 1 Samuel 16 where the prophet is sent to Bethlehem to the house of Jesse to look over the several sons until he settles on David, the shepherd. (Be sure to read the text, or you won't be able to answer the questions on the quiz I will administer in May or early June.) An intriguing point: in this semi-arid place, with rocky, compacted dirt and just some ragged gray ground cover coming up here and there, this does not seem to be the ideal place to raise sheep. Jared told me that sheep and goats will eat anything, and that on our various excursions we will surely see some flocks grazing about in the most unlikely terrains. The last time I encountered flocks was in Assisi, in the month of May. There, the grass was high in the olive grove, and the sheep moved slowly through the grove like a pastel mirage.

Bethlehem is a Palestinian community with both Palestinian Islam and Palestinian Christian inhabitants. There is an Israeli policy of separation which forbids Jews to go to Bethlehen, and which requires Palestinians to get prior approval before coming to Jerusalem, for example, for medical attention. The result of this policy has been economic crisis for the residents of Bethlehem, and an exodus of the Christians. Our group will be going to Bethlehem soon, and I will tell you more then. Although Bethlehem is a suburb of Jerusalem, we will need to present our passports at the entry point, as if we were entering a foreign land. (Just imagine our having to present our passport to leave New York City and enter Newark. On the other hand, why would anyone want to enter Newark?)

I think I will save until later any further description of the political situation and the cease-fire boundaries which have prevailed here. These figured in our tour of the horizons of Jerusalem and are ironic developments in relation to biblical history.

The Bible reference for the Mount of Olives is Mt 21. This is the point of entry for Jesus into Jerusalem and into his passion and death. Jesus was a Passover pilgrim and he gathered with the others at this traditional place of staging their prayerful procession into the city after coming from many places. They would sing the Psalm of Ascent, 122, a Psalm of David:

*I rejoiced because they said to me,
"We will go up to the house of the Lord."
And now we have set foot
within your gates, O Jerusalem-
Jerusalem, built as a city
with compact unity.
To it the tribes go up,
the tribes of the Lord,
According to the decree for Israel,
to give thanks to the name of the Lord.
In it are set up judgment seats,
seats for the house of David.
Pray for the peace of Jerusalem!
May those who love you prosper!
May peace be within your walls,
prosperity in your buildings.
Because of my relatives and friends
I will say, "Peace be within you!"
Because of the house of the Lord, our God,
I will pray for your good.*

I found this visit to the Mount of Olives and the psalm of ascent to be very powerfully connective with the event of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem which we commemorate on Palm Sunday. You have to realize that the places in Jerusalem which are claimed to be identified with events we read about in the Bible may not in every case be correctly and accurately identified. For example, the Pavement (*Lithostratos*) which is commemorated at the convent where I am staying, as the place where Pilate said to the crowd: "Behold the man", is more accurately placed at another part of town. But the commemoration does not become false because of the mistaken geography, especially since believers enter more into the event through the Word of God which is a living word that takes us into the mystery of Jesus. At the Mount of Olives, we know that it was the staging area for pilgrims to enter Jerusalem for the Passover, and we know that the psalm of ascent which we call Psalm 122 was their prayer. And so there is an especially powerful connection with the event which we get with the confluence of the geographical site and the psalm and the Gospel of Matthew. I took some pictures with my new camera which at

some later date I will add to this verbal account. (If I can remember which picture relates to which horizon!)

The second faculty member we met was Fr. Flavio Gillio, a Jesuit from Italy who is working on his doctoral dissertation at the Jesuit Bible Faculty here, called the Biblicum. (An extension of the school of the same name in Rome.) The name of the course is The Gospel of Mark. I'm sure that I will tell you more about the content of this course when I have had an opportunity to reflect on the material. After one session (almost three hours) my impression is that his approach is meeting me exactly where I am, and taking me forward. The method in no way discards the historical-critical method which with minor variations I have come to rely upon largely through my attendance at the annual Georgetown Scripture Institute, but incorporates all those insights into a method which accents the Scriptures as communication between subjects and participates in the kind of freedom which characterizes the traditional *Lexio Divina*.

I am finishing up this first letter at around 6pm on February 2, three days after I began it. Around this time of day sounds of strange horns and sometimes human voices go out into the city from powerful loudspeakers in the high towers of the mosques. Since our convent is in the Arab quarter of the Old City, and since we are right next to a large mosque, the sounds tend to dominate all other sounds and voices, even when we are celebrating mass in our chapel. Everybody is being called to prayer.

JR