

Sojourn in the Land of the Bible
January 27-May 14, 2009

A Diary of My Sabbatical
Fr. John Rowan

Second Letter

Saturday, February 7, 2009

We are in the 12th day of the program, which is intended to go 110 days. The routines are like those of a religious house: I get up at 6am, go to breakfast at 7am and classes begin at 8:30am. (This week we had an excursion on Wednesday, and breakfast was at 5:30; on the bus at 6:30). Classes go to 12:15pm; we have lunch at 12:30pm, and then we are free. Some of us gather for mass at 6:30pm, dinner is at 7:00pm, and the day is over at 8:00pm. The group of thirty is very congenial. In this recent period we had three celebrations, which means wine or cake at supper or a gathering in the common room: the birthday of two of the participants, the founder's feast day for a sister, and again for the founder of the Don Bosco Salesians. Very pleasant, and we learn a bit about the history and work of these congregations at home and in the missions.

Next Tuesday there are general elections for the Israeli legislative body, the Knesset. There are so many splinter parties it would be impossible to try to get it straight. Out of the elected representatives a coalition will be formed sufficient to put the prime minister in office. Yesterday, I was sitting at the Damascus gate, a major entry point to the old city and an active market, watching the crowds go by. Near me was a young man apparently trying to make a political video; he had a friend training the camera on him, and he began the speech about twenty times in my hearing, trailing off because he didn't get it right. He probably thought he could turn his passion into a coherent message but couldn't get beyond the first sentence. He would then turn away in frustration and mutter under his breath, regroup and begin the same speech again. I left before he got it right. He was a Palestinian, some of whom are Israeli citizens, although not enough of them to make a difference.

The City of Jerusalem is filled with pilgrims and tourists. About 2.5 million people will visit Israel this year, half of them pilgrims. From my perspective, the pilgrims are mostly Christian, then Jewish. At the airport I encountered a huge crowd of Nigerians. They were dressed in a bright cloth especially dyed with their pilgrim purpose. There are many African groups here, mostly Protestant Christians. They add to the very diverse appearance of humanity, religiously and ethnically, making its appearance here. What are they seeking? What am I seeking? Why do we feel that our religious quest will have some relation with a particular piece of land called Jerusalem or Israel?

I went to the Western Wall to observe and to pray. If you don't have a hat, you can borrow a cardboard skull cap. I had a hat. (Dr. Moynihan, please note.) An elderly Orthodox Jew with a long scruffy beard asked me: "Is God in the heart of the devil?" I answered: "Do you mean, does

God abide in all his creatures, because then, yes, the devil is a creature; or do you mean, by the devil's intention, because perhaps he (or she) has forsaken God?" He said: "Both, in every way, is God in the heart of the devil?" I said: "Yes, that is what the Book of Job says." He said: "But what do you say?" I said: "Job is good enough for me." He said: "Then, how can you believe in the man who was not found in the tomb? He wasn't there, right? And if he wasn't there, he couldn't be God, right? Because God is everywhere!" I said: "Your logic is off." (This is a question of the middle term: 'everywhere'. You may say "God is everywhere", but you cannot say "Everywhere is God". ((Hat's off to Bill Hughes, my Logic teacher in the Seminary.)) The fellow then said: "It's simple." I said: "Too simple for me!" A lesson I take from this playful experience is that in this city, God is important, much of the conversation is about God and what is God's will for our lives and how we may make our submission to God more complete and more integral. That same delightful dimension is what makes this sabbatical program such a rich experience. Whether we gather for class on the scriptures or on history, or come together for group meetings to review our experiences, or engage in small conversations with our fellow pilgrims, we are part of that mysterious conversation which has drawn people here for centuries. It's not that we don't have this conversation at home, we most certainly do. But in this place, it seems to be the way of life, multi-faced and many-layered and constant. I am reminded of Tevya's song in "Fiddler on the Roof":

If I were rich, I'd have the time that I lack
To sit in the synagogue and pray
And maybe have a seat by the Eastern wall
And I'd discuss the holy books with the learned men, several
hours each day.
That would be the sweetest thing of all.

Tevya's idea about what it means to be rich may be peculiar but here it makes a lot of sense.

Four of the five days of this week were under the direction of Jared Goldfarb, whom I introduced in my first letter. His course is called "In the Footsteps of History: Exploring 4000 Years of the Land of Israel". At times, we will begin in the classroom and then head out into the city, where the land becomes our classroom, as we did this week when we went to the place outside the walls which is called The City of David and is the place where the local history here begins. (1000 BC) Jared's purpose is to show us how each of the civilizations which has occupied the land of Israel has left its imprint, its evidence, in the land. As a pilgrim you simply walk by a site, for example, the Damascus Gate. A guide will help you distinguish the evidence: this column from the Roman age, 63BC to 325 AD; this wall from the Ottoman period 1561 AD.

The principal periods we are interested in are the following:

1800BC	Abraham and Sarah
1500	Moses and the Exodus
1200	Settled in Canaan/Judges
1000	David

722	Assyrian Conquest
586	Babylonian Conquest/Exile
333	Greek Conquest
167-164	Hasmonean Revolt/Maccabees
63	Roman Conquest/ time of Jesus
67-73AD	Great Revolt/Temple Destroyed/Masada
132-135	Israel= Palestina, Jerusalem=Aelia Capitolina
325	Constantine/Byzantine Christianity
638	Early Muslim Empire/Dome of the Rock
1099	First Crusades
1187	Late Muslim Empire/Saladin
1250	Mameluke Empire/Continuity of Muslim Rule
1516	Ottoman Empire/Suleiman/
1917	British Mandate after WWI
1947-8	UN Partition Plan/State of Israel

The principal school of archeology follows the method called Stratigraphy, which means that the archeology team, having identified the likely place of prior civilizations, marks off a square and then painstakingly brushes aside the sand to uncover the smallest item, a piece of broken pottery or a tiny copper coin, taking careful note of the level on which it was found, so that they may relate it to a particular time in relation to the findings below or above it. The likely spot to start digging would be a “tel” which is an unnatural hill, with a flat top and sides sloping at 45 degrees. It has gotten its height from the accumulated debris of the civilizations that have been located at this place. The rubble of one settlement becomes the foundation of the next. A good description of this phenomenon is found in the novel The Source, by James A. Michener. (He also wrote Tales of the South Pacific; so, if you want to have “many enchanted evenings”, get a copy of The Source and plow through.) Archeology is a relatively new discipline. At first, archeologists were working almost exclusively to confirm the Bible texts. More recently, archeologists are engaged in critiquing the Bible text, for example, asking why there is no evidence of a conflict at the gates of Jericho. War and conflict always leave a lot of debris; why is there none at the walls of Jericho. How does this archeological finding cause us to modify our interpretation of the text of the Book of Joshua?

On Wednesday of this week, the day of our early rising, we set out in a bus, going north near Galilee, to the Megiddo National Park. This is an archeological site, important in Israelite history but also in the whole archeological world. Here have been uncovered *twenty-five* layers or strata going back 10,000 years, to the beginning of agriculture by humans. (This is probably the model for the fictional city “Makor” in The Source.) A visitor goes into the City gate, notes the defenses. Megiddo is on a high hill overlooking the fertile plains. After the enemy gets up the hill, even if he gets through the city gates, there is still a narrow passage to manage before you come to the settlement. This would be one of the explanations why one settlement after another chose this site. Along with the availability of water and the fertile fields.

The earliest biblical text referencing this place is Judges 1:27, “Manasseh did not take possession of Beth-shean with its towns or of Taanach with its towns. Neither did he dislodge the inhabitants of Dor and its towns; those of Ibleam and its towns, or those of Megiddo and its towns.”

In a prominent part of the settlement is a place called the Sacred Compound, with a round altar, which each settlement, except the Israelites, maintained as their worship space. The Israelites would not have used such space for that purpose, because that would have been competition with Jerusalem.

Another biblical reference to Megiddo is found in the New Testament, Revelation 16:16 “They then assembled the kings in the place that is named Armageddon in Hebrew”. (Armageddon is a corruption of Megiddo.) This was to be the final war-of-wars, good against evil. While we were in the park on Wednesday, I mentioned to one of my fellow pilgrims, that I had it on good information that the battle of Armageddon was going to take place this very day, and we were just unlucky to be here, and that I was trying to line up one of our confreres to hear confessions so we would be prepared. Well, as it turned out, we got out of the park before the battle started, so I am happily able a few days later to write this account in the peace of the library at the convent.

While we were in the north we stopped at the Zippori National Park, an archeological site of the utmost importance. It is a few miles from Nazareth, a sprawling city which we could see in the distance. For Christians, Zippori suggests an interesting possibility: that during a particular period of development and repair there, under funding from Herod Agrippa, the son of Herod the Great, Jesus may have apprenticed as a carpenter. The availability of work for tradesmen over a long period of time could explain why Jesus’ family stayed in Nazareth rather than migrate as many working families did. The craftsmen on this project brought the skills and specialties of their nation or region, so it is possible that Jesus as a young man would have encountered people of different languages and religions, and had a broader experience of humanity than would have been available to him in a provincial backwater town like Nazareth in the first century. Just one of those interesting possibilities in the mystery that is the historical Jesus.

Where Zippori (also referenced as Sephoris) emerges into great prominence is as the center of rabbinic Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple in 70AD. Jerusalem had been decimated and the center of Jewish religious practice had been leveled by the Romans. The future of Judaism was in peril. It was to Zippori that the center of Judaism moved, not as a second temple because that could be rebuilt only in Jerusalem. The new center was that of study and prayer. Zippori is mentioned frequently in the Talmud as a Jewish city with 18 synagogues and a number of study houses. During the period of the Mishnah and the Talmud, many sages made their home in Zippori. The Sanhedrin moved from Jerusalem to Zippori and remained until the second half of the third century, when it moved to Tiberias under the leadership of Rabbi Yohanan, one of the great Talmudic sages. This form of Judaism, without the Temple, without priests and sacrifices, is the form which continues in all our communities to this day. Reading

and studying the sacred text, interpreting it with the help of all the sages who have gone before, under the leadership of a teacher, the rabbi, this is the memory which Zippori has etched in the land. I remember with affection and respect the several rabbi's that I have encountered in my professional life, as members of local clergy associations in Bay Shore and in Sayville. I always learned from them, and very often felt more kinship with them than with some Protestant members of our association, especially since our Catholic tradition was enriched by the Vatican Council II "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" (*Nostra Aetate*), which says, in part: "Nevertheless, according to the Apostle, the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their fathers, for he does not repent of the gifts he makes or the calls he issues (cf. Rom.11:28-29).

A side note: last week, we were advised that a demonstration would be taking place on our street at 8pm. On the convent balcony overlooking the street, plastic caution tape was stretched across so that we could not get near the roof's edge and peer down. The demonstration was conducted by a fringe group of Jews who want to build the Temple again in its original place, which is on the Temple Mount, presently owned by the Muslims and observed as the holy place from which Mohammed ascended to heaven. (Non-muslims are not able to go into the precincts at all.) So the new temple group is very controversial and disruptive. The reason for our staying back from the edge of the roof is that the demonstration is very carefully monitored by the Israeli army. If we should by chance drop anything off the roof, e.g., a candy or a cigarette, it may be interpreted as provocative and the patrol would be required to enter the convent and search it completely. So the sisters have struck a deal with the police: we will stay away from the roof edge, and they will not have occasion to enter the convent. That evening we heard the demonstration go by; it sounded small in number, with several people shouting things out.

At Zippori there was a little outdoor theatre with a stage and several rows of seats for the audience. Jared asked us to take a seat, and then asked for three volunteers to take part in a little instructive performance. It will surprise my friends to know that I was one of the volunteers, not the first, or the second, but I did, at last, volunteer. Jared had a bag with some costumes, mine being just a skull cap and a bib with braids (I was a rabbi). The costume of the priest was pretty elaborate, but about three sizes too small for the volunteer. But he gamely put it on, which made for even more fun. The third costume was for the zealot (people of the daggar): he looked like a desert dweller, like Lawrence of Arabia.

The issue of the little performance was: how to respond to the Roman threat in 70AD. The priest simply saw Judaism as being so related to the Temple that without it there would be nothing left. The zealot thought any compromise with the Romans was out of the question: kill them. The rabbi thought that there was a way, first of speaking to the Romans to suggest that there might be accommodation; then the promise that even without the Temple, Judaism would continue through the preservation of the holy texts and the study of them and the faith of the people. So you see that while I had the least elaborate costume, I had the best lines! The review of our performance was very favorable locally, but I could find no notice of it in the Tel Aviv edition of the International Herald Tribune. You see the bias of the press.

The question of religious people living in the world without being contaminated by it, is the issue here. How far could the first century Jews cooperate with the Romans without losing their soul, without their children being assimilated? This is the question for Jews and Muslims here in the Holy Land, it is the issue for Catholics and Amish in the United States, where each seems to have found a different measure of going along and getting along. There is also the issue of how much change a religion can endure without losing its identity. This was the challenge of the first century Jews at the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. The priests, employees of the Temple, saw the destruction of the Temple as the end of Judaism, as indeed it was the end of sacrifices and priesthood. But Rabbinical Judaism emerged from the ashes, and flourished around the world, in a sense freed from the geographic, physical boundaries of the Temple. Maybe an analogy may be found in the Catholic Church being unloosed from the classic European worldview of the 19th century by the leadership of Vatican Council II (1961-65). I would like to make reference to a masterful new book on the subject, What Happened at Vatican II, by John W. O'Malley, S.J. The great issue here: if the Church let go of its attachment to monarchy, and its opposition to science and biblical research and democracy, how could it survive? The Holy Spirit is our teacher and guide. Here are some examples of this dilemma: in the political news, a hard-liner Israeli on the Hamas issue: "Today's compromise is tomorrow's norm". A scene on the street: a Palestinian mom, covered head to toe with only her eyes peering out, walking with her teen-aged daughters, who are dressed in tight jeans and tank tops.

Before ending this letter I want to make a record of my sad impressions going to the north. If one looks to the west (toward the Mediterranean Sea, toward Tel Aviv) you see Jewish cities and settlements. As one looks to the east you see Arab (Palestinian) cities. They are in the West Bank (the West Bank of the Jordan River, actually east of the north-south highway), and they are surrounded by high walls like the sound barriers we use along the Expressway. There is no entering these cities except through check-points, at which you have to show your passport as if you were crossing a border into a foreign land. A sorry situation about sharing the land.

JR