

## Sojourn in the Land of the Bible

A Journal of My Sabbatical  
January 27-May 14, 2009

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It is Saturday, February 21, 2009. Last night there was a thunder storm of heroic sound, which I hardly heard. One of the blessings that has been given to me on this sabbatical has been to sleep soundly. Early to bed, and early to rise. That's the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin and, while he was not the best example of it while he was our ambassador to Paris, it works for me.

The earliest sound we hear in the morning is the Muslim call to prayer. It is the song of the Muezzin coming from the minaret (tower) which is next to every mosque like a bell tower is near a Christian church. The word Muezzin comes from the Arabic *muezzin*, which means announcer or proclaimer. It is a call to prayer. The three religions represented here all have some means of alerting the faithful that it is time for prayer: Christians ring bells; Jews used the horn; Muslims, following the preference of Mohammed for the human voice, uses the announcer, now on powerful loudspeakers, singing out from minarets over the city. The first call to prayer comes at about 5am. After chanting a few verses of the Koran, there are some praises of Allah, and some advice to the faithful, as at 5am: "Now it is better to pray than to sleep". No opportunity to dispute the wisdom of this advice; but we Christians and Jews, still in bed, are allowed to pray that the early morning call to prayer is finished.

The call to prayer is answered. A man may put down a little mat and kneel on it, touching his head to the floor, and offer his prayer. Or, as one of our colleagues saw on a bus, a young couple was sitting together, behaving affectionately. The call to prayer was heard, and the young man unwound himself from his girl friend, solemnly said his prayers, and afterwards, immediately went back to cuddling with his friend. It reminded me of the old joke about the difference between the Jesuits and the Franciscans. The Jesuit asked his superior if it was ok to smoke while he prayed; and the Franciscan asked if it was ok to pray while he smoked.

The convent where we are housed is in the Arab quarter of the old city of Jerusalem. The entire walled city is not that large: you can walk around the outside of the walls in about an hour. The sections are: the Christian quarter, the Jewish, the Armenian, and the Arab. The Arab quarter would probably be described as the poorest, less tourist oriented and more crowded than the other three. The shops are small stalls with the merchandise spilling out into the narrow cobbled alleys. They sell clothing and shoes, meat and vegetables, coffee and tea (for Islam alcoholic drinks are forbidden), candy and pastries of every description, non-prescription drugs and cosmetics, luggage and small electronic devices like TV remote controls. The clothing, Arab dresses, for example, are hanging from rods outside the store; only the proprietor goes into the store, as into a large closet, to get something after you have told him what you want. When the tractor goes by pulling a garbage bin, the upper corners of the bin are brushed by the dresses and long coats hanging nearby. All the food, including candy and pastries, are without cover. So

your temptation to buy some is tempered by the sight of a customer reaching over the tray to try one before buying. The market is very noisy, with the vendors shouting out the buy of the day. Their pitch ends with the word: *Hashara*, accent on the last "a". I asked around as to what this might mean, and learned that it means: this is what you get for ten shekels. For example, seven big oranges, *Hashara*. Ten shekels are worth about \$2.50. The Arab Quarter is real daily living; the average yearly wage of a Palestinian is about NIS 48,000 (New Israel Shekels, equal to about \$12,000). Rent for a small apartment in a project-like building would be equal to about \$500.00 a month.

Still, the Arabs who live in the city of Jerusalem are better off than those living in the West Bank, behind the walls marking the Green Line border, the cease fire line of what the Israelis call the War of Independence, and the Arabs call the Devastation. Consider the case of Elias, a guide we had one day this week, who lives with his new wife near Bethlehem, which is just a few miles from Jerusalem. In order to get to meet up with us in Jerusalem at 8:30am, he had to start out from Bethlehem at 6am. He figured it would take him two hours to pass through the checkpoint from Arab territory into Israel, and he was right. There are four lines at the checkpoint but the Palestinian Arabs must go on only one of them, even if the clerks on the other three are idle. These policies have led to a severe reduction of Palestinian Christians in the region: they used to represent 10% of the population, now they are 2%.

This week we had a Spanish nun, a public health nurse, visit us with news and pictures of the scene in Gaza. She is part of a relief team of health care professionals who were able after some difficulty, to set up a medical and trauma care operation in Gaza City. The pictures were harrowing. The human suffering, especially among the children, a pitiable sight. It is not surprising that the Israelis should initially deny using phosphorus powder bombs, because the burns they inflict on military personnel as well as on civilian women and children are so monstrous. These weapons are prohibited by the international conventions. I see in the Herald Tribune today that Sen. John Kerry and Sen. Joe Lieberman are in Gaza visiting with a U.S. delegation sent by President Obama. In the Israeli press, there is a lot of criticism of the rightist government and of the military and security forces, which seem to be somewhat independent of the control of civilian government officials, for the human rights violations made in the Gaza Strip.

I should mention, the prominent Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, which is published as an insert of the International Herald Tribune, a subsidiary of the New York Times, is replete with articles and opinions pleading for the civil rights of the Palestinians. But the hard right appears to have taken the lead in last week's elections to the Knesset, and their prime interest will be on security, despite the effect of curtailing the rights of some of their own citizens (some Palestinian Arabs are Israeli citizens), and others who are not citizens but who have occupied the land from time immemorial.

On Thursday, February 19 the local Catholic bishops here ( which would be the Latin Patriarch, Greek Melkite, Maronite, Syrian Catholic, Armenian Catholic, and Chaldean), issued a public letter in which they deplored a comedic presentation on Israeli TV channel 10, which mocked

Jesus and Mary, the principal icons of our Christian faith. The bishops were asking for the authorities and the TV management to review their policies of freedom of speech and to call to mind how the Jewish people were so deeply harmed by this kind of creeping intolerance of their faith.

Back to the market: when you get to the Christian Quarter, almost all the shops are selling religious articles and tokens, and all the merchandise is inside the shop: you have to enter to see what they have. When you reach the Jewish Quarter, much of it has been rebuilt, and it is in the European style, the shops are upscale and the general ambience is stately and quiet. There are public bathrooms and other accommodations which make the timid American like me quite at home. You can also buy wine and beer, a nice feature whether home or away!

Switching from the market to the Biblical Formation Program, I will use a little anecdote. You have to understand that the merchants of religious goods are very aggressive. "Please enter my family store. Big discount for you." "Please take my business card." They will reach out and even grab your arm or your coat. I said to one fellow who was tugging on my sleeve: "Where I come from that is not a good way to get business." In any case, as I was walking through the market one day, a vendor said to me: "What are you looking for?" I hesitated for a moment, thinking, that's a really good question. And I replied to him: "Spiritual renewal". He just nodded, shrugged his shoulders, kind of realizing that he didn't have that in his shop. Meanwhile, the question stays with me. Prophecy comes from the most unlikely places. (See John 11:49)

This week we finished up our course on the Gospel of Mark. It was given by a young Italian Jesuit, Flavio A.M. Gillio, who is on the faculty of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Biblicum) and is preparing a PhD in Bible at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. His approach to the gospel is, in part, to regard the sacred word as a communication between subjects, the one being Mark, the sacred writer, the other being you, the believing reader. We are, of course, in biblical criticism, accustomed to ask to whom, to what community of persons, the gospel was originally addressed, because in determining the addressee, and their situation, we can come closer to understanding the intention and purpose of the sacred writer. It is thought that the Gospel of Matthew was written to better educated Jews, who believe in Jesus but are still arguing about the law. Luke was written for wealthier Gentile Christians in an urban setting, who may be tempted to be complacent. And Mark, the first gospel chronologically (late 60's AD), is written to a community largely gentile, new in their faith, and facing persecutions. But the gospels were also written to me and to you and to all those who would follow through the centuries of the tradition. We are invited to read the gospels in the style of *lexio divina*, allowing the text to connect with our own spirit.

In the final class with Fr. Flavio, I was asked by the director to speak for the class a word of appreciation to the teacher, a custom of the program as each course comes to a conclusion. I thanked him for his reverent attention to the text, for his generous availability to us despite the pressure of his doctoral work, for his patient listening to our questions modeling for us a truly dialogical way of teaching the sacred Scriptures, and finally, acknowledging our solidarity with

all of his students past and future with whom we have shared his love and reverence of the Word of God.

I want to tell you for a moment about his reverent attention to the text. We spent about five hours on Mark 1:14-20. The subjects are, on first reading, the initial preaching of Jesus and the choosing of the first four disciples, Simon and Andrew, James and John. We paid total attention to these texts, examining the Greek original words, for a most rewarding and insightful outcome.

I want to insert a little side bar on studying Greek. When I was in the first year of the minor Seminary, September, 1953, our class began its study of Greek, three one-hour classes each week, under a professor whose name is given in the necrology of the priests of the Brooklyn Diocese as Rev. Alfred Joseph Theodore Weinlich. (d. March 23, 2004). A lot of names for a very simple and straightforward fellow, who, by the time we had him as a teacher, had gotten a bit tired of the student's resistance to Greek, and kind of taught us "Greek lite". After a few months, Fr. Weinlich had a heart attack, and had to take a few months off. Into his place came our English professor, Rev. Eugene J. Molloy (d. August 18, 1971), who later became the Superintendent of Schools for the Diocese of Brooklyn. Fr. Molloy, on taking up the Greek course, told the class that for years he had lamented the decline of the classical tradition at the college, and now he was prepared to do something about it; and that he was going to spend three hours preparing for each of the three classes each week, "and so are you". And so began a grueling three months of Greek study under the zealous Fr. Molloy until we welcomed Fr. Weinlich back. He had recuperated and we were spent. But we got enough Greek under our belts to coast for the next year with Fr. Weinlich. I know that one of the graces of this sabbatical is to make me grateful to all my teachers, especially teachers of language, starting with elementary school and the learning of English grammar and composition. And in my prayers are a special thanks to Fr. Weinlich and Fr. Molloy, for Greek. I just might mention in regard to the Greek text that there are several sites on the internet in which you can bring up on parallel frames the Greek text and a selection of English texts. It's generally free, because the purpose of the site is evangelical, to promote study of the gospels. There is also a site on which you can view the original parchment of the text of *Codex Sinaiticus*, dating from about 400AD, the oldest complete copy of the New Testament.

"I will make you fishers of men."(Mk 1:17) "He appointed twelve [whom he also named apostles] that they might be with him and he might send them forth to preach and to have authority to drive out demons.(Mk 3:14) (You know that in your Bible, the parts that are bracketed, such as part of Mk 3:17, above, are not found in the most reliable witnesses.) I just wanted to illustrate an example of reverent attention to the text by pointing out that the word "make" in the first quote, and the word "appointed" in the second, are both the same Greek word, which is found in the Book of Genesis, as in the passage "Let us *make* man in our image, after our likeness". (Gen 1:26) It may seem a simple point, but it is putting the action of Jesus in *making* the fishermen into disciples, and *making* the disciples into apostles, into a creative dimension, not a creation *ex nihilo*, which is described in Genesis, but still a work which is appropriately assigned to God. Jesus calls, Jesus makes, Jesus sends.

This week we began a new course, in the Gospel of John. The teacher is Fr. Joseph Nguyen Cong Doan, S.J. a Vietnamese who is the Superior and Director of the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Biblicum) in Jerusalem. He was in jail in Vietnam for nine years, without books or paper and pen, during which time he recalled the Gospel of John from memory. After his release and resumption of his studies, he was given by one professor of the Gospel of John, a bibliography that was eighty pages long. He quipped that he would have had to go back to prison to find the time to read all the entries.

Fr. Joseph will approach the text as one would a literary work, while realizing that this literary work has the message of salvation and faith. He will ask the question: Who is Jesus; What did he do and say? Where was he from? When was "his hour"? Why was he here, why did he die? How (can we know the way)? These and other questions are just a surface treatment of what it means to look at the gospel as a literary work. I will do more justice to Fr. Joseph's notes in a later letter. This course is to be our longest, twenty-five hours.

Here's a little aside that makes this kind of scripture fun. Fr. Joseph used this analogy: you know how we hide a key to the front door under the mat so the family can get into the house? Well, each of the evangelists also gives you a key to his gospel, so you will get the point. Where are these keys? Well, Mark is the easiest: he doesn't hide the key he nails it right on the door: it is found in Chapter 1 Verse 1. Matthew hides the key in the infancy narratives, Chapters 1 and 2. Luke hides the key in Chapter 4, Verses 16-21. And John hides the key in the Prologue. So, find the key, and open the door!

On Wednesday of this week we visited the village of En Kerem, a far western suburb of Jerusalem. I think the name means Spring of the Vineyard. Because of its location in the hill country and its proximity to Jerusalem, it has been regarded from the 5<sup>th</sup> century as the home of Zachary and Elizabeth, and the birthplace of John the Baptist. "During those days Mary set out and travelled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zachary and greeted Elizabeth." (Lk 1:39) This is certainly hill country. Absolutely beautiful, with sweeping vistas into valleys and lifting your eyes up high rolling hills. There are two churches there, one commemorating the Visitation, with the prayer *Magnificat* on the plaza wall on large ceramic plaques in every conceivable language. We arrived at this church at 9AM, and had mass presided over by a member of our program, Fr. Jaime Palma Cuacuamoxtia, a Mexican who is a missionary in Korea, and on this day presided at mass in the English language for the first time. A few weeks ago he helped me get a wireless internet signal on my computer. He has a perfect indigenous face, like so many migrant workers on Long Island. His smile, on accomplishing mass in English for the first time, was worth the whole trip.

The Church of John the Baptist was also on our itinerary. In the basement of this church is a crypt-chapel which is made out of a cave, which is said to be the "place of concealment" sought out by Elizabeth, an older woman who did not feel comfortable displaying her pregnancy in public. I learned that people of the economic and social status of Zachary and Elizabeth would

often have second homes in the hill country, part of which would be a cave; and the cave would be a comfortable place to have the birth, because it could be made warm in the winter and was always cool in the summer. On the wall in the courtyard of the church are ceramic plaques with the prayer *Benedictus* in many languages.

I should make again a distinction among the holy places as to the historical accuracy of the location in reference to the event they commemorate. In the case of the shrines at En Kerem, the commemoration of the Visitation and the Birth of John the Baptist are “congruent” with the biblical account in Luke. The earliest date of a church being in the location is the 5<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which commemorates the place of Calvary, of the Burial of Jesus and the Resurrection, have been honored by the Christians long before St. Helena, the mother of Constantine, came on the scene in the middle of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. The local bishop and the Jerusalem Church had preserved the memory of these places from the beginning, and were perhaps even more aware of them because of the irritant of the Romans, who had built a pagan temple on the sacred location.

The Sisters of Sion, who are conducting our Biblical Formation Program at their convent Ecce Homo in Jerusalem, have a convent with a garden and a chapel at En Kerem, which we visited. When the sisters first arrived in Jerusalem in the mid-nineteenth century, they opened a school here, and quickly learned that the state of public hygiene and sanitation in the city was miserable, and that the sisters and students needed periodic healthy breaks to the mountain country, and so the estate at En Kerem was purchased. The chapel is a witness to simplicity. The gardens are just beautiful, with the flowers of this early season being the blossoms of the almond tree, like a snow-fall in suspension. The geraniums are left in the ground all season, so they grow as big as bushes. I saw some exotic birds, little parrots and grey birds like a sparrow, except when they opened their wings they revealed a bright yellow breast. Another bird, which I heard but did not see, had a call or song like a tin whistle. We had our lunch there, sitting on plastic chairs overlooking the valley, like a peaceful picnic scene in an impressionist painting.

This week we also observed the death of Stephanus Cardinal Kim, the retired Archbishop of Seoul, Korea. Three of our program participants are from Korea, two diocesan priests and one sister who is a social worker. On the day of Cardinal Kim’s funeral in Korea, we had mass in the Korean language, celebrated by Fr. Jeong Bay Pak (Benedict), and Fr. Joungh Hyun Kim (Matthew). Before mass, Matthew taught us how to sing the *Lord, Have Mercy*, in Korean. I am in constant amazement of the courage and inventiveness of the participants from Asia as they listen to the lectures given in English, on topics that are challenging even if English is your first language. One of the Asians, Fr. Ekachai Chinnakort (Johnbaptist) from Thailand, transmits from here, by computer hookup, three one-hour radio presentations every week. I asked him how he is able to keep the flow of words going for a full hour. He responded that his assistant in Thailand will edit the material he transmits before putting it on the air. Did you ever hear the joke this little joke? A person who speaks three languages is called tri-lingual; a person who speaks two languages, bi-lingual; and a person who speaks one language is called American.

Another event of the week deserving mention. Fr. Flavio returned here one evening after supper to show us a video about the Dead Sea Scrolls. The scrolls are maintained here in Jerusalem and I will write more once I have been to the exhibit. The scrolls have had a rocky political history, and that's what this BBC video was about. The early scholars, working on the translation and restoration of the scrolls, sometimes rushed to publication without checking their work with the others on their team. One, for example, an Englishman named John Allegro, published in the New Yorker taking the position that the scrolls would basically undermine Christianity by demonstrating that Jesus' message was not original but indeed derivative from the message of the Teacher of Righteousness of the Essene community which is thought to be the originating community of the Dead Sea Scrolls. John Allegro's position has been completely discredited by later scholarship, but he, and others rushing to publish, put some Catholic scholars, such as Roland deVaux O.P., the director of the Ecole Biblique, in a bad light as impeding the expeditious publication of the scrolls to the professional world and to the public.

Today has been a cold and rainy day, a good one for staying in and compiling my journal, which I will now bring to a close with the promise that I will write again. My prayers and thoughts are with you all.

JR