

Sojourn in the Land of the Bible

A Journal of my Sabbatical January 27-May 14, 2009 Letter Seven

Fr. John Rowan

Saturday, March 14, 2009. We have completed the second week of Lent. For me, this Lent is unprecedented, immersed in the sacred Scriptures which are said to 'purify' and 'enlighten'. (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) I am just amazed that I have the leisure to be in Jerusalem and to be so free and still so purposeful. Thanks to the diocese and to all who made this sabbatical possible.

I discovered that Friday the 13th has a [dubious] Jerusalem connection: it was on Friday, June 13, 1307 that King Phillip of Spain ordered the mass arrest of the Knights Templar, whose mission was to protect Jerusalem pilgrims, but who had become too rich and powerful in the course of their work. My impeccable source for this story is Dan Brown's The DaVinci Code. Anyway, we got through Friday the 13th without any mishaps and without any arrests and all the pilgrims appear to be safe.

Wednesday was the Festival of Purim in Jerusalem, also called the feast of Lots. In the Jewish world outside of Jerusalem it was celebrated on Tuesday. The feast celebrates the deliverance of the Jews by Queen Esther from a pogrom in Persia; Esther pleads with the king and convinces him to replace his evil advisor and to spare the Jews. The day of the massacre was determined by lots (*purim*). For Jews today, and especially for children, it is like our Halloween, everybody is somebody else, in costume, and there is a general sense of making light of everything. So in the early morning I saw a pint-sized rabbi, maybe six years old, with the black suit, the fedora, the full black beard, on his way to school with his father and his lunch box. Seeing a person in costume doing ordinary, daily tasks is always funny, like a clown getting cash from an ATM, or Abe Lincoln buying some candy. Later in the day, I saw a teen-aged bumble bee, fully yellow with black spots. Our teacher Deborah Weissman brought to class a supply of the special cookies for Purim, it is sweet dough around a prune paste, called Haman's Hat. Haman is the evil advisor. The cookie is literally named "Haman's Pockets", because Haman's treasury was taken from him and given to Queen Esther. I was familiar with these pastries because each year that our clergy association in Sayville would have its monthly meeting around this season, Rabbi Steve Moss would serve them to us.

I was trying to find a single theme for this letter by which I could tie together several unrelated items, and I came up with the concept "distinction", or the verb "to distinguish", that is, to recognize differences, or shades of differences in reality. Making distinctions is a noble and essential part of our Judeo-Christian way of thinking, and of other philosophies, (not particularly attractive to fundamentalists of any persuasion) and it remains ever useful. For example, in ethics, we distinguish between a just and an unjust war. It is not simply attaching a

name to a reality, but critically trying to express the nature of the reality. Is the war truly defensive; is the force proportionate to the alleged offense; are weapons used against civilians? Islam has similar standards relating to 'holy' war. It is not for any person to simply call his violence '*Jihad*' and thereby justify it. And a Muslim obedient to the Quran may never resort to suicide, and may never make a suicide into martyrdom. These are just examples of how distinctions help us to analyze situations and make decisions that strive for moral integrity. Distinctions help us to avoid the madness of Humpty Dumpty, who told Alice that he can make words do anything he wants, though he pays words extra if he requires them to do a lot of work. (Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland*)

Here's a useful distinction: between (A) Israel the people, (B) the State of Israel, and (C) the government of Israel. Israel the people, the Jewish people, exist all over the world, about 5.5 million in the land of Israel. It is an ethnic people, with diverse religious practice or no religious practice, numbering about 14 million worldwide. The State of Israel came into being through the UN Partition Plan (1947) and the Independence War (1948), and is recognized as the homeland of the Jews, which is their first autonomous rule in the region since 586 BC, when the Babylonian Empire conquered the Southern Kingdom of Judah. (The Northern Kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians in 722 BC, causing the demise of the ten "lost" tribes.) The third item in this distinction is the government of Israel, which is presently in transition and appears to be in the grip of far right politicians who appear to put the value of security above human rights. (Sound familiar?) What is the value of this distinction? Just to remember that criticism of the government of Israel is not anti-Semitic. The Jewish press is full of such negative comment, without being disloyal to the Israeli people or the State of Israel. Criticism of the policies of your government is not disloyalty to your country or your people. It can even be your civic and moral duty.

Here's an interesting distinction. Did you ever realize that in the story of the wedding feast at Cana, there is a difference between the actual supply of wine and the report that the mother of Jesus gives to him? "When the wine *ran short*, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have *no more* wine". (Jn 2:3) There is a difference between 'short' [supply] and 'no wine'. The fun thing about reading the text critically is that you do not let this apparently insignificant difference escape your attention, because this is precisely the kind of hint the gospel writer is giving you that something is up here, and it could be very important. What is the significance? I will tell you when I get home. Stay tuned for further developments.

Here's another distinction: when is scholarship, or architecture, pure and objective, and when is it overly influenced by politics? This is not an easy question, and every researcher has to try to filter out of his work any presuppositions, or tendencies to have his/her work favor his sponsor or his public. For example, isn't it pleasing to see the report of research saying that two drinks of wine every day will give you a long life and good digestion and a happy disposition, and that you were right all along in choosing this routine. How much pressure on the researcher must come from the grape farmers, from the wine industry, from all his drinking friends and relatives? Forgive the digression, I was thinking about dinner.

In the politics of scholarship I am following a story in the Israel press about the Dead Sea Scrolls and their meaning and origin. Just to remind you of the extraordinary discovery of the scrolls. They were discovered in caves at the Dead Sea, 1947-1956, in clay pots where it is assumed they were hidden from the Romans in 70 AD. There are 15,000 fragments, 850 separate scrolls, reflecting the text or part of the text of every book of the Hebrew Scriptures except the Book of Esther. The scroll of the Book of Isaiah, almost entirely intact, is 1000 years older than any previously known copy of Isaiah; and, interestingly, is 99.5% identical in text to the more recent copy. Our gratitude must go out to the scribes, whose reverence for the sacred text was translated into such precise copying. The Dead Sea Scrolls enhance our knowledge of both Christianity and Judaism. They represent a non-rabbinic form of Judaism and provide a wealth of comparative material for New Testament scholars, including many important parallels to the Jesus movement. They show Christianity to be rooted in Judaism and have been called the evolutionary link between the two. Most of the scrolls are housed in the Shrine of the Book at the Israel Museum here in Jerusalem. I have plans to visit the museum soon.

The story I am following is that of the criminal arrest of a man whose father, a scholar at the University of Chicago, takes the unpopular opinion that the scrolls were not from the Essene community near the Dead Sea, but were secreted out of Jerusalem before the Romans invaded in 70 AD. This theory would bring the scrolls into a tighter relationship with mainstream Judaism, rather than being the product of a marginal group. The arrested man (the scholar's son) impersonated a rival scholar in a blog, contending that his father's opponents were anti-Semites because they were insisting on the Essene origin rather than Jerusalem. Now other scholars are speaking out on the subject. The former curator of the Shrine of the Book called the "Jerusalem" theory "foolishness and mean-spirited". On the other hand, the chief archeology officer of the Civil Administration of Israel, who excavated at Qumran for 10 years, says he believes that not even a quarter of the Qumran material was Essene. "The scrolls were an outcome of flight from Jerusalem and other areas that were densely settled with Jews." He called the proponents of the Qumran Sect (Essene) theory "a guild with money and conferences". Isn't it fascinating how scholarship develops, even when outside interests and passions run high. It is so hard for any of us to change our minds, especially if certain ways of thinking have worked for us for a long time. We have to remember that Jesus first teaching was "Repent (Change your mind), and believe in the Good News." (Mk 1:15)

Here is another exercise in making distinctions. When you look at a Jerusalem wall, of an old building or a wall of the city itself, can you distinguish among all the stones that make up the wall, which are Roman (63 BC to 325 AD), Herodian (36 BC to 6 BC), Byzantine (325 AD to 638), Muslim (638 AD to 1099 AD), Crusader 1099 AD to 1187 AD? That's what the archeologists do, and their identification of tiers, the characteristics of the various layers, can be pointed out and explained to the non-expert. For example, our group visited the eastern wall of the city, which is also the eastern wall of the Temple Mount, to inspect the different layers of huge stones that make up the wall. Some of the stones are from the time of Herod the Great, the king we meet in the second chapter of St. Matthew's Gospel, who consults with the Magi and then proceeds with the massacre of the male children in the vicinity of Bethlehem. He has a reputation for cruelty, coming not only from the Holy Innocents story, but from the historical record that he

executed two of his own sons. But he was a great builder, and the Temple Mount was one of his greatest accomplishments.

This is the story of the Temple Mount. The first Temple, built by Solomon, is described in 1Kings 6:2 “The temple which King Solomon built was sixty cubits long, twenty wide, and twenty-five high. The porch in front of the temple was twenty cubits from side to side, along the width of the nave, and ten cubits deep in front of the temple.” This temple was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. The second temple was constructed in 538 BC, when the Jews were allowed by the Persians to return to Jerusalem. It was thought that the dimensions of the first temple were divinely given, and so the second temple had to follow the plan and size of Solomon’s Temple.

The second Temple was the structure Herod wanted to improve, but he was stuck with the rather modest dimensions that were God-given. So he elevated the Temple onto a huge platform which is referred to by the Jews as the Temple Mount. This is a grand flat surface lifted sixty feet into the air, with massive walls and ceremonial gates, with the Temple sitting on top. This was a marvel of ancient engineering, something like the Pyramids. It was built by paid laborers, not slaves. The area of the esplanade is five-hundred yards by three-hundred yards, equivalent to thirty football fields. A Herodian stone was pointed out to us that is estimated to weigh five hundred tons. A style of the time was to etch out rectangles to make the great stone look like a construction of several smaller stones fitted together, and the appearance is very convincing. But if you look closely, you can see that it is one huge stone.

The Temple Mount is under Muslim control, and is called the Hara mesh-Sharif (The Noble Sanctuary). I visited the site recently (times for visits by non-Muslims are tightly controlled), and it is simply beautiful, like a series of courtyards and park-like vistas, with Cypress trees and other plantings. The vast “Noble Sanctuary” both dwarfs and elevates the visitor. All around, families are having picnics. The day was beautiful and the Cypress trees were majestic spires reaching to heaven. This is the place of Abraham’s sacrifice, the test of his faith, the place of justification. This is the place of Mohammed’s ascension. It’s only six stories above the original level (Roman Period) but you could be at the very place where earth and heaven meet. It is the horizon of faith. There are two mosques in the sanctuary, one called the El-Aska Mosque, the other called the Mosque of Omar, inside the Dome of the Rock, which is a circular building whose walls are covered with Palestinian ceramic tiles in blue designs on white, and the roof being the huge golden dome that dominates the profile of the city of Jerusalem. I wasn’t able to get into the mosque at the Dome. I started to take my shoes off and a man came over to tell me that only Muslims could enter. I know this is the rule for prayer time, but there are other rules when the community is not at prayer. This might be just arbitrary. Or he might have been a zealous Muslim exceeding his authority. But one (Christian) does not argue in the sanctuary (with a Muslim).

In Jerusalem I’ve thought a lot about the issue of having non-believers present for your community prayers. The Muslims are strict about it: you enter the mosque to pray, not to observe. At the Western Wall, the Jews will allow anyone to approach the wall, to offer their

prayer there, as Pope John Paul II did when he visited in 2000. It's very consoling to feel at home there. The Jews seem very centered in their presence and prayers, and not distracted by visitors. The reform synagogue which we visited last week in West Jerusalem had an orientation for visitors before the Sabbath Service, they were quite welcoming both to a crowd of Jewish pilgrims and to us. In the early Christian Churches, the catechumens were excused from the assembly at the end of the Liturgy of the Word, before the sacred mysteries were celebrated. Now, in our churches, for ceremonies of first Eucharist and Confirmation, members of our own faith come with cameras almost proclaiming that they are here to observe and to chat and not to pray. It's a real dilemma. One does not want to neglect hospitality on the one hand; on the other there is the integrity of the prayer and the total trust we want to have with those who are with us on the journey of faith.

Admission to the Temple Mount has always been a privilege. The diary of a pilgrim in 1848 had the following entry:

Next to Mecca, Jerusalem is the most holy place of Muslim pilgrimage, and throughout the year, the Mosque of Omar and its court are crowded with turbaned worshippers. This mosque, built on the site of the Holy Temple, is the great shrine of their devotions. It is strictly guarded against all intruders, and there is a superstitious Muslim belief that if a Christian were to gain access to it, Allah would assent to whatever he might please to ask, and they take it for granted that his first prayer would be for the subversion of the religion of the Prophet. (Quoted in Jerusalem in the 19th Century, Yehoshua Ben-Arieh)

When the Herodian Temple was under the control of the Jews-until A.D 70, non Jews were not admitted in the temple area. At each of the gates was a notice in Greek and Latin saying: "No Gentile to enter the fence and barrier around the Temple. Anyone caught is liable to himself for the ensuing death." The Jews continue to reverence the area even though it has been out of their control since the Roman invasion. "Now just as we are obliged to keep the Sabbath for all time to come, so must we reverence the Sanctuary for all time to come, for even though it is in ruins, its sanctity remains". (Maimonides, 12C) Some say that this reverence and nostalgia for the ruined Temple is what's behind the gesture of breaking a glass at a Jewish wedding. Even in times of great joy, we keep in mind the sorrows and setbacks of the whole people. I believe the ritual at some Catholic weddings, to have a gift for the poor, is in the same spirit. The lesson is the same: your happiness has been purchased at a great price, and you should always be grateful for what has been given to you. Remember the Holy Temple, and one day you will enter it with joy. Remember the poor, and one day they will welcome you to heaven.

A particular significance of the Temple Mount to Christians is that this is the structure that was in place at the time of Jesus, and all the references in the gospels to the Temple have reference to this site. Consider John 2:13-21, the account which we call the cleansing of the Temple. The statement is made: "This temple has been under construction for forty-six years..." If this statement was made around the year 30 AD, it would put the beginning of the construction in 84 BC, which is squarely in the reign of Herod the Great. The 'Temple' referred to the whole complex, the huge esplanade with its various courts and venues, as well as the temple proper,

the sanctuary built according to the dimensions given in the Book of Kings. The cleansing would have been not in the sanctuary, because ordinary people did not enter there, it was not a place of assembly as our churches and synagogues are. Instead, the cleansing would have been in a courtyard possibly three hundred yards from the temple sanctuary. Jesus was not speaking or acting against the temple; he was protesting the "business as usual" attitude of the money changers and the animal sellers and the butchers who were going about their tasks unmindful of the sacredness of the Temple precincts and of the presence of the Holy one in the sanctuary. For ourselves, awareness of the sacred in the ordinary persons and events of our lives should never be taken for granted. Consider Psalm 33: "From heaven the Lord looks down: he sees all humankind. From his fixed throne he beholds all who dwell on the earth. He who fashioned the heart of each, he who knows their works."

Next Wednesday, our group is going to Galilee, up to the sea. So I will be away next Saturday and will not write the next installment of this journal until Saturday, March 27.

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