

Sojourn in the Land of the Bible

A Journal of my Sabbatical

January 27 – May 14, 2009

Letter Eight

Fr. John Rowan

I am beginning this letter on Friday, March 27, 2009, just a week before Holy Week. The city is filled with pilgrims from America, Europe, Asia and Africa. All around preparations are being made for the celebration of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter. Our program is going forward resolutely, having reached its half-way mark last week.

The bulk of this letter will be used to describe and hopefully interpret the journey which we made, starting Wednesday, March 18th and finishing up on Wednesday, March 25. We travelled north to the region of Galilee, which has its importance for Christians because it was the principal location of the ministry of Jesus, and continues to move the soul of all visitors because of the sheer beauty of the place, with its mountains and rolling hills, its lake and its fertile fields, its meadows filled with grass and wild flowers. (*Gal* means round, as in “wheel”, or “scroll”, or “rolling hills”.)

Galilee is a welcome spring break from Jerusalem because of the milder weather and the resort ambience. And for the archeologist, most of the ruins are not buried deep under the debris of successive settlements, as in Jerusalem, but near or at the present surface; and all the natural sites, the lake and the mountains, are just where they were at the time of Jesus. (In Jerusalem and other sites which have been destroyed and built up over and over again, the present-day surface is thirty feet higher than at the time of Jesus.) As for the lake and the mountains, the water level may be lower than before, but the lake bed is just where it was when Jesus called the fishermen who were to become his first disciples, and the mountains are rising just where they were at the time of the Sermon on the Mount, or the Transfiguration.

As I list the places we visited, you have to remember that these are not the guaranteed location of the Bible events that are commemorated at the site. But some of these places have been the destination of Christian pilgrims for about 1800 years, and many of these holy places were the site of pagan shrines before Christianity. They have a natural holiness about them which was recognized by the Christians as contributing to a deeper intuition of the events recorded in the gospel. As I write this letter I am looking for a name for the connectedness of the natural site, for example, the cave or the spring, with the gospel event commemorated there, for example, the cave of Mary's house and the story of the Annunciation. Three possible concepts, none of which is original with me) are suggested.

The first is the principle of “sacramentality”, that is, all reality is imbued with the sacred presence of God, and some created things, for example, running water, or mountain tops, or caves, or the desert wilderness, are especially evocative of the mysterious dimension of the created world. (Catholicism, Richard McBrien) Using this language, a cave would be the

outward sign of the interiority and mysticism of the encounter with God in the heart of the believer, as in the Gospel of Luke: "And coming to her, [the angel] said, 'Hail, favored one...'" It is possible that the early Christians had less compunction than the Jews about taking over pagan religious sites and relating them to Christian stories, because officially the Jews were very protective of the one shrine at Jerusalem, and very cautious about appearing to adopt the customs of pagans, whereas the Christians were prepared to "baptize" whatever could be salvaged from earlier pagan religions. St. Patrick's mission in Ireland in the fifth century is a good example of the freedom of Christian missionaries to adapt to indigenous religions. ([How the Irish Saved Civilization](#), Thomas Cahill)

The second concept is that of "inscape", a word coined by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Inscape attempts to express the unique existence of every created thing, reflecting the conviction that the Creator is endlessly inventive and makes no two things alike. Thus, the particular Sycamore Tree in the city of Jericho which is said to be the one on Jesus' route that was climbed by Zaccheus (Lk 19:1-10) may help the viewer to integrate the gospel story. You see its relatively low branches permitting the short Zaccheus a foothold to climb up; you can see him peering down from the branches, not just to "see Jesus", but to "see who Jesus was". The tree is unique as is the gospel story of Zaccheus, and something in the fundamental identity of each is entering the mind of the viewer to produce a deeper appreciation of both the tree and the gospel.

The third concept comes from the Italian word "*suggestivo*", meaning something like reverberation, with the sliding of one part of a sense of reality into another, with a movement of feeling and experience connected or corresponding to both realities, for example, the reality of the desert being connected to the experience described in the scene of the temptations of Jesus. How does the solitude and the sheer expanse of the wilderness help the reader of the gospel to enter into both the vulnerability of Jesus and his resolute dependence on the word of God? (Lk 4:1-13) How does the gospel story of the Temptations of Jesus heighten both the risks and the benefits of going out into the desert?

A major factor in achieving the integration I am seeking is the space and time for silence. Even when you are not part of a program, as I am, the economies of life require that you keep moving along. We had three days of relative quiet in Galilee, staying in a German hostel for pilgrims, which was conducive to long walks and solitude, but I believe the contemplation I mean by the introduction of the concepts above would require a more prolonged culture of silence. After all, Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert for forty days, and St Francis of Assisi took forty days for his fast and retreat. What can we expect from a forty-minute visit? ([A Book of Silence](#), Sara Maitland, Granta Press)

On Wednesday, March 18, as we traveled north into Galilee our first stop was Nazareth. We celebrated Eucharist at the Basilica of the Annunciation, which is built over the Grotto of the House of Mary. At the grotto, there is an inscription that says: "*Hic Verbum Caro Factum Est*", that is, the Word was made flesh here. (Jn 1:14) Later we visited the Greek Orthodox Church of St. Gabriel, and saw the icon of the Annunciation. Both the Roman and the Greek theologies of

the Annunciation are based on the account in St. Luke's Gospel (1:26). In the Roman version, Mary is visited by the angel in her room (as in the painting by Fra Angelico). In the Greek version, Mary encounters the angel while on her way to the well to draw water. In the icon at the Church of St. Gabriel, after Mary has said her "*Fiat*", she leaves the water jug empty at the well, because she is now carrying the "Living Water" within her body. These two images point to two different ecclesiologies (theologies of the Church): in one, the Church is a room, a place of safety and dwelling with God; in the other, the Church is the path leading to the Living Water. The cave under the Church of Annunciation is mentioned in the Diary of the Pilgrim Egeria (384) who wrote that she was shown "a big and very splendid cave" in which Mary had lived. At the Church of St. Gabriel, there is a spring of living water in which pilgrims dip their hands to bless themselves. Thus the cave and the spring, strange gifts of nature, draw us into the mystery of the Incarnation, a new kind of life never before originating in the womb.

We went on to the Church of the Marriage Feast in the village of Cana. There is a lot of discussion about the location of the historical Cana, and it is clear that this is not the spot. But this is where the shrine is, and you can buy a bottle of wine made in the region (made from grapes, not from water), for fifty shekels (\$12.50). The gospel text is John 2:1-11. "Now there were six stone water jars there for Jewish ceremonial washings..." Two things about this sentence require further inquiry: one, they did not use stone water jars in Galilee; stone jars were too expensive, too elegant for the country. Stone water jars were used in Jerusalem, while in Galilee they used clay water jars. Second, the word "Jewish" probably means "Judean", that is, relating to the tribes of the south, in Jerusalem, where the tribe of Judah will ultimately give its name to all the Israelites from the original twelve tribes.

We ended this day with a visit to the heights of Mount Arbel, which has a rich history militarily and contains many caves and excavations. But we went mainly for the view, which is just exquisite, and displays the vast expanses of the Galilean hills and fields, to the distant mountains of Tabor and Hermon.

The next day, Thursday, we visited sites in and around the Sea of Galilee, also called the Lake of Kinnereth (Num 34:11). It is Israel's largest freshwater lake, approximately 33 miles in circumference, 13 miles long by 8 miles wide. It is the lowest freshwater lake in the world and the second lowest lake in the world after the Dead Sea, a saltwater lake. The Sea of Galilee is full of life and is a major source of fresh water for Israel. Due to its low-lying position in the rift valley, surrounded by hills, the sea is prone to sudden violent storms; hence the New Testament story about Jesus calming the storm.

We visited the Yigal Alon Center with its exhibit of The Ancient Galilee Boat. In 1986 two brothers discovered the boat when a severe drought resulted in lowering the waters of the Sea of Galilee. The vessel had been buried in, and thus protected by, the seabed's sediments. In an eleven-day evacuation, the boat was uncovered and wrapped and floated to the Yigal Alon Center, where it underwent an eleven-year conservation process in which synthetic wax replaced the water in the wood cells. Now it is shown in an atmosphere-controlled museum. The boat is preserved to a length of 26.9 feet, a breadth of 7.5 feet and a height of 3.9 feet.

The original construction of the boat, which employed pegged mortise-and-tenon joints to edge-join the planking, and the steps in its restoration, are both a marvel. Based on several criteria the Galilee Boat is firmly dated to the first centuries BC-AD. An analysis of crew sizes suggests that this is the type of boat referred to in the gospels in use among Jesus' disciples, as well as that used by the Jews against the Romans in the nautical Battle of Migdal in 67 AD.

When word got out about this discovery, people came from miles around to help dig the boat out and to watch the painstaking work of preservation begin. Even small children seemed to be enthralled with this link to the past. The boat, an object of human construction made of wood, with great skill, having as its purpose to transport people for work, dating from two-thousand years ago, now preserved with equal skill, resulting in an exhibit looking like a discarded hull on a deserted beach, but reverberating with a reverence for work and for human industry and invention two thousand years old, is humbling and exalting. And the link to the gospels and to the fishermen is given a new depth.

We hired a motor launch for a journey on the Sea of Galilee. This was a well-worn craft with a sun-shield made of reeds, with benches around the sides and some folding chairs set up in rows in the center of the deck. We went out a distance from the shore, and paused for reflection.

The readings were:

Luke 8:24 "He awakened, rebuked the wind and the waves, and they subsided and there was a calm."

Psalm 107:29 "He hushed the storm to a gentle breeze, and the billows of the sea were stilled."

Job 38:8 "When I set limits for the sea and fastened the bar of its door, and said: Thus far shall you come but no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stilled!"

The sea was calm as we rested, with the motor turned off, just a cool breeze reminding us that the weather could change. When we think about Jesus sleeping through a storm that had the disciples fearing for their lives, the sea becomes a metaphor for all our anxieties, and we realize that God understands that our faith is "little". We envy the disciples for having such an immediate answer to their prayer.

We left the sea and went to the place called the Mount of the Beatitudes, which towers above the Sea of Galilee and offers the country's most magnificent view of the shimmering blue lake. It is here that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is commemorated. We had Eucharist in an open chapel and had lunch at the Franciscan Sisters' guesthouse, where the standard fare is a roasted fish, caught in the Sea of Galilee, served whole. The fish was of a very pleasant consistency, like trout. After lunch we returned to the bus by way of a winding dirt path down the mountain on a walk that took about an hour. We walked in silence, with only the sounds of spring around us, taking a brief rest in the meadow on the way, during which our guide read from the Sermon on the Mount. This was a perfect blend of movement and silence and quiet companionship. The Sermon on the Mount is, of course, a compilation of the teachings of Jesus, assembled into a few chapters of Matthew's Gospel from many different occasions and

settings. But surely our listening to the Gospel, on a sunny mountainside, was one of the settings in which the original teaching was given. There is a particular power, and weakness, of the human voice, in a natural setting, without amplification, which may reach the soul with fresh clarity. A feature of the trail we took were small markers, really stones about the size of grave markers, on which an old Benedictine monk by the name of Virgil Pixner, who used to wander around these hills, would carve messages to be read by generations of pilgrims who would come upon them. One of these was a line drawing which was interpreted for us to mean that it was not only to the eleven Apostles that Jesus spoke when he instructed them: "Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you". (Mt 28:19) It was also to all the disciples through history, including those who this day heard again the teaching of the Beatitudes.

We departed by bus for the City of Capernaun, the headquarters of Jesus' Galilean ministry. (Mt 4:12-17) It is fun to ride in the bus and see the highway directional signs, which are in Hebrew, Arabic and English, alerting drivers that this is the road to places you've only encountered in the Bible, like Capernaun or Nazareth or Jericho. Capernaun is a major excavation site of both the village and the impressive synagogue which was the center of the town. The site of the synagogue is said to be where the Lord cured a man possessed by the devil. (Mk1:23) I believe the structures found there date from the latter part of the Roman period (63 BC-324AD) The bougainvillea vines draping over the ruins are spectacular.

In Capernaun also is found an excavation said to be the home of St. Peter, over which has been built an octagonal church with a glass floor so you can look down into the ruins. Egeria, the fourth century pilgrim, noted in her diary "In Capernaun the house of the prince of the apostles has been made into a church, with its original walls still standing..." Here, as in the center of the ancient town of Capernaun, you can see the kind of living space a family would have, really two rooms equaling the size of a garage. The preparation and eating of food was done in common spaces with other families. This site is under the guardianship of the Franciscans, and, while walking about the grounds, I introduced myself to one of them, who happen to be the superior of the house, an African named Fr. Jerome, originally from Ghana. He knew Fr. Seth and Fr. Victor, and had been to Long Island to help at the parish of St. Elizabeth, Melville, where Fr. Frank Schneider is pastor. Having discovered so many mutual friends, I continued chatting with Fr. Jerome and had to be called away because the bus was leaving.

The next day we visited two nature preserves at the foot of Mount Hermon, both of which center on the kind of life, human, animal and vegetative, which thrived on the fresh water springs there that are fed by the melting snow at the top of the mountain. This is the site of ancient Canaanite worship, and of Roman pagan cults, and identified with the city called Caesarea Philippi, frequented by Jesus and his disciples. This is the site remembered for the Confession of Peter "You are the Christ..." (Mt16:13) We read that Matthean text here, and the memorable connection with the natural site is where Jesus says to Peter "You are Peter (Petrus) and upon this rock (petra), I will build my church." At that site, the rock is rising over the stream like a skyscraper. The scene challenges the imagination: this is no foundation stone, like a building block. It is a massive mountain of rock.

We took a slippery path into the forest and at a quiet tributary had a little prayer service in which we renewed our baptismal promises. The human voice, mixed with the sounds of the rippling water, was very penetrating of the soul. Here you can see how the secret places in the deep of the forest, and the fresh water which is flowing in abundance, connects with the rebirth in faith. This might be a good example of *suggestivo*: the sound and the movement of the stream and the words spoken by a human voice reverberate and blend with the interior, spiritual realities of life in the Father, Son and Spirit. I should mention that this forest place is not the usual place where pilgrims commemorate the ministry of John the Baptist. That site is a bit south on the Jordan, a bit dry and barren, because the Jordan is reduced in many spots to a mere creek.

While we were at the German pilgrimhouse we took a short walk to the Church of the Multiplication of Loaves and Fishes. Egeria, the fourth century pilgrim, wrote in her diary: *“Not far from there (Capernaum) are some stone steps where the Lord stood. And in the same place by the sea is a grassy field with plenty of hay and many palm trees. By them are seven springs, each flowing strongly. And this is the field where the Lord fed the people with five loaves and two fishes. In fact the stone on which the Lord placed the bread has now been made into an altar. People who go there take small pieces of the stone to bring them prosperity, and they are very effective. Past the walls of this church goes the public highway on which the Apostle Matthew had his place of custom. Near there on a mountain is the cave to which the Saviour climbed and spoke the Beatitudes”*. We saw the ancient, irregular steps described by Egeria, and we celebrated the Eucharist on a stone altar, in an outdoor chapel at the seashore, where the pews were big logs, and two badgers sunning themselves on the rocks behind the presider appeared to be regular members of the congregation, one of them dozing off as if he had heard this sermon before, the other alert and curious, probably wondering if we would come up with some hymns she hadn't heard before. We also saw the cave where Egeria claims Jesus spoke the Beatitudes, (on the mountain trail I described above) and it is fun to think of our common pilgrim experiences and our common Christian faith reaching over fifteen hundred years, looking for monuments of the gospel story in the land.

On our return trip south we stopped at Mount Tabor, which is the principal contender for the place of the Transfiguration of the Lord. (Mount Hermon and the Mount of Olives are the other possible sites that the evangelist might have had in mind.) What happened to us at Mount Tabor may prove the adage that the more struggle a pilgrim has getting to his destination, the more merit he will receive. The large tour buses in which we and the other pilgrims arrive cannot climb the winding mountain road, so the pilgrims have to disembark from the tour bus and get into small vans, six at a time, for the climb to the Basilica of the Transfiguration, where we had an appointment for the use of the main sanctuary for Eucharist at 10am. As our bus pulled in to the transfer place, we were behind a huge crowd of tourists who were already on line for the vans. As we waited, a fierce cold rain, like little pieces of melted ice, began to fall on us. And we could not retreat to a dryer and warmer space without losing our precious place on line. Ultimately we got to the church on time: a group was just finishing up in the sanctuary, and after we were finished, at 11am, another group was waiting to take our place. The view

from the terrace outside the church was breathtaking. Somehow, I regret that we could not have seen the majestic view first, before mass. I think it would have put me in different space for contemplating the Transfiguration of the Lord. (Lk9:28) I was assigned to give the homily at the mass, and, to put it gently, this was not my finest hour. I think I spoke too abstractly, instead of dwelling on the sacrament of the place, Mount Tabor. I should have allowed our coming up the mountain to resonate with the mystery of this event, which, I believe, has so much to do with the conversation in which Jesus' death is discussed as an "Exodus". As it is, I suppose no one will remember what I said, which will put us all in touch with Peter in the same story, who is described thusly: "But he did not know what he was saying".

Thus far this excursion north has taken us to or through the following places: the Jordan Valley, Nazareth, Cana, Tiberias, the Sea of Galilee, Mount Arbel, the Mount of Beatitudes, Capernaum, Banyas (Caesarea Philippi), Dan, Tabgha, and Mount Tabor. In this letter, there remains only a description of our trip to Jericho, an oasis in the Judean desert, which was our destination for Wednesday, March 25.

We left by bus from Jerusalem into the Judean desert to the city of Jericho. The road we took was the same used by Jesus in the parable of the Good Samaritan, and along the way there is a site called the Inn of the Good Samaritan. (Lk 10:29) This excavation shows that a gospel event does not have to be historical in order to have an actual place where it is commemorated. Jericho is the oldest city on earth. It is an oasis in the desert, with a water source in a powerful spring that puts out 1,000 gallons a minute. By 8000 BC the inhabitants of the place had become shepherds and farmers (evolving from hunters and gatherers). In 1200 BC this is the place captured by the Israelites under Joshua. (Joshua 6:20) The story of the "Walls came tumbling down" has run into some archeological trouble, because the mud fortifications originally thought to be those leveled by the Israelites in 1200 BC turned out to be about a thousand years older. Now it is conceded that there is little or no evidence of Israelite occupation in 1200 BC, so the debate about the historicity of the Book of Joshua continues. Because of its mild winter climate, people from Jerusalem kept country homes here. Herod the Great leased the oasis from Cleopatra, who had been given it by her paramour Mark Antony. The spring, which we visited, is referenced in the Book of Kings 2:19:

*Once the inhabitants of the city complained to Elisha,
"The site of the city is fine indeed, as my lord can see,
but the water is bad and the land unfruitful." "Bring
me a new bowl," Elisha said, "and put salt into it."
When they brought it to him, he went out to the spring
and threw salt into it, saying, "Thus says the Lord, "I
have purified this water. Never again shall death or
miscarriage spring from it." And the water has stayed
pure even to this day, just as Elisha prophesied.*

The main attraction in Jericho today is the Greek Orthodox monastery and church that is essentially a cliffhanger on a high, sheer mountainside, accessed by an impossible climb or by a cable car that takes you over the Palestinian village below to a station in the mountain side,

from which there is a further uphill walkway to the monastery. The inaccessibility of this strange place points to the desert tradition of the Christians, which began after the persecutions ended (313AD), in which the life of monks in community, or of hermits, became the heroic way to seek God and holiness of life. Even today, a few monks occupy the cells on this mountainside. There is a small chapel attached to the monastery said to contain a rock which Jesus clung to during the time of his temptation in the desert (Mk 1:12)

While we were at the cable car platform preparing to descent, a large group of Palestinian boys arrived on a school outing. Many of them greeted us with a heavily accented: "Welcome". But one boy, an eighth grader as I later learned, asked me in perfect English, where I was from. I told him and asked him the same question. His answer: "Houston, Texas."

One of the sights of the Judean desert, which is just endless crusted sand rolling for miles and miles, is the presence of sporadic Bedouin settlements, so-called "unrecognized villages" which represent a way of life thousands of years old. The only difference in today's shacks from Abraham's is the material of their construction, which now is corrugated tin instead of leather skins. They are squatters, and have no electricity or city water or sanitation. In Israel, there are 160,000 Bedouins, Israeli citizens, although separated from the benefits of government by their isolated life. Their way of life may be coming to an end, however, largely through the enforcement of compulsory education of their children, and also because of some resettlement programs in which Bedouin families have adapted very quickly to the conveniences of city life.

Our bus stopped in an isolated desert place where we could walk about on the dunes in silence for a little while. It was a very peaceful interlude, indicating the path to God is both communal and solitary.

JR