

## **REFLECTION**

### **(Holy Week 2011 with Sue and Lisl in the Holyland)**

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I hope this will be a little foretaste of things to come. I am deliberately using just my Easter experiences and not the whole trip.

This is a brief account of my Holy week 2011. Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> April was a scorcher of a day (38°C) spent looking at the fortress of Herod the Great, Masada that overlooks the Dead Sea on one side and the Judean desert on the other.

We arrived back to the New Gate Hotel which is in West Jerusalem and which was burgeoning with Jewish families returning for the Passover. On the first floor was a Mikvah (ritual bath) and plans were underway for the Seder meal on 18<sup>th</sup> April. On 17<sup>th</sup> April there is the search for leavened bread and it is the Jewish year of 5771 with Seder celebrated on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> April. The hotel went mad with cleaners everywhere. Every inch of the hotel was cleaned. On the Monday of Holy Week we had to move hotels. I was sorry that we could not participate in a Seder ceremony as I had done so at my kibbutz in 1976 and found it a beautiful celebration of liberty and freedom. It is such a good story to base a meal around! It's got it all: plagues, death, salvation, chariots, miracles, and finally freedom.

The Haggadah is a piece of great beauty. In Tel Aviv I had bought an antique copy of this. The youngest child in the household asks "why is this night different to all other nights?" The sung haggadah is very beautiful and it is so integral to our understanding of the whole Judaio-Christian tradition.

I had a long chat with Mrs Frankel whose son is a celebrated Rabbi in Denver Colorado. She is a wise and dignified elderly lady. Her forebears were Lithuanian Jews and she had left there as a child. She was looking forward to the Seder but she said she no longer went to family as it was "too long and too exhausting" for her now. We talked in the hotel foyer for about two hours. Then we moved hotels – a radical transition from Jewish West to Arab East and to an Arab hotel.

We walked on Monday night into the old city. It was a beautiful night with the Passover moon visible. We went to Mass (in Polish!) in the Armenian Catholic Church. We saw the Church of the Holy Sepulchre already very full of pilgrims: Greek, Romanian, Polish, Eritrean, Syrian, Armenian etc, etc. This Easter was a rare occasion as the Orthodox and Latin calendars were in sync! When I was there in 1976 I was very confused by little Greek women with Palm branches on Easter Sunday until someone told me about the calendars!

Tuesday of Holy Week was a very special journey with a nice Palestinian lad called Joseph who had actually been a student at Bethlehem University and who now was driving a cab. He took us to see Brother Peter Bray in Bethlehem. We had lunch there with some visiting Australian MPs. The money raised by our Student Council at Sacred Heart College was duly handed over and we had time to have a look around Bethlehem too.

The nicest part of this visit was the feeling of an oasis of hope in a desperately sad situation. The students we met at Bethlehem University were wonderful young women. We met Haya who is doing Occupational Therapy and who talked about wanting to make a difference in the new state to help people with disabilities. We had heard about how this university wants to create "a pool of people to create a new Palestine." We met Christina an accounting student, Taba an English Literature student and Lubna from Hebron also doing English Literature. Lubna talked about how hard it was to travel from Hebron to the university as the Israelis have "flying checkpoints." She often misses her first classes of the day because of hold-ups at the border.

The university began as a school for poor boys in the tradition of Jean de la Salle. It was founded in 1893. In 1996 it was closed for three years (the first intifada) and in 2001 there was the second intifada with the Brothers teaching in secret. We saw the bullet holes in the Brothers' quarters.

We also heard the story of Azzam Berlanti whose case went all the way to the Israeli High Court. She is a resident of Gaza who was denied access to the university even after the Israelis admitted that she was not a security risk. The story has a happy ending though because she received her Business degree in the end and is now studying in the USA.

On Wednesday we again crossed the border (now a WALL) into the Palestinian Authority. We did this tour to Nablus with a really nice Israeli man called Fred Schlomka who is committed to peace and to giving tourists a more honest and complete experience. We had a Palestinian guide and we went into a camp called Balata where many of the people have languished since 1948 and 1967. It is a very rough and unsatisfactory way to live. Despite this the people were very friendly and it was here that I met my magician. He was top rate in the old "sleight-of-hand" business. He "threw" my camera away and then restored it to me and then he "ate" Sue's ring. We were charmed. We visited the Holy Mountain of the Samaritan people of whom there are only 650 left and we met their high priest. We also went to the Orthodox church of Jacob's Well where the priest was hacked to death by Israeli settlers thirty five years ago. He now lies in state as a martyr in his own church. This is also the well where Jesus accepted a drink from a Samaritan woman. The priest who is now there is Father Eustenius. A nice man with a beautiful black Tom cat called Asmar ("Black" in Arabic!).

On Holy Thursday we went to two washing ceremonies! The first was at the Armenian Patriarchate (Orthodox) and it was very colourful with crowns and monks with terrific cowls and beautiful faces. The other was at the Lithostrotos or the Basilica of the Flagellation. The Sisters of Notre Dame de Sion have a convent here. I had stayed there in 1976. It was a very beautiful Mass.

On Good Friday we did the Stations of the Cross at 6.30am. It is a very moving experience even though from an historical point of view the current Via Dolorosa is a convention of the middle ages and is not really the way Jesus walked to Golgotha. With much more archaeological evidence now we know that the first station is not in the Madrasa that is built on the Old Antonia Palace but it would have been in the

Hasmonean Palace on the other side of town for it was here that Pilate would have tried Jesus. It is good that there is a route though and it is an important convention.

After the Stations of the Cross we decided that it was in keeping with the day to go to the Yad Vashem Museum. It is of course much more extensive than it was in 1976 and has outstanding architecture. It is probably the hardest museum in the world to "do". It is a trail of tears, of deep sorrow, relentless pain, murder and unbearable cruelty. It covers the rise of Nazism, the start of the War, Babi Yar in 1941 (Ukraine), all the camps, the Final Solution, Auschwitz and the liberation. The museum uses real accounts on DVD from real survivors. There is a fine art gallery also and it was here that I was deeply moved by the pictures that Carol Deutsch did for his daughter to illustrate Bible stories. There are exquisite lively luminous pictures. Carol and his wife Fela were murdered in the extermination camps, however their five year old daughter Ingrid was hidden by a Catholic family and when she returned to Antwerp at the end of the war she was greeted by this wonderful Bible. You can google Carol Deutsch and see all 99 of these images. He must have been such a good father. I wrote in the book at Yad Vachem that words are inadequate. There have been other genocides but none of such pernicious, unscrupulous, scientific thoroughness. It is a story that has to be told and re-told as it is a fanaticism and madness that we must always be on our guard against.

My first small insight into this horror was as an eight year old child. I was in Standard 3. There was a girl who didn't do religious studies with the rest of us. The Bible Studies were taken by a well meaning man from the local bicycle shop. She sat on the step. She always had pretty summer dresses. She was a very nice girl. She took me to her Dad's shop for lunch one day. We had chicken noodle soup. He was a cobbler and the whole shop smelt of leather. I saw the tattoo on his arm and in my own funny eight year old way I sort of "got it." These people were victims of terrible injustice. They were hard workers. The mother worked at J. Wattie Canneries and was bent and stooped even though she must have been only middle-aged.

It was during the same year that another girl at school brought a swastika bracelet to school. It would have been of Indian origin but she flaunted it in front of my friend. I saw very clearly that day how evil is perpetrated. I also saw how no guard is too great to insist upon to ensure that we don't just keep on repeating the same atrocities. I hear that the girl is now a psychologist. She will be a very good one. I still replay bits of this story in my head. It is a mantra of memory and a small taonga that says "Be on guard." Kia ata haere!

Easter Saturday was to bring an example of the relentlessly repetitive nature of history as I witnessed another injustice. We were up at 4 o'clock to attend that Holy Fire ceremony in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre but we were blocked by Israeli police on the Via Dolorosa at Jaffa Gate and at New Gate. Jews were allowed in but no-one else. The people waiting were Orthodox Christians who had come from Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece and Russia and the Holy Fire is their big day. There was a little Serbian woman I have a photo of. She kept saying "Why they no let us in?" Good question. The cordon with linked arms moving into the crowd reminded me of the 1981 tour protest except this lot of tyrants had guns. I sang "La

Maseillaise” and repeated the verse about “tyrannie” at least 3 times “Contre nous de la tyrannie.”

We were lucky though. We met a traveller who could help. She was a Greek Aussie from Sydney now an Attorney in New York. Through her fluent Greek we were able to get into the Greek Patriarchate where we attended a Greek Orthodox Eucharist. Stella Said “do you want to take communion?” We said “Yes” and she told us that we would be asked our baptismal names and then given communion on a spoon (the elements are mixed together). In a church built for 200 but with 600 people in it this was a truly moving and remarkable experience. Just for the record the Israeli police were at the door and not letting people out – even an hysterical and quite sick woman. So..... good experience! A taste of what Palestinians put up with all the time as this is occupied territory. This was a display of power for no apparent reason. It was sinister, anti-pilgrim and arrogant.

The afternoon was quite different. We went to the top of the Mount of Olives. This is the Dome of the Ascension (in the middle of a mosque as it is also holy to Moslems), a panoramic view of Jerusalem and the dear little church called Dominus Fleuit. (The Lord weeps). Jesus wept for Jerusalem and predicted its destruction. We waited in the Old City for the 9pm English language Mass at Lithostrotos. The celebrant was the former rector of Tantur. We walked back to the hotel at 11.30pm The most special part of the ceremony was the lighting of the fire on the terrace that overlooks the Madrasa that is the first station of the Cross with the Golden Dome of the Mosque of El Omar shining in the distance.

On Easter Sunday we walked the Ramparts between Zion Gate and Dung Gate. We visited the very beautiful Dormition Abbey where Our Lady fell asleep. We saw the Coenaculum or room of the Last Supper, St Peter in Gallicante and at 5pm went to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre for the procession which ends in the Franciscans Little Chapel with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament.

In keeping with the sequence of the stories of the resurrected Lord we went on Easter Monday to Abu Ghosh said to be the Emmaus of the New Testament. We had a Palestinian taxi driver called Abdullah Daoud from whom I learnt a great saying: “The camel does not see his hump.” This was his answer to the manifestly unfair way in which Palestinians have been treated by the Israeli state. We passed the King David hotel on the way out which was blown up by Jewish terrorists in the time of the British Mandate. They sent the bomb in with the daily milk delivery. On the way to Abu Gosh we also passed Bab el-Wad, a valley that has a profound role in the War of Independence or Arab Uprising of 1936-39 and in 1948. It is a terrible tale of starved civilians in Jerusalem and a United Nations that failed to guarantee the international status of this city. Palestinians blocked the valley and Jewish convoys tried to force their way through to relieve the siege. Bab El-Wad came to symbolize triumph for the nascent State of Israel in 1948.

So on this same road there walked grieving friends. They were so involved with their grief that they did not recognise the stranger who came to join them. Not until he broke the bread did they recognise their master – le Seigneur as the Benedictine monks and nuns sang when we finally got to Abu Ghosh. It was beautiful singing.

From Abu Ghosh we drove to Ein Kerem the site of John the Baptist's family home and where the Visitation took place. Ein Kerem is also the site of bloody warfare in 1948. The Arabs were driven out of the village. On the way back as if to complete our history lesson Abdullah insisted we see a UNRWA school for poor Palestinian girls. It is not so far from the Old City and the western wall. It has three rooms and two tiny courtyards and it desperately needs two hoops for the basketball goals. 140 girls go to this school. I hope we may be able to help them in some way.

Last of all on Easter Monday we went to the Church of Pater Noster where the Lord's prayer is inscribed in decorative tiles in many different languages. Yes, Maori is there! (It wasn't in 1976 but it is now!)

I was proud of Fred Schlomka's comments about Aotearoa/New Zealand and its management of post-colonial issues. Fred was the "fair minded" Israeli who took us to Nablus. The heart of the matter is that it will always be (sorry LV Martin and Sons) the "putting right that counts." The Holyland has so much putting right I wouldn't know where to start. I am stunned that the oppressed have become the oppressors and that a people from the shtetl and ghettos have now built their very own wall. The big laconic Sephardic Jew who drove us to Tel Aviv summed it up: "They are pigs. They live like pigs – let them stay behind the wall." There was racism in the 1970s but now it is overt. The state has lost its moral compass and the 20% of Israelis who would have it re-arranged are fringe voices.

So this then was our Holy week 2011. It is like the "Rime of the Ancient Mariner"

- "A sadder but a wiser man  
He rose the morrow morn."

It is not a cruisey sort of holiday when you think a lot about grief, oppression and suffering but it is a stark reminder of how the world is experienced by so many people. Jesus's journey on the Via Dolorosa was constantly on my mind.

Pilate would have pronounced his death sentence with these words "Ibis in crucem!" "You mount the cross." He would have then been given the Patibulum (the cross-beam of the cross) to carry.

He would have still been wearing the seamless white garment he had put on for the Passover meal only now it would be covered in his own blood. He gets sympathy from the women of Jerusalem and help from a North African Jew, Simon of Cyrene. It is likely that this man became a Christian as his sons were called Alexander and Rufus and are mentioned in the gospels. Jesus dies having recited quietly to himself the 22<sup>nd</sup> Psalm. Jesus died and on the Sabbath which was also the Passover <sup>i</sup> his followers would have left the tomb. They would have felt that all was lost. They would also have been mindful of Deuteronomy "... Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." The disciples must have asked themselves "Why?" Why execute the Messiah? There are two answers here. The first answer is that of the Pharisee Saul trained in the school of Rabbi Gamaliel the elder, grandson of Hillel.

<sup>1</sup> This is assuming the year AD 30 is the date of this event.

Saul later Paul saw it as an expiation of the sins of mankind. The second tradition is that of St Luke's gospel which is more about rescuing all humankind from death. Both explanations have their place. It is with the Resurrection that the Messianic period of salvation has begun.

God has showed us in Jesus a way of true being. Redemption is an historical process. Despite great adversity and evil the Resurrection advances our history and penetrates all human history. Both interpretations of the Messiah's death are needed in our world today.

I am so pleased to have been to Emmaus and also to Tabgha for it was at Tabgha or Ma-gadan that Jesus appeared to the disciples who had gone fishing. Just as there is a meal in the Emmaus story at Tabgha he has breakfast with them.

For the second time in my life I stood there by Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee) and for the second time I didn't really understand but also for the second time I realised that it is the best story in the world. I will never tire of wanting to retell it, to examine it like a jeweller with a rare gem and sharing it.

Thank you for this opportunity. It has not been lost on me and it will be shared.

### **Epilogue**

This journey has taught me that intellect is useless. We need so much more at the point at which the abyss yawns before us or we are "brought to the test." Only faith has an answer. It is from faith that we have joy and hope. The magician in the camp at Balata taught me how unreliable is the human eye. It was a little miracle to have my camera restored to me. This has been a journey of most pleasant hope, excellent company and small revelations. The stoic Epictetus said:

"Do not seek to have everything that happens happen as you wish but wish for everything to happen as it actually does happen and your life will be serene."

Before I left I had listened to a great presentation from Kate Smith of eatbigfish.com she was encouraging us all to have "a naïve intelligence." That is: to let go, to notice more and to use everything. My great favourite Michel Eyquem de Montaigne said much the same thing: "The trick is to maintain a kind of naïve amazement at each instant of experience." This was the methodology applied to this trip and I hope indeed to life itself.

On 15 May 2011 a 3<sup>rd</sup> Intifada has been called for. (A third but peaceful rising against Israeli hegemony). I pray that it will be peaceful and successful in bringing the world's attention back to this issue.

This is an interim report dear friends as it only covers Holy Week so as the infomercials say "but wait, there's more..... " I will give the last word to Mahmoud Dawish the great Palestinian poet who died in 2008. In his poetry the Nakba or tragedy of the Palestinian people is always in the background. A central theme of his poetry is 'watan' or homeland. I was just glad I had one to return to.

This place has its scents.  
The sunsets have their torments.  
The gazelle has its hunter.  
Tortoises have their armor.  
Ants have their kingdom.  
Birds have their appointments.  
Horses have their names.  
Wheat flowers have a festival.

But the song, the song of the happy ending,  
has not found a poet.



*Gazelle Niger Desert -  
April 2011*

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