

Archdiocese of Southwark



Purley Parish Pilgrimage to the Holy Land February 2019



Mass with Purley parishioners

Although this pilgrimage has left an enormous and lasting personal impression on me, the impetus came from my becoming the new Parish Priest at Purley and wanting to undertake a significant pilgrimage together in order for us to draw closer to each other spiritually and in simple companionship.

It was my first journey to the Holy Land. I had always had misgivings about security, a feeling shared by some parishioners, and about parts of the Palestine Authority areas (particularly Bethlehem) being suddenly closed off. However, we all felt and were safe and our journeys went smoothly. As we drove late at night from Tel Aviv airport towards our accommodation at Tiberias on the Sea of Galilee I experienced a childlike excitement, sitting at the front of the coach, at seeing on the main highway road signs to Cana and Nazareth.

I had thought that this would be a once in a lifetime experience for me; but I am keen to go back with another group of parishioners, because this is an experience I want to share. I want to see their faces as they see these places with such familiar names, where Our Lord walked, talked, lived, died and rose again. I would also like to encourage Christians in the UK to support our brother and sister Christians in the Holy Land, who are now a sad minority of the population.

So, what is it that we experienced? Father Bargil Pixner coined the phrase the “Fifth Gospel” in speaking of the Holy Land. By this he described what we ourselves experienced: being in the home country of Our Lord brought him closer, seemed to explain so much just by virtue of our appreciating how far he walked between places (Nazareth and Cana for instance) and over what terrain and with what views of countryside and the Sea of Galilee.

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This is on the face of it such an ordinary environment, a homely place, even when you consider the political issues so current in modern Israel and Palestine, in Gaza (where we did not venture!) and in the West Bank, where Bethlehem and Jericho are situated.



Be prepared for all weathers!

Our excellent guide was a Christian of Syrian descent, born and living with his wife and children in Bethlehem! Each day, as he joined us during our stay in Jerusalem, he had to pass through the Israeli check points between the West Bank and Israel. That morning a half-hour journey had taken him two hours. We experienced the sacred and the secular.

No need to list where we visited; you hear a passage from the Gospels and we were there. Back in the parish it is a temptation (and one I am giving into) to say in my homily after the Gospel, “We went there.” This echoes what we all said to each other on the pilgrimage: “We are actually in Capernaum....Gethsemane....”

For me as a priest the highpoint was somehow ending up being the chief celebrant at an early morning Mass within the Holy Sepulchre. In the inner sanctum at the small altar over the place the body of Jesus was laid to rest only two priests have room at the altar and there stood I and my best priest friend from seminary days who had joined us on the pilgrimage. It was difficult to take in. I held myself together through the Solemn Mass under the guidance of a kind Franciscan master of ceremonies; but when we had unvested and sat back in the church I burst into tears. It had been such a blessing and holy privilege. The rest of our pilgrims could not hold back their tears either. A Holy Land pilgrimage is a hugely emotional experience that will stay with you the rest of your life.

