

4th Sunday of Easter, April 13, 2008, Liturgical Year "A"
ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S CHURCH IN THE TOWN OF TONAWANDA, NY
The Rev. Fr. Arthur W. Ward, Jr. + Rector

"Holy but Hollow"

A FOND FAREWELL

What I would like to do this morning is to share a bit about my trip to Israel which took place from March 26 through April 4. But first I want to thank everyone for their prayers, cards and condolences concerning the passing of my father-in-law Richard Patrick. As many of you know, my father-in-law had been fighting Leukemia since November of last year. On the Tuesday before Easter, he was discharged from the hospital so he could go home and receive hospice care. While we saw him the Monday after Easter in Oswego, he only awoke for about five minutes, acknowledged us with a wave and a nod, and then went back to sleep. The last time I was able to speak to him was a week and half earlier while he was at the University Hospital in Syracuse. He was excited to know that I was going to Israel. The last words he said to me as we left his hospital room were, "I hope you have nice time in Israel."

I find it interesting that the day the Lord called my father-in-law home was the same day I was en route to Israel. I was going to the Holy Land, he was going to the Holy One. One of the things my father-in-law wanted to do before he went home to be with the Lord was to see a deer in his back yard. My in-laws live in a cal de sack outside of Oswego, that is in the middle of a wooded area. Their bedroom is on the first floor looking out into the yard. While my father-in-law didn't see that deer while he was awake, just before he took his final breath, one of his sons looked out the window and saw a deer sprint across the yard.

Yes, God does hear our prayers. We had prayed for a physical healing but the Lord determined otherwise. My father-in-law's work on earth was complete. It was time for him to depart to be with the Lord. Yes, even in the darkest times of life, the Lord Jesus gives us signs of His presence. He shows us glimpses of His glory.

And I must say that this is most certainly true of the land where it all began. What we like to call the Holy Land, the land of Israel, the land promised to Abraham, the land of Isaac and Jacob, of Joseph and his brothers, the land of Moses and Aaron, kings David and Solomon, the land of the Prophets, and the land of our Lord Jesus Christ, Himself. Yes, it is an amazing place. But we will find it is a land that though holy, is also incomplete. While I'll share about what I mean by that in a few minutes, first I would like to tell with you about some of the incidentals of the trip - like the journey itself.

THE TRAVEL

Because the tour originated in Chicago and we had seven in our group from Buffalo and there were not enough tickets on the flight from New York City, we flew to Israel from Chicago. So we went from Buffalo to Chicago, Chicago to Istanbul, Turkey and then from Istanbul to Tel Aviv, Israel. We took Turkish Airlines. If you travel to Israel, don't take Turkish Airlines. The seats are small, there is little leg room, and it makes for an uncomfortable journey especially when it is ten and half hours to get there and then twelve and half hours to come home. All told including the bus rides to our hotels, it took us 26 hours to get there and 26 hours to get home! If I ever go back to Israel, with a tour from St. Bart's, trust me, we will do better. The travel in and through the country was fine. We had a Palestinian Christian bus driver and guide who took us through the country. The weather was for the most part warm to hot, partly cloudy or sunny; no snow, and only a sprinkle on one day.

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THE FOOD

Breakfasts and dinners were buffet styles at the hotels, and lunches were at local Palestinian restaurants. The food was excellent, and it reflected your typical Mediterranean diet; lots of vegetables and different types of salads, olives, pita and other types of breads- many whole grain, some beef and lamb, lots of chicken and fish. But there was no pork – so forget about bacon and sausage. Recall that Moslems and Jews consider pork to be unclean so there was none to be found in Israel. The desserts weren't as sweet as what we are used to here in the States, either. I am told that they use honey more than sugar and I don't believe they use corn syrup as well. In short, it was a healthy diet and frankly between the food and the walking, I lost a couple pounds even though I ate extremely well.

THE PEOPLE

Israel as you might expect, is predominately Jewish. There are 5.5 million Jews in the country. But it also has a sizeable Moslem minority – 1.5 million to be exact, and about 150,000 Christians (2% of the population of which 80% are Arab and 10,000 Messianic Jews). And although there are underlying tensions as we have heard in the news over the years, it is a very peaceful and safe nation. Yes, the Israelis recently have put up a wall between Bethlehem and Jerusalem and there is tension down at the Gaza Strip, but for the most part all is stable and calm. And this is especially true for tourists. It is extremely safe for tourists – why? Tourism is the lifeblood of the economy for both the Jews and the Moslems. It is the number one industry in Israel. So neither group is going to bite the hand that feeds them. When there was the problem of suicide bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem some years ago, they were always in non-tourist Jewish areas. So this fear of traveling to the Holy Land that some Americans have is unrealized and it has been fostered by the media. In fact, I would we say were as safe as walking through the streets of Tonawanda, and certainly much safer than walking the streets of Buffalo.

What you will also find in Israel is a large number of orthodox Jews. The orthodox generally wear black clothing and hats reminiscent of what they wore in Europe centuries earlier. It's like our Amish here in America. They wear clothing from another era and try to remain distant from the modern culture. But unlike the Amish, the Orthodox are not generally farmers.

THE PLACES

The itinerary of the tour was intense. There was lot's to see and do. (By the way Bishop Ackerman told me to send his regards to all of you as did Fr. Hubbard and his wife Emily, who also joined us on the trip.)

We started in Tel Aviv on the Mediterranean and went up to the Sea of Galilee, a fresh water lake that Jesus spent much time in and around. We stayed at the city of Tiberius. We were there for two days and during that time we went to where Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount, or what is called the Mount of Beatitudes. We saw His hometown of Nazareth as well as Cana, the town where He performed His first miracle. We then went to Capernaum, and Caesarea Philippi which is in what is today called the Golan Heights region in the north. We also went to Mt. Carmel where the prophet Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal. From Mt. Carmel you could see the Mediterranean in the west and the beautiful Jezreel Valley to the south, the place where Armageddon is predicted to take place.

We traveled about a two hour bus ride to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is a city built in the midst of the Judean Hills. It is home to 750,000 residents and 49 square miles in area. The ground is rocky but with green vegetation interspersed throughout. Everything is built into the sides of the hills and mountainous

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area. We also went to Jericho which is southeast of Jerusalem and up the Mount of Temptation, by cable car where it is believed Satan took Jesus to show Him the kingdoms of the world. The Wilderness area where Jesus spent forty days is actually between Jericho and Jerusalem.

While in Jerusalem we went to the Mount of Olives and then walked down towards the Kidron Valley where you could see the old Temple Mount. While a Mosque (the Dome of the Rock – Islam’s 3rd holiest site) has been built on the site of the old Jewish Temple, the Jews are doing excavations all around that area. We walked through the Old City carrying a cross and doing the Stations of the Cross. We went to the Shepherd’s field outside the city where it is believed the shepherds heard the angel Gabriel announce the birth of Christ. We visited the site where it is believed Jesus was crucified and buried. A Church, the Church of the Holy Sepulcher has been built on that site. We went to the Wailing Wall, which contains remnants of the retaining wall that King Herod had built. In virtually every sacred site that involves an aspect of Christ’s life and ministry, a Christian church has been built. Many of these have been torn down and built again over history as Jerusalem has changed hands over the centuries. We went to the house of Caiaphas, the high priest and saw the dungeon and the pit where Jesus is believed to have been dropped into while waiting for his trial. We also went to Qumran where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, swam in the Dead Sea and went up to Masada, a palace Herod built for himself on a mountain top and where it is believed 900 Jews lost their lives trying to hold out against the Roman 10th Legion in 73 AD.

For me some of the most moving aspects of the trip included being at the shores of Galilee and recalling the time Jesus ate with His Disciples after He rose from the dead. Going to the place where Jesus taught the Disciples the Lord’s Prayer and seeing it inscribed in dozens of languages along the walls of the area and to think how indeed this is just one more example of how Christ has impacted our world. Descending the Mount of Olives toward the Kidron Valley and knowing how this was the last walk Jesus took before being handed over to be crucified. Walking the way of the cross in the Old City and seeing and hearing all the people just doing ordinary activities but how chaos must have reigned on that day and just to get a glimpse of what the Lord went through. And certainly being in the pit where Jesus was dropped into while He was held by the High Priest Caiaphas.

THE LOCAL VIEW

During my time in Jerusalem I had two experiences with local citizens - one with a Moslem, the other with a Jew - that highlight why Jerusalem will always be a stumbling block to the nations until Christ returns (recall **Zech. 12:2-3**).

On the first full day we were in Jerusalem, we went to what is believed to be the place from which Jesus ascended into heaven. This place is controlled by Moslems and within the remains of an old unused Mosque. The Palestinian Moslems charge a fee to go in to see the rock from which Christ ascended. They also try to sell you things. As I was walking out of the enclosed area, one of the Moslems who was taking money and overseeing the place said to me, “See you in America in 2050.” I immediately, thought that he was implying that somehow the Moslems will be in control of America in the future. Later, I asked our guide, Samir Khoury, what the man meant and he said that the young man was a follower of the Palestinian group, *Hamas*, and has been brainwashed to believe that one day America will be under a Moslem Caliph. It is a reality that we need to understand and recognize. The truth is that many Moslems believe that they will take over the world but believe that Israel and the United States stand in the way.

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And then I had an opportunity to speak with a Jewish man. On our last day in Jerusalem we visited the Wailing Wall. The clergy in our group - we had three bishops, three priests and three deacons - dressed in our clerics and we went to the wall to pray. We were mainly surrounded by orthodox Jewish men praying. As I began to walk away, a young Jewish man tapped me on the shoulder and asked me why I came to the Wall? He asked, "Is it just to take pictures and visit the Wall as a tourist site?" I replied, "No, we come here because the Messiah walked these grounds." He said, "The Messiah also walked in other places in Jerusalem, so how is this different?" I replied, "It's because I believe the Temple is an integral part of God's plan." He asked, "Do you believe the Temple will be rebuilt?" I replied, "Most definitely." With that, he nodded his head in agreement and walked away.

For the Jews the Temple represents the center of their spiritual life. More importantly, they long for the day it is rebuilt for they believe that the rebuilding of the Temple will usher in the coming of the Messiah and the Kingdom of God. Jesus said in **Jn. 2:19**, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.*" The Jews of Jesus day thought He was talking about their temple made with stones, but Jesus was speaking of His Body. Why? Christ, Himself, is the Temple of God. Jesus is the answer to the world's need not the buildings of men!

WHY JERUSALEM?

But why Jerusalem? Why is this city so important and why is Jesus coming back to Jerusalem? As our bus drove into Jerusalem for the first time I asked the Lord, "You are coming back to this?" I felt uncomfortable having such feelings and asking that question. It was not a joyous place. The spirit of the city is pious, serious, busy, tense, but not joyful. And then the Lord gave me the answer. Jesus will return to Jerusalem because it is His city and although the vast majority of the people who live there today do not recognize Him as the Messiah, one day they will. Recall from **Mt. 23:37-39**, when Jesus wept over Jerusalem, He said, "*From now on you shall not see Me until you say, 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!'*" And so why not come to the very place that rejected Him and still does not accept Him? In essence, it is all part of God's plan. You see the Moslems don't know the truth - for it's not about Allah or Moslem conquest; and neither do the Jews - it's not about a new Temple or their nation state of Israel. Rather, it should be about the Lord Jesus Christ and vindicating Who He is!

And so, the Land of Israel might be Holy, but it will forever be hollow until the Holy One fills it with His presence, power, and peace. We wait and long for that day. **Psalm 122:6** tells us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem. Though "Jerusalem" literally means, "city of peace," it has been the most violent city in human history and while today it may be at peace on the surface there is no inner peace and one day it will be the scene of the final conflict at the end of the age. So may we pray for the peace of Jerusalem, knowing that when we do, we are really praying for Christ's Return. For there will be no true peace in Jerusalem or in our world until the Coming of the Prince of Peace. So my brothers and sisters, like St. John said in **Revelation 22:20**, may we always say and pray, "*Come Lord Jesus, come!*" In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!