

A Christian Visits the Land of the Holy One – November 13, 2009

The following talk –a reflection on his sabbatical experience in Israel and Palestine in the Summer of 2009 – was delivered by the Rector, The Rev. Dr. Frederick P. Moser, at Temple Shir Tikva, Wayland in November 2009

Shabbat shalom.

It is a joy to be with you this evening, and I want to thank Rabbi Gold for this invitation. For many years, in a past life, I was chaplain of a liberal arts college – Hobart and William Smith in Geneva, NY. One of my weekly duties was to attend Friday evening gatherings of the campus Jewish community. That part of my ministry quickly ceased being a duty and became a pleasure. I looked forward to that hour apart when the candles would be lit, simple prayers offered by students according to the traditions in which they grew up and from which they came to college, and of course, at the end, the challah, which was always as good as the Manischewitz was unforgettable! It is always good to be with friends in the family of Abraham and Sarah.

When Rabbi Gold and I talked about my topic tonight we said I would talk about Israel through Christian eyes; I call this “A Christian perspective on the Land of Promise.” Through a very generous grant from the Lilly Endowment of Indianapolis, Indiana, I went to Israel and Europe this past summer, and my family went with me for most of the trip. In Israel my wife, Kim, and younger daughter, Rachel, met me after I had been there about ten days with a group from our Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts. Our older daughter was on her own high school orchestra trip in Europe, and we met her later in Vienna.

I think Israel is one of those places to which different people go for many different reasons. I went on this trip, not in the first place, to see Christian holy sites. I went, in the first place, to see for myself the land that is sacred to all three of our Abrahamic traditions. I wanted to experience it as a sort of interfaith pilgrim, and I wanted to meet Jewish and Muslim people as well as Christian. I also, though, went, inevitably, as a Christian pilgrim to see sites connected with the life of Jesus, ones I had learned about but never seen. And, I went for a third very specific reason, which was to be with churches and clergy in Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. Our Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts has developed a partnership with the Diocese of Jerusalem. To help give visible meaning to this relationship a group from our Diocese went to be guests of the Bishop and churches of his Diocese. Christians are a relatively small number now in the Holy Land, and Anglican (or Episcopal) Christians are an extremely small number. So our group went to show them that their ministry and continued witness there is important to us and not something we take for granted.

I had never been to Israel. I arrived in Tel Aviv on Saturday morning June 20th. Never have I been in such a quiet airport as that one was on the Sabbath. Our guide led

us to our bus. We stepped outdoors; it was very hot. As we boarded the bus, with its air conditioning running we were, thankfully, handed bottles of water. I took my seat, and looked out the window as we began our ride to Jerusalem. I thought, "So, this is it. This is the place – the land – that God promised to God's people. Strange," I thought to myself, "it doesn't look all that special. It is different, and interesting, but I thought it would feel more 'holy'. I have felt God's presence in other places, ones I would call holy because of the deeply meaningful, revelatory experiences I have had in them. What does it mean to call this place the Holy Land?" I thought about my life as a Christian, and places I have met or known Christ. The meaning I found in them did not seem necessarily tied, specifically and physically, to any of those places, in the sense that I had to be in one of them and no other land to feel whole. Some of those places aren't even there anymore, but I don't feel any less connected to the meaning I found in them because they are gone. "Holy land" seemed a more spiritual experience to me than a physical one, a dispersed experience, perhaps, rather than one tied to a specific place. Yet, my faith and the two others to which it is related call this hot, arid, dusty place holy. What do these two realities have to do with each other?

We climbed the Judean hills to Jerusalem, and I recalled a verse I read so many times: "he went up to Jerusalem." Yes, indeed, it is "up." Our bus climbed the hills passing cement mixer trucks straining so much to reach the crest I thought of another verse from my childhood: "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can,..." from the Little Engine that Could as it worked to pull its train over a hill. As we approached the city its white limestone buildings impressed me immediately. Never mind that the temperature outside was probably in the 90's, in the noonday sun the sight reminded me of a city covered in snow. We went to where we would stay for our first few days – St. George's College, on the grounds of St. George's Cathedral, the home of the Anglican Bishop. It is in east Jerusalem – as you know, a largely Arab part of the city. The food was definitely Arab, and there were always enormous quantities of it. That was true in all the places we went. It was hospitality on steroids. In one home where we were invited for dinner, I finally figured out that the only way to stop the woman of the home from putting more food on my plate was to leave some of it uneaten. She finally relented.

Later that first afternoon we went to the Mount of Olives for an overview of the city, and to see the route by which Jesus entered it at the beginning of his final week, the events Christians recall on Palm Sunday. I never before understood how close everything is in the Holy Land. I had always thought of the Palm Sunday road as something lengthy. We walked it in about ten minutes. I thought the Kidron Valley, across which Jesus looked as he entered Jerusalem, must be miles and miles wide, something like, say, the Hudson River Valley. It wasn't even one mile across. Everything was right there, close. The Temple Mount, the Western Wall, Golgotha, the Holy Sepulcher – all are within feet of each other, not miles. And the Wilderness; it starts right there. There is no gradual transition from the city to the desert. You stand at the

Mount of Olives; look to your right and it's the city, look to your left and it's the Wilderness.

At the bottom of the Palm Sunday Road we were in the Garden of Gethsemane. What astounded me was not to see olive trees *like* the ones Jesus sat under as he prayed for his disciples while they slept, but to see *the very same* olive trees under which Jesus sat as he prayed for his disciples while they slept. The trees there have been pruned all these centuries to the point where their branches are no bigger than those of other trees, but their trunks are enormous; they have been there, the same trees, for more than 2000 years. That for me was a holy realization.

We went to other Christian holy sites: Bethlehem where a grotto beneath the Church of the Nativity commemorates the birthplace of Jesus, the fields where the shepherds lay watching their flocks by night, according to the Christmas stories, and the hill over which the wise men from the east would have come led by a star, the story says; Nazareth, where the largest basilica in the Middle East enshrines what is said to be the home of Mary, and where beneath the convent in which we stayed excavations have unearthed the first-century streets on which Mary and Joseph walked, and Jesus played. There is a striking tomb there too, with a rolling stone of the same kind that covered the tomb in which Jesus was buried. It wasn't just seeing these sights that amazed me; it was understanding their relationship. It was appreciating the geography of the Bible as never before. It was understanding, now, that when Mary went from Nazareth to visit her cousin Elizabeth in the hill country of Judea after being told she would bear God's child, it really was a journey, not something you did in an afternoon; that when Jesus and his disciples walked from Peter's home by the Sea of Galilee to Jericho, there was only one practical way to go: down the valley of the Jordan River, which is why the stories from that period of Jesus' ministry refer, in order, to places along that very route. It all made physical sense, as well as spiritual.

I was there nearly three weeks. Before I left Rabbi Gold gave me a book about contemporary Israel called The Israelis. It is a picture of the complexity of the society, and it was so true; identity in Israel is complicated. We were with Israeli Jews, Israeli Christians, Israeli Muslims, Israeli Arabs, Israeli Arab Christians, Israeli Palestinian Christians, Palestinian Christians, Palestinian Arabs, and on and on it went as the people we met self-identified with more hyphens even than Americans. I met Rabbi David Foreman, with whom Rabbi Gold had connected me; he said, "The one thing to know about this society is, 'It's complicated!'" We had Shabbat dinner one evening with some Conservative Jewish friends who live in Jerusalem, people we have known for a long time because they vacation where we often do in the Finger Lakes of western New York. Their anxieties were less about Palestinians than about an ultra-orthodox Jewish group seeking to ban city parking in Jerusalem on Saturdays. Ilene, our friend, was going to a protest march later in the weekend over that issue. About Israel's complexity and periodic contentiousness, particularly with the Palestinian population, Ilene said she often felt like offering her own solution. We dubbed it, "Ilene's two state solution." She

proposed two states: one for all the people – Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Israeli, Palestinian, whatever, who want to fight, and the other for all the people of any identity who just want to live in peace.

We all know it is not simple like that. But, to hear it expressed that evening was poignant and telling. I said earlier that one reason I went to the Holy Land was to be with Christians in the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. It is a diocese that spans five countries or territories: Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. When we have gatherings of the Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts we all go to Boston to meet; it hardly takes any of us more than two hours to get there even if we come from the Cape. When the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem gathers it takes them up to three days to get to the meeting, and what makes it really complicated is that the only place they can all meet together is Jordan, because it is the only place to which everybody can go with their various passports or identity cards. How complicated is that! I spent four fascinating days in Ramallah and Ber Seit in the Palestinian West Bank where there are two Anglican churches. They are very small, but they are among the most inspiring Christians I have ever been with. They run schools and day camps whose students are mostly Muslim children. They are doctors and dentists, teachers and lawyers. The irony I learned about their lives is that while I as an American can travel 7,000 miles from Boston to Jerusalem any time I can afford it, they cannot travel 10 miles to Jerusalem from Ramallah because of the kind of identity card they do or don't have, and the kind of license plate they do or don't have on their car, which will or will not let them through the checkpoint at the Wall separating Ramallah from Jerusalem.

I didn't come back with illusions about Americans resolving two state solutions, or the politics of the West Bank with its settlements and Walls, or any of those issues. I came back all the more inspired about the common heritage Jews, Christians, and Muslims share, and about all the opportunities we have to learn and work together. Even with difficulties like those I saw facing Christians in Ramallah, and even with the heart-wrenching history I saw remembered at Yad Vashem, especially its children's memorial, I was amazed how most people in this very complicated, and sometimes highly charged, society of Israel work together day to day just doing life. Most of the people I was with were just trying to do the best they could about the same things we all deal with in our lives – kids, work, groceries, appointments..., and in the midst of life's ordinary tasks they were finding remarkably creative ways to manage the enormously complex realities of their situations. I felt we have so much to learn from them. One afternoon outside Nazareth Kim, Rachel, and I had an experience I can only describe as "mind-blowing." I had met Rabbi David Lazar, a Conservative rabbi friend of Rabbi David Foreman. Rabbi Lazar invited me to meet a friend of his, the Imam of the village of Alut near Nazareth. I jumped at the chance; Rabbi Lazar said he would meet us there. As our Palestinian Christian driver brought us into Alut he noticed the symbol in the village square and said, "I don't understand this place." There in the village square was what appeared to be a Star of David, with the green flags of Hamas on it. Alarmed, our driver called Rabbi Lazar on his cell phone. Rabbi Lazar said not to worry; we were in

the right place, and he was right behind us and would be there in a minute or two, which he was. "Follow me," he said, and led us up a hill and around a corner to the Imam's home, a lovely house overlooking the village and his mosque. Rabbi Lazar got out, and out of the house came a handsome man in his mid thirties dressed in a white shirt and casual pants. They smiled broadly and embraced each other as the best of old friends would. We were introduced and invited in, where the Imam, Kalib, introduced us to his traditionally dressed wife and darling, shy three year old daughter, Luna. Rabbi Lazar had brought a gift for Luna, with which she was most pleased. We were fed watermelon, tea, and ice cream, and over the next two hours learned the background to this extraordinary relationship. Kalib did his doctoral study at a Jewish Institution near Tel Aviv, where he met Rabbi Lazar. Kalib's doctorate is in theology, and he wrote his dissertation, which was about to come out as a book, on the *imago Dei*, the image of God. In the book he explores implications of the image of God as the image of peace. For the past three years he and Rabbi Lazar have been meeting weekly to pray and study together, one week in Alut and the next in Tel Aviv. Kalib's village indeed is conservative Muslim. But Kalib is from a very old family, and the people respect him even with his broadminded views. At the end of the afternoon Kalib wanted a picture of us all together on his porch with his mosque in the background: the imam, the rabbi, the priest, the imam's wife with the rabbi's arm around her shoulder, Kim – my wife, and our daughter Rachel (Luna was engaged inside with her gift). Our still bewildered Palestinian Christian driver snapped the picture on each of our cameras. I asked Kalib, "Will this get you in trouble here?" Half laughing, he said, "Yes, probably; but, it will be okay."

The day we left Israel our Palestinian Christian driver was stopped, as everyone is, at the airport gate in Tel Aviv by young soldiers with big guns. They asked to see our identifications and look in the car's trunk. Henry, our driver, produced his identity card, and we our passports. They asked perfunctory questions about our time in Israel and went about looking through the car. They handed back our documents; then the one who was obviously in charge smiled and said, "Have a good day, Henry; see you again." "You too," replied Henry with a smile, and we drove on. Astonished, I asked, "Henry, what was that about? Do you know him?" "Oh yea," Henry said, "we have known each other for 12 years; I see him whenever I bring people to the airport. We do this all the time; it's just what we have to do." It was a final icon of this complex, complicated land, and of the intertwined relationships of the different people to whom it has been promised for as long as they can remember.

I hope to go back, but the next time I go I would like to go differently. Next time I would like to go with Jewish and Muslim people as well as Christians. I would like to see it not only with my eyes, but also yours and our Muslim brothers' and sisters'. I think that would be a very rich experience. Rabbi Gold and I, and some others in the Wayland Clergy Association, have been talking about organizing such a trip. I hope it happens. When it does, I hope some of you might want to come.