

## Study Leave Report

By Rev Reuben Hardie

“Pilgrimage to Israel”

30 July 2014 – 17 August 2014

I always thought it would be amazing to visit the Holy Land. The opportunity arose in 2014 to join a pilgrimage in August lead by the new Moderator of PCANZ Andrew Norton. With the support of my Principals and the Saint Kentigern Trust Board, I signed up. My enthusiasm increased when I discovered that my brother, Rev Caleb Hardie, Minister at Mairangi Bay and my mother the Rev Sylvia Miller, Minister at St Georges, Takapuna were also keen to take up this opportunity. Once committed, my brother and I decided in preparation we should grow a beard worthy of the Old Testament.



In the weeks leading up to our visit, Israel was in the headlines a great deal. The conflict between Israel and Gaza was escalating daily. Travel advisors warned of the risk, travel insurers clarified their lack of cover, and some airlines even cancelled flights. However, the message that we had from Israel was that we would be safe. In the end we listened to that advice. We went, but we went praying for peace.

Israel should be on every one's bucket list, especially those who work in Christian ministry. It was the best possible professional development I think I could ever experience. I returned to New Zealand feeling genuinely, like a changed person. I am still working out what exactly this change means but I do know for one, that the Bible has changed for me. When I read it, the places that are mentioned come alive in my mind. There are connections that I never saw before. I feel a renewed sense of excitement to read the Bible. And if these were the only things that happened as a result of the experience then that in itself would have made the trip worth it. Indeed, I came away with a lot more. In this

### 1. Thirst

One of the chief reasons that I had for visiting Israel was that I felt dry. Creativity has always been important to me, but this year as I carried out my Chaplaincy duties, it felt like the well was running dry. Ironically it wasn't until I was in Israel that I experienced the true meaning of dryness. I went for several runs while I was in Israel. Two early morning runs along the Galilee and one run up Ein Gedi in the heat of the noon day sun. The temperature was mid 30's – and 40 degree at Ein Gedi, (Ein Gedi is an oasis in the South of Israel, where David hid from Saul). As I undertook these runs I told myself I was in training for the Auckland Marathon, but really each time it was an exercise in discovering the true nature of thirst. I have never been so thirsty in all my life.

Israel is a sunny climate. It rains from November to April. The average rain fall is 0-70cm in the north and can be as little as 1/2cm pa in the south, compared to Auckland's rainfall of 124cm per annum. Dryness and rain are incredibly important themes in the Bible. In Israel

the first rain occurs before the Feast of Tabernacle/Succoth (early October), while the last rain occurs after Passover. (The phrase the "former and latter" rains occurs multiple times in the Bible: Deuteronomy 11:12; Jeremiah 5:24; Daniel 11:29; Hosea 6:3; Joel 2:23; and Haggai 2:9.) The Feast of Tabernacle is linked to rain while the Feast of Passover is linked to dryness. I learnt that water in the Passover story actually has negative links. For example, the river Nile was where Israelite babies were thrown, it was turned to blood in the plagues, the Israelites were cut off at the Nile, and then were only saved when it was parted and they could cross on dry land, before crossing into Moriah - the place where the water was bitter.

I also remember hearing, while in Israel that, the Feast of Passover, in the Bible teaches the value of dryness. This really puzzled me. What does this mean? Surely the well needs to be full? As I reflected on this question it occurred to me, that dryness is more a part of life than I perhaps realise. People experience financial dryness, dryness in their social calendar, creative dryness, and spiritual dryness. The thirst that I experienced in Israel taught me that

instead of escaping or fearing creative dryness, I need to value it. I was reminded of one of Kurt Hahn's famous gems to young people "There is always more in you than you think." After all it is when you are dry that you discover just how deep the well actually goes. True thirst also teaches you to recognise what a blessing rain is. You learn to value what you have and use it well. Finally, and perhaps more than anything else, my thirst in Israel, renewed my faith in



Jesus as the one who inspires, and is the true source of any creativity I may claim to have. I found new meaning in the invitation Jesus makes in the gospel,

"Now on the last day, the great day of the feast (*the end of the dry season*), Jesus stood and cried out, saying, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water.'"

John 7:37-38

## 2. What good came out of Nazareth?

Israel is a place of hills and valleys and on one of the hills sits the city of Nazareth. As we drove down into the bustling city we were told that today it looks a far cry from the way it would have looked in the time of Jesus. Today the population of Nazareth is estimated at 80,000, mostly Arab Muslims and Christians. Some historians believe that at the beginning of the first century Nazareth would have been a town of roughly 70 families, or 400 people.

The mountains that surround Nazareth are, however, the same, dry and barren hills as they were in Jesus' time, mainly rocks and shrubs with very little farm land. In order to farm the land, terraces need to be cut into the mountainside. From every direction you have to climb up to get to Nazareth and for this reason it would have been a very isolated place. Most travellers carrying heavy loads preferred to go a longer distance than climb up a hill.

Furthermore, mountain passes were dangerous place for travellers. Jesus home town would have been an intimate setting where everyone knew everyone. It would have been poor, rustic, dry and isolated.

As I reflected on the isolation of Nazareth I was reminded that throughout the gospels Jesus showed incredible compassion to those who were isolated, either due to illness, poverty, or past mistakes. In Mark 1:40 it recounts the healing of the leper, who said to Jesus “If you are willing you can make me heal.” According to Marks gospel, Jesus filled with compassion reached out and touched the man and said “I am willing, be clean.” In Nazareth, I felt inspired by the way Jesus reached out, and reaches out, today to those who feel isolated in their faith, to the elderly who live isolated lives, to immigrants who feel isolated in their new city, to students who feel isolated at school. Jesus grew up in an isolated town that people concluded “Nothing good can come out of”. He is one who identifies with those isolated, filled with compassion, he reaches out to people today and calls me to do the same.

While we were in Nazareth we visited a community that had purchased property in the heart of Nazareth and recreated the 1<sup>st</sup> century conditions. It was like walking through a scene from the bible. The vineyards, the sheep and goats, the oil press, the clay homes. There was a lot to take in. There was evidence of 1<sup>st</sup> century mangers, which were interestingly made of stone not wood. There were crosses which stood no taller than an adult. In the movies the cross is always tall – people look up. We were told that crosses were in fact built so that those dying could look into the eyes of people and experience the shame of their death. Perhaps most striking of all the things we learnt in Nazareth was the name of Nazareth. Nazareth means a shoot. In the Old Testament we find a messianic reference to a shoot sprouting up from the house of Jesse in Isaiah, a familiar reading in Carol services.



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Jesus is the shoot, and his own town serves as a reminder of this. The metaphor of shoot is most likely a reference to an olive tree. Olive trees are amazing. They and their fruit, and the oil of the fruit are wonderful symbols for faith. I am still unpacking their significance. We came across Olive trees that were older than a 1000 years. New shoots sprout out of the old tree. If you take an olive seed and plant it somewhere else it still carries the exact same dna as the parent tree. The Olive tree is a wonderful symbol of transplanted Christianity. It is no wonder that early Christians were also called Nazarenes. In



a very real way Christians are shoots from the house of Jesus, carrying his DNA, carrying his intention to reach out to those who are isolated. As the apostle Paul wrote "It is no longer I that lives but Christ that lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

### 3. Good times by the Sea of Galilee

When you read through the New Testament so many of the best moments in Jesus ministry took place by the Sea of Galilee. It was on the Sea of Galilee that Jesus walked on water, it was there he fished with his disciples, it was there he calmed the storm. Galilee and its shores witnessed the popularity of Jesus, as well as so many of his miracles. Today there is a Church that marks the spot where right on the edge of the lake he transformed one young boys offering into food enough for 5000.

The Church itself is built on ruins of an older church built over a rock, dating from 2nd century. This is only a few generations after the actual event. Locals talk about a grandfather recounting the story to his grandson as they walked the shore of Galilee, "Do you see that rock over there when I was your age I was there when Jesus feed the 5000." Above this church sits the Mount of the Beatitudes where Jesus preached his sermon on the mount, and further around the lake is Capernaum, which is marked by a sign as you enter proclaiming it as Jesus home town. In Capernaum there is another Church this time built over the house of Simon's mother in law, in which she was healed by Jesus.

Galilee is a beautiful place. It is 200 meters below sea level. The water is warm, the weather mostly settled. When we were there a gentle breeze blew over the water, and the sun was softened by the clouds. Frequently the sun would break through the clouds creating an amazing effect on the water. We stayed in what was once a Kibbutz. Today it is a holiday resort (with a 1970's feel to it) and a number of families where there on holiday or escaping the conflict in the south. Galilee was our base as we explored the surrounding area, visited the Jordan River, and even ventured up to the Golan Heights to overlook the borders to Syria and Lebanon. I will always remember the song "By the Sea of Galilee" by Jonny Cash, my brother made us all listen to as we drove round the edge of the lake in the bus. It was a brilliant moment. While in Galilee, we went for a boat ride, we had several attempts at catching fish, we swam, we even tried walking on water, without success - although the photo makes it look like we did.

The Galilee struck me as a beautiful place to live and as I savoured and enjoyed the many experiences we crammed into the four days, the gospel stories seemed different to me. Suddenly, the good times Jesus had by the Galilee seemed more real to me and more significant. It caused me to reflect on the ways that I experience good times in my own life. It is easy to be haunted by the fear that it is too good to be true, that I am undeserving, that life has a way of balancing out. Sebastian Moore states that "Our biggest obstacle to believing in God is our innate distrust of happiness." (Moore, p. 27) Should happiness be viewed as selfish, unproductive, self-indulgent or should it be viewed as God's desire for us all. One of the songs I teach the pre-schoolers at Saint Kentigern Preschool during my weekly visits is the well-known song "You can be happy and I can be happy, and that is the way it should be!" I sometimes wonder whether people really believe this to be true.



The bible is full of moments where people stopped to savour and enjoy. These moments became festivals, celebrated annually. Why have we lost these festivals? Where have they gone? How can we reclaim the religious significance of holidays? I think that there is an important role that Chaplains have to play in their school community celebrate the significant times of the year and enjoy the good moments of the school year not as an escape from reality but as vital moments of life, interwoven into the normal and the mundane.

#### 4. Zion - the Holy Hill

The three major world Religions lay claim to the significance of Jerusalem. Crusades have been launched to claim it and even in the last 100 years it has been in the control of a number of different countries. As we ascended the hills toward the Holy city in the back of my mind I was wondering whether it was worth all the fuss. My mood possibly wasn't helped by the winding roads and feeling a little car sick. Taking in the city from the Mount of Olives, however, will be forever etched in my mind. There are a lot of layers of history in Jerusalem. It is fraught with background. It is crammed full of sacred sites. I still chuckle when I remember our guide pointing out the three different Churches of the Ascension as we passed them, that each marked that exact spot where Jesus ascended to Heaven.

Jerusalem is a sacred place. There are not enough superlatives to describe it. We were there for four days. It was the zenith of the trip and it felt right to leave my beard in Jerusalem, as indeed requested by my wife. We walked and saw and did so much in Jerusalem that I am still piecing together the events and the photos. Viewing the city from the ramparts of the old walls, wading through Hezekiah's tunnel in the dark (2700 years old, 800 meters long), walking the Via Dolorosa with my mother and brother and together prayerfully following the last movements of Christ, visiting the Garden of Gethesame, sharing in communion in the Garden Tomb celebrated by Andrew Norton, praying at the Western wall. Jerusalem and the Temple Mount is a place of rich significance and deep connection.



The original Temple, built by Solomon around 1000 BC, was built on Mount Moriah, the spot David believed was appointed by God. Moriah is referred in the Bible as the place where Abraham brought Isaac to be sacrificed. It is also believed by Jews and Muslims to be the place of the Foundation Stone, where God created the world. The most prominent feature of the Temple site today is the Al-Aqsa Mosque built on the site at the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century. All that survives of the Jewish Temple itself is the Western Wall, 57 meters tall, 60 meters wide (though the tunnel underground the length is closer to 500 meters).

Herod the Great, who rebuilt the temple in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, was a master builder of genius proportions and still to this day engineers cannot understand how he was able to transport and install stones in the wall. The largest stone in the wall is among the heaviest objects ever lifted by human beings. It is 13.6 meters long, 3 meters high, around 4 meters wide, and weighs



around 520 metric tons- the weight of over 80 elephants.

My brother and I arrived at the Western Wall on our first morning in Jerusalem. We arrived there by pure chance as we were exploring the streets of Jerusalem. It was still early in the morning, most of the shops that we passed had not opened yet, but there was already a throng of activity at the wall. There were black suits and black hats, and phylacteries and leather straps tied around arms. There was the chanting of the scriptures facing the wall. Many read the scripture with their whole body moving in a sort of dance. There was discussion and debate. There was prayer. We went up and placed our hands on the wall as we could see so many others doing and we prayed. In almost every crevice, nook and gap in the wall there are small folded pieces of paper that contain prayers. When we returned later in the day before the Sabbath meal, we brought our own prayers on folded pieces of paper.

In the Celtic tradition there is the understanding that there are some places in the world where there is a thin line between the divine and the ordinary. These places serve as points of connection and are normally marked as sacred sites. In Jerusalem I felt deeply connected to God. It helped me to realise that one of the core tasks in ministry and in Chaplaincy is to help facilitate a connection with God. We might feel such a connection in some places more than others, but again according to the Celtic tradition – the connection can be found anywhere.

## 5. Shabbat Shalom

Friday feels different in Jerusalem. There is an energy and purpose in the streets. People are getting ready for the Sabbath, in the markets people hunt out the best food to celebrate their evening meal. Every ingredient needs to be perfect. When we met our host for a Sabbath meal, Joshua, at the Western Wall in Jerusalem, there was almost an urgency in the air. People were rushing either to or from the Wall. As Joshua greeted us, several people he knew passed him without stopping and called out "Shabbat Shalom". In fact the greeting of "Shabbat Shalom" filled the air. Everyone seemed to be saying it.

Shabbat is of course the seventh day of the week, when God chose to rest from his Creating. In fact, more literally, Shabbat means to stop. Shalom is of course the Hebrew word for peace or wholeness and so "Shabbat Shalom" means literally "May your day of not working be peaceful". Joshua explained that the greeting can also mean something like "Thank God it's Friday" But not in the sense that we probably think it. He argued that Jews are not so much thanking God that the working week is over - but that the Sabbath is arriving. The emphasis is not on living to work nor on working to live - the focus is on re-grounding oneself in God. The Sabbath he explained is the hinge on which the week pivots. It is the culmination of achievement during the week and an opportunity to ask for God's blessing on the week to be.

Joshua traced the significance of the Sabbath to the Exodus. "Once," he said, "we were slaves. Once we didn't have a choice whether we worked or not. As slaves that right was taken from us. We worked without rest. When we left Egypt into freedom, we celebrated and continued to celebrate this freedom in the Sabbath. Sabbath in Hebrew means to stop - to stop the normal activity of our week." As I reflected on the way that people work in New Zealand, I worried about the Sabbath. How often do people work 7 days consecutively. It is not uncommon in the teaching profession, especially in the busiest periods of the term. Are people still slaves to their work? On that first Sabbath night in Jerusalem, we walked the journey from the Western Wall to the home of our host. Orthodox Jews do not use machinery during the Sabbath including elevators or cars. We were welcomed into their home, as children played with toys on the floor. It was great to see the children were a part

of the evening. A prayer of blessing was said over them. A fantastic thing, I thought, to do as part of a nightly family grace. The evening progressed, with singing, explanation, numerous courses, prayer and concluded with the invitation for each member of the group to share something of ourselves and our experience in Jerusalem. At the end of the evening as we left I think everyone of us privately wondered how we might take the Shabbat Shalom back into our lives and our homes, so that our day of no work would be a day of peace and wholeness. It was an incredible experience of hospitality, by evening's end I felt closer to God and closer to the people I shared the evening with. I felt convinced that hospitality needs to play a greater role in my life.

## 7. O little town of Bethlehem

Bethlehem was one of the places I was most excited to visit. I recall seeing a documentary on a village in Israel not far from Bethlehem and so I knew not to expect the sort of nativity scene that you see on Christmas cards. It was an incredible experience being in the Church of the Nativity in the heart of Bethlehem, the place which marks the spot where Jesus was born and viewing the 4<sup>th</sup> century mosaic floors. We also visited the caves of the Shepherds and sang carols with the other members of our tour party in a beautiful Franciscan church built by the place where the Shepherds were meant to have learnt of Jesus birth.

As you would expect there are some very special places to visit in Bethlehem. It was amazing to hear from the local guide why the angels chose to give the news first to shepherds. The shepherds were among the few people whose travel was not limited by the Romans. They could drive their flocks with freedom. They were the perfect people to pass the good news to. The message was sure to get around. As you would expect it was amazing to be in the little town of Bethlehem. However, the one thing I didn't expect was the large wall shutting the city in. Bethlehem lies in Palestine or the West Bank and Jerusalem while only a few kilometres away lies in Israel. Several years ago a wall was erected between Bethlehem and Jerusalem to stop suicide bombers entering into Jerusalem and restrictions were placed on people, especially young people entering Jerusalem. The wall is large and ugly. It is filled with graffiti. When we arrived at the checkpoint to go through to Bethlehem from Jerusalem we traded our Jewish bus, driver and tour guide for a Palestine bus, driver and tour guide.



While we were in Bethlehem we heard a very different narrative of the last 70 years to the one told to us by our Jewish guide. The one thing they did agree on is that Bethlehem is a very poor town. The wall and the restrictions placed on people entering and leaving Bethlehem are terrible for its economy. The people selling had a desperation about them that was incredibly sad. On several occasions I found myself buying things thrust upon me by street vendors, things that I didn't need, and that I didn't want. Christmas maybe expensive but Bethlehem is cheap. Only a few hours after we left Bethlehem to young people were shot on the streets, not far from where we had been. It was a reminder of tension always bubbling beneath the surface of these complicated lands.

## 8. Bedouin Tent

One of the classic things we did during the pilgrimage to Israel was to visit a Bedouin Tent. The Bedouin are an Arab people that live in the Desert. They live in deserts all over the Middle East including in the south Israel. We had spent the day driving down from Jerusalem, and after a brief visit to Masada we arrived at the Bedouin. When we arrived we were ushered into the main tent and then as our host welcomed us we were served in accordance with their customs - three cups of short and sweet coffee – that apparently turned out to have a highly laxative effect on some members of the group.



Our host was very gracious and on the whole he seemed to be rather happy with himself – life had been good to him, he explained to us that he had 3 wives and 23 children. As well as numerous camels and donkeys. In fact I have never seen so many donkey's in my life. Early the next day I was up early and I saw a classic sight. I saw a young boy –perhaps 11 years old – obviously one of our hosts 23 children – and we was out trying to move a caravan of camels. He was doing so riding on the back of a donkey. The donkey wasn't being very cooperative and so the young boy was whacking the donkey pretty hard with his stick.

As I watched and restrained myself from going up and taking the stick off him I was reminded of the story of a donkey in the Bible. A story which illustrates the invisible hand of God. The donkey refused to go where Balaam wanted and Balaam hit him until suddenly his eyes were opened and he saw what he had been missing. There was an angel blocking the path. People don't get talking donkeys in life to steer them in the right direction or to hold them back from doing what they shouldn't. But God is there. The more time I spend in School Chaplaincy the more I come to realise that Chaplaincy is simply about getting



alongside students, staff and school families and gently encouraging them to see that God is there, loving them, protecting them, and guiding them to a better future.

There is so much more to unpack about my time in Israel. We visited Mt Camel the site of Elijah's battle with the prophets of Baal. I renewed my baptism in the Jordan River where Jesus was baptised. We floated on the Dead Sea, We visited Qumran, the Holocaust Museum. We stood in the ruins of Armageddon – called "Megiddo". We were in



Caesarea Philippi – at the sight where Peter uttered those wonderful words "I say you are the Christ". We visited Joppa, the city Jonah went to flee the request of God and where Peter stayed at the house of Simon the tanner. I even rode a camel. There were great people on the tour, and I really enjoyed their company. Andrew Norton went to great lengths to ensure things went to plan and he was always on hand to push your thought process a little deeper. It was so very special to share it all with my brother and mother. That was just an amazing bonus that we will always treasure together.

As I set out to write a report on my trip to Israel I had no intention of exceeding 1000 words. I fear I have written almost five times that and merely scratched the surface. I have said nothing of the food. There are so many hugely significant experiences I had in Israel that I haven't mentioned. I took so many photos. I am still piecing together which photos relate to the ruins of which biblical sites. Already I have drawn on my experiences in Israel in numerous chapels, staff devotions or in other moments I am called on in my role as Chaplain, but I think what I gained personally, is more than I will ever share. It was an incredible experience. A trip of a life time. I am so thankful for the opportunity. Israel is a place in desperate need of peace. It is the land of the bible, the land where Jesus walked. I close my eyes and I am there!

