

JERUSALEM THE GOLDEN

TEXT & PHOTOS BY / FELIX YEUNG

*'I know not, O I know not
what joys await us there,
what radiancy of glory,
what bliss beyond compare.'*

These beautiful lines written by John Mason Neale, taken from the famous hymn *Jerusalem the Golden*, rang in my ears as the group of 33 pilgrims, under the leadership of Dean Matthias and Fr Robert, embarked on an exciting journey from Ben Gurion International Airport to the 'centre of the world': Jerusalem. This hour-long journey was accompanied by our guide and beloved friend, the Revd Canon John Peterson, who also gave us a very warm welcome as we stepped into the arrival hall.

After settling ourselves at St George's Guesthouse in Jerusalem, we began our journey with our briefing session, also meeting our local guide, Canon Iyad Qumri. We were all given a 'prayer partner' for this whole pilgrimage as we drew names from the basket. As we were about to leave the Guesthouse, Canon Peterson emphasised again, 'HAT and WATER'. We obedient pilgrims of course obliged every day as we heard this caring command.

On our itinerary in the first four days, places we visited included Herodion (the palace fortress built by Herod the Great), Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Bethlehem, the Western Wall and Israel Museum. Canon Peterson's profound knowledge and his love for the Holy Sepulchre gave us a comprehensive view



of its history and significance. Our first encounter of this holy place was rather unconventional; rather than entering the church from its 'normal' entrance, we traced the steps of the Constantinian entrance to the church. After lunch, we entered the current church; however, we did not queue for the famous rotunda, as Canon Peterson told us that it was more likely for Jesus to be buried in the rolling stone tomb, which is now situated in the Syriac Chapel of St Joseph of Arimathea.

People do not usually associate Bethlehem with 'shopping'. But that was the first thing we did as we approached the birthplace of Jesus. How could a group of pilgrims from Hong Kong resist the temptation of spending thousands of shekels at the Holy Land Handicraft Cooperative Society? With our hands full of souvenirs and gifts, we approached the Church of the Nativity. The usual queue to the grotto where the manger

once laid was as long as usual. As we approached the narrow entrance to the grotto, enthusiastic pilgrims from all over the world struggled their way into this tiny space. As we stood by the drinking trough (the manger) carved out of stone, we sang 'Away in the manger'. It was indeed a bizarre experience: the manger was just there.

Visiting the Western Wall could be a rather nervous experience. The high level of security simply added to the smell of tension in the air. After we all had a chance to pray by the Western Wall, we were going to ascend to the Temple Mount (Haram esh-Sharif). A group of young and zealous Jewish men were blocking the only entrance for non-Muslim to the Haram esh-Sharif. As we decided to drop that out of the itinerary, a group of soldiers carrying machine guns approached them. Perhaps, tension would never leave the holy place.





As we left Jerusalem for the region of Galilee, we caught sunrise on the horizon at Wadi Qelt. After Dean Matthias had celebrated the Eucharist with us in the desert on this St Matthias' Day, we made our way to Nazareth via a hike to the Mount of Temptation. Nazareth was not only the place where the Holy Family lived, but also where the archangel Gabriel brought the good news to the Blessed Virgin Mary. As we did not have the chance to visit the Church of the Visitation, we sang the Magnificat in honour of the Virgin Mother in the Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation. We then visited the Latin Church of Annunciation, where the house of St Anna and St Joachim, parents of the Blessed Lady, is situated.

Our memory in Nazareth would be incomplete without the Sisters of Nazareth. We did not only receive very warm hospitality at the Sisters'; we were

given a chance to visit the excavation at the site under the convent and guest house. The ruin has a first-century house, some traits from the crusader period, and a rolling stone tomb. Canon Peterson hinted that there is a possibility that the ruin might be where the house of the Holy Family lived. If that is really the case, we were extremely blessed to be able to spend three nights there!

Before returning to Jerusalem, we visited numerous places, including Sepphoris, Ceasarea Philippi, a boat trip in the Sea of Galilee, renewing our baptismal vow at the bank of River Jordan, a Eucharist on the Mount of Beatitudes, as well as a swim in the Dead Sea. On our return to Jerusalem, we traced the path of Jesus's last week, first the Palm Sunday journey from Bethphage, and on the last morning, the Stations of the Cross. We took turn to carry the wooden cross and to lead the prayers on our way.

I guess the reason I am writing this cover article for the pilgrimage is because of the extraordinary musical gift that we brought to the Holy Land in this pilgrimage. Besides myself and Peter, our Cathedral Organist, we also had three other members of the Cathedral Choir in the group. We sang in the Eucharists on Ascension Day and on the following Sunday at St George's Cathedral, Jerusalem. And for our fellow pilgrims, a departing gift, a setting of 'An Irish Blessing' by James Moore: 'and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of his hand.' The pilgrimage to the Holy Land lasted only ten days; however, the changes that this wonderful journey has given each of us would be life-long.



THE HOLY LAND: PILGRIMS PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

PHOTOS BY / FELIX YEUNG

Caius Ng:

I truly didn't know what to expect when I signed up for the pilgrimage. I simply had a strong desire to discover more about the faith that I have believed in for more than 40 years.

Once the group arrived in Israel, the Bible came alive everywhere we visited as biblical stories flashed back to my mind, day and night. Of all the sites that we visited, the Jordan River and the Judean Desert made the strongest impression on me.

The renewal of our baptismal vow at the Jordan River reminded me of the fact that Jesus came to us as the Messiah, and gave us the grace of the forgiveness of sin (Mark 1:4) and that each of us gave God a vow all those years ago. Being able to renew my baptismal vow strengthened my own faith and reminded me of the importance of upholding that faith in my daily life.

The group also had the privilege of seeing sunrise one early morning in the Judean Desert and we had the Eucharist in the desert. The sunrise in the Judean Desert is a reminder of how powerful God is and His Creation. We are merely a small part of this world and the problems that we face in our daily lives do not matter as much as they seem in God's plan. We all have our ups and downs in our life, and when we go through a trough, it might seem to be dark and unbearable at times. But those moments often represent the darkness before dawn, when we are then able to see the brilliance of sunrise and the beautiful day ahead. It was comforting for me to remember that God promised to walk with us through such dark and difficult times (Isaiah 42:16) and, in my own life, God has led me through many of these challenging periods.

I want to thank Dean Matthias, Fr Robert and Canon John Peterson for a truly spiritual and inspirational journey. The pilgrimage has renewed my faith, helped me to 'recalibrate' and focus on things that truly matter to me at this stage of my life.



Fay Pang:

When we were sailing on the Sea of Galilee, we admired the waves glimmering under the sun against the perfect blue sky – it was a beautiful day. I thought to myself, 'This is where Jesus spread the words of the Gospel and this is where many miracles took place'. Geographically, the Sea of Galilee is surrounded by mountains in a low-lying rift valley, where thunderstorms would often occur on the lake.

In one story, Jesus and his disciples boarded a boat. During the journey, a furious storm suddenly attacked the lake and the waves swept over the boat. Jesus fell asleep. The disciples hurried over and woke him, saying, "Lord, save us! We're going to drown!" Jesus replied, "You have such little faith... why are you so afraid?" Jesus got up and rebuked the winds and the waves – immediately the surroundings settled and the lake was completely calm.

When we encounter ups and downs in life, where do we put our faith? Challenges in life are like the winds and waves on the lake; we're fearful, we worry, we become upset, and we want to give up. However, once we overcome them, our faith is strengthened, we become stronger, wiser, and better in many ways. Most importantly, we are reminded once again of the fact that God is always with us.





David Chong:

The late spring wind was dancing through the warm beams of sunlight, and the birds were chirping their morning prayers on the tall almond trees. A shepherd was grazing his flocks on a rather rough pasture. Not far from the sheep, there was an opening in the field to a cave large enough to hold 30 or so people – just the right size for us pilgrims who had just travelled from the Far East.

The cave was once used by the early Christians as a chapel, according to the findings of the archaeologists. It's not difficult to reckon how harsh the

circumstances must have been over the various periods of time that had forced those devout Christ followers to find a gathering and worshiping place underground to avoid persecution. Standing on this piece of land called Tekoa – the home of Prophet Amos, I remembered God's will in restoring "David's fallen tent" (Amos 9:11), as well as how He considers behaving justly to be far more important than ritual (Amos 5:21–24). Our impression of the Holy Land during the pilgrimage was that it is still in trouble – high separation walls and young soldiers with machine guns on the streets. God's Promised Land is obviously still not in peace. As Christians, I think we need to keep praying as King David once did (Psalm 25:22): Redeem Israel, O God, out of all his troubles.



Tiffany Cheng:

The Jerusalem trip was a stark reminder of life in digression. When we journeyed through the land, its tribulations acted as an unsettling light on human folly. We can all see a bit of us in that biblical drama. Who would we have been if we lived at that era? How would we identify our icon among the cacophony? If a similar situation is taking place now, will we, being Christians, give way to hegemony for immediate gains? Maybe the answers have inhabited the testaments for centuries; human nature

without Grace is beastly. Icons which represent gratification and comfort aren't easily ignored; "The spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak." What we are is what we have already been, but the Jerusalem trip has crystallised what we can be, which puts a clearer focus on a better being.

We are mere mortals and it may be ironic that, from this trip, we may have to admit to "Because you have seen me, you have believed..... (John 20:29) No, we did not see our ultimate icon, but we have seen Jerusalem, we have visited Nazareth. During that 10 days and thereafter, His presence was massive.