

HOLY WEEK IN JERUSALEM

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In 2006 I had the great privilege of taking a course at St. George's College, which is part of the Anglican cathedral in Jerusalem. The course was called "The Palestine of Jesus" and I was fortunate to take it at the right time of the year so as to be in Jerusalem in Holy Week and Easter. The course consisted of both classroom lectures and field trips by bus to sites in Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, Caesarea Maritima, and Caesarea Philippi by the Sea of Galilee.

On Palm Sunday I joined 20,000 pilgrims who walked from the Mount of Olives to the Old City, mostly the same way Jesus and his disciples walked, with some exceptions. The place where it is believed Jesus started from is now behind the Wall of Demarcation, and the gate by which he entered the city was bricked up in the Middle Ages, but except for that, it's pretty much the same.

To get to the Mount of Olives in the first place I had to take the number 71 bus from a station on the Salah Eh-Din Road. Just as I was about to step aboard I was elbowed aside by a group of Italian nuns who needed the bus more than I did, apparently, but the bus company was running them every four or five minutes, so I got the next one. The bus couldn't make it all the way to the top because of the crowd, so the driver let us off as close as he could get to the top. I found a group of Anglicans, including the then Bishop of Jerusalem, Riah Abu El-Assal, and the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Carey of Clifton. Teenage boys were handing out branches of olive or palm. I got olive. We stood around for a while wondering what was supposed to happen, and then, for no apparent reason we started moving. I thought we would be singing hymns on the way down, but no one seemed to know any, and we were accompanied by high school marching bands, so that it resembled the Battle of Flowers more than it did a religious procession. There was a lot of confusion but we kept going down the Mount, across the Har Ha-Zeitim Cemetery (Ezekiel's Valley of Dry Bones), and finally through St. Stephen's Gate into the Old City. There the procession disintegrated and everyone scattered to the wind. I made my way back to St. George's for Evening Prayer, which we usually recited about the same time as our Muslim neighbors, called by their muezzin.

St. George's Cathedral, like many Anglican and Roman churches, has Stations of the Cross mounted on the inside walls. But I never saw them used. Instead, when the congregation gathers for Stations, they go down the street, enter the Old City at the Damascus Gate, and follow the original Stations of the Cross along the Via Dolorosa. Something similar takes place on Maundy Thursday. Following the Celebration of the Eucharist, instead of keeping vigil in the Cathedral, the Blessed Sacrament is carried down the street and into the Old City, where the vigil is kept in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is brought back for Communion on Good Friday at the noon service, which is mostly in Arabic, because the Cathedral's permanent congregation is made up chiefly of Palestinian Christians.

Following the recommendation of our guide, a group of us joined some Japanese Roman Catholics who were staying at a nearby hotel, and had a bus with some empty seats. We attended the Great Vigil of Easter in Abu Ghosh, which is one of several towns believed to be the Biblical Emmaus. There is a French-speaking Roman Catholic Benedictine monastery there. Men and women live in separate houses but worship and eat together. The Vigil was celebrated by the Abbot, who began the service in the courtyard with the lighting of the new fire. We then processed with our candles into the Abbey for the Prophecies, a Baptism, and the First Mass of Easter. The service was all in French, and was mostly sung. I will remember it till I die.

How wonderful to read the story of our faith year after year and to reenact Our Lord's Passion and Resurrection. It's wonderful too to see the places where these things took place and to remember them again and again while reading Holy Scripture. May we all keep a holy Lent and come with joy to Our Lord's Resurrection.