

Journey in Galilee – *Discovering Identity*

Lent Journeys in the Holy Land – Session 2

Part 1: Around the Lake

A boat trip on the Lake of Galilee is one of the highlights of many people's pilgrimage. After the hustle and bustle of the day, rushing around churches and archaeological sites, the boat's engines are turned off, and we are left with the quiet and stillness of the lake – marvellous, whether for spiritual reflection or for catching up on sleep.

The tourist boat is not so very far different from the sort of fishing boat Peter, Andrew, James and John might have used. As the boat drifts, you catch glimpses of some of the key sites of Jesus' ministry, and you can almost imagine yourself there:

- Capernaum, the synagogue
- Tabghe, site of the loaves and fishes miracle
- St Peter Primacy, site of the breakfast on the beach of Jesus' resurrection;
- the Hill of the Beatitudes where he preached the Sermon on the Mount.

We can't say with certainty these are the exact places, but as one guide put it, this is where they have been 'localised': it's a place that fits, a geographic location that reminds that things happened in history; people came and saw and listened and touched him: and Jesus showed he had worked out his vocation as Son of God.

One of the things you realise is just how small a scale this is. The places are only a few miles apart. Jesus stuck to the villages: there's no record of him going to the prosperous town of Sepphoris just down the road from Nazareth. Jesus had said no to the temptation towards the spectacular – to put on a show. You could say, he's staying beneath the radar. Of course, there are the miracles involving thousands, but they just seem to roll off him naturally: he doesn't want people to go on about them. His challenge is to make people stop and think. It was on the lake itself, faced with a raging storm, the fishermen disciples bow in worship and themselves ask, 'Who is this man, that even the wind and the waves obey him?'

Part 2: Caesarea Philippi

If you travel to the east side of the lake, and then head north, after a few wonderful views, you discover you're on the Golan Heights – for us a label synonymous with Arab-Israeli conflict. Either side of the road are areas cordoned off and warnings about mine-fields. But in front, to the north, is the mighty Mount Hermon, serenely snow-capped and now even containing a ski resort. Jesus led his followers up to its lower slopes, to the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi.



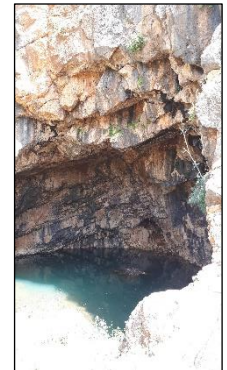
Today it is called Banias, and it's part of an Israeli national park. It's a green and pleasant land. The headwaters of the Jordan River gush freely from springs and melting snow on the mountain – such a contrast with the almost stagnant brown sludge of the lower Jordan. Caesarea Philippi was built, like so much else, by Herod the Great, one of many vanity projects to prove to his Roman overlords how very Roman he could be.



So it included a great white marble temple dedicated to Caesar Augustus, but older and more famous was the temple to the pagan god Pan (from which Banias derives its name). Pan's temple concealed a vast watery cave, and water would spurt out from it, as if summoned and controlled by the flow of Pan's music. Here, the upper end of Galilee was the very edge of historic Israel. Pagan worship was pre-dominant. Greek culture and Roman power were in your face.

This journey took the disciples away from their familiar surroundings, the influence of friends and neighbours, the opinions of their parents or wives or children, Jesus asks them the straight question of identity: 'Who do people say I am?' And then he follows it up with, 'Who do you say I am?' You've been with me for a couple of years by now: what conclusions have you reached? Am I just another teacher? Or am I more than that? And implied, what are you going to do about it?

Peter blurts out the right answer: 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' He's got it right, but doesn't understand what the words mean. He thinks nothing bad should happen to God's Messiah. If Jesus had accepted that, all his struggles in the desert would have meant nothing. They all have a lot to learn. But, away from their home territory, they do have the courage and insight to recognise in Jesus are met all the hopes and longings of their people. And that does get Jesus' affirmation: 'the gates of Hades shall never prevail against you.' It's believed the water filled cave behind the Temple of Pan was known as the Gate of Hades, making the allusion particularly apposite in Caesarea Philippi.



Part 3: Mount Tabor

I suspect Mount Hermon is where Jesus took Peter, James and John, to witness his transfiguration. But tradition has it that it was on Mount Tabor, which rises some 1600 feet from the Jezreel Valley and can be seen from all sides as an almost perfect, pudding-bowl shaped mountain.



The views are spectacular, looking over the Jezreel Valley – on a good day from Hermon to the Med. Nazareth can just be glimpsed in the hills to the right. This fertile valley was always peaceful. In fact, in ancient times it provided the ideal route for marching armies across the Middle East. Not far from Tabor lies the hill fortress of Megiddo which gives control of the valley. So frequent and so intense was the fighting that it's provided the name for the last battlefield of all: Armageddon.

In the Transfiguration, Peter, James and John gain a whole new insight as to Jesus' identity. First, they are shown Jesus' connection to the two great Old Testament luminaries, Moses and Elijah. His ministry is not starting something new starting from scratch. There's something here that's true for us, as well. Whatever experience you have with Jesus, it's personal to you, but it's also part of the bigger story, of God's salvation history.

Then they see his appearance changed: shining whiter than white with divine brilliance. You could say this is the Father's answer to the question of Jesus' identity: making it plain rather than dealing with allusions and symbols and parables and signs. But when they look and see with their own eyes it proves too much for them. I like the tradition of iconography that has them tumbling down the mountain side: this is too much for their eyes. It's a reminder for us never to think we've grasped all there is to know of Jesus, and never to lose the sense of awe and wonder about what we have learnt or experienced.



Transfigurations can also come about for us when we see other people with new eyes. Our group had a lecture from Stephanie Saldana who had been working with Syrian refugees. She has researched what happened when whole communities are dislocated and scattered through civil war. What happened to their culture, physical artefacts, language, songs and sense of identity? She was working mainly with Christian communities, conscious that these Christians use Aramaic for their worship – the language of Jesus.

Inevitably, much of what she said was quite harrowing, and she could see we were getting quite upset, yet she was able to tell these people's stories with humour and a lightness of touch. She stopped to explain: she'd heard the stories before. She'd experienced all the



emotions that we had and more, but now she knew these people, often as friends. They were no longer objects of her research or even objects of her compassion. She just admired them, respected them, loved them as fully rounded human beings. She'd heard their music and listened to their songs (some of which she played for us). The songs told of their communities' lives. And she showed us this beautiful tapestry or embroidery: stitched into it is a depiction of the entire life of that community. Stephanie said she felt 'the face of Christ was seen more truly in these refugees than anywhere else.' I think that is transfiguration.

Prayer For Refugees

Almighty and merciful God, whose Son became a refugee and had no place to call his own; look with mercy on those who today are fleeing from danger, homeless and hungry.

Bless those who work to bring them relief; inspire generosity and compassion in all our hearts; and guide the nations of the world towards that day when all will rejoice in your Kingdom of justice and of peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.