

## Journey to Jerusalem: *Confronting Challenge*

### Lenten Journeys in the Holy Land: Session 3

There were two possible routes from Galilee to Jerusalem, one through Samaria and the other along the Jordan Valley at then up through the desert. John's Gospel hints that Jesus used the first, the Synoptics the second. For John, who has Jesus coming to Jerusalem several times, passing through Samaria was a symbol of tackling opposition. Hostility between the two meant Galilean Jews sought to avoid Samaritan areas, but Jesus had to complete his work, as he put it, while there was still day light.



**Samaria** is a hill country of beautiful rolling hills and olive groves. In Biblical times it tended to be richer, and, perhaps what most fuelled hostilities, the people had welcomed Alexander the Great's conquest in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and widely adopted Greek culture.

The modern Palestinian town of Nablus lies on the Biblical site of Shechem, the location of **Jacob's well** (famed for Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman). Jesus accepted he would face opposition, and did not shy away, but also found and encouraged faith in the least expected places.



The second route is along the **Jordan Valley**. It's flatter, although with towering cliffs of the Rift Valley on either side. Hotter: you're deep below sea level and the hot air is trapped in; and probably lush in vegetation with river water and oases. Jesus' followers have their understanding challenged as they go. In Mark, three times he tells of his forthcoming arrest and death, but they don't get it. Physical blindness is a pointer to the spiritual. At Bethsaida, at the start of the journey a blind man is at first partially cured: he sees people as if they are walking trees. At Jericho, blind Bartimaeus recognises him as Son of David, and is healed straightaway.



Mark's Gospel takes us straight from this to the Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem. It's almost like Bartimaeus, with his correct identification of Jesus, has opened the city gates and let him in. On the ground, you'd have the steep climb on **the desert road** rising 2000 feet, cresting the Mount of Olives near Bethphage and seeing the city spread out on the slightly lower hill below. They would not have been alone. Crowds would be flocking in to celebrate the festival, joining in the festal Psalms: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go up to the house of the Lord!' Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!" (Psalm 122: 1-2) Still, we wonder, how much had the crowds actually understood.

Today, Palm Sunday in Jerusalem is a true festival. It's one day when Christians, pilgrims and locals, dominate the outdoor space. Someone estimated 15,000 were present in the **Palm Sunday procession** when we were there. Led off by a series of scout troops, with drums and pipes and saxophones, the crowds slowly made its way through narrow streets over the hill, down across the Kidron Valley, and up through the Lion Gate and into the city. It was quite an experience – a mass outbreak of jubilation.



And yet ... you couldn't help wondering if we were missing the point (or at least part of the point) as did those first crowds. For us, Palm Sunday always has a bitter sweet feel: we know where this is going to end up. Celebration has to some extent to be muted. The crowd passed by the ***Dominus Flevit*** (meaning 'The Lord Wept') church. But Jesus, whether on that day or another, paused to pray and to weep over Jerusalem.

He came to the **Temple** and overturned the tables of the money-changers, stopping its operations for a short spell. It is written, 'My house shall be a place of prayer for all nations.' The great platform that was the foundation of Herod's Temple (of Jesus' day) is still there, but little that was built on it. It's one of the most religiously contentious places in the world.



Jews pray at the **Western Wall**, and people of other faiths are allowed to join them, perhaps touching the Wall, perhaps writing a prayer and placing it in a crack in the wall. Many people find it deeply moving; personally, I was uncomfortable – not least because of the division of male and female areas (and that it's an unequal divide).

In the 7<sup>th</sup> century Jerusalem was conquered and the Muslim invaders built the **Dome of the Rock** and the Al Aksa mosque which dominate the platform now. Our group was given privileged access. The Muslim guide, who was quite high up in the educational set-up there, was very welcoming, insisting these are places for all. Inside the Dome of the Rock he pointed to texts that he claimed back up his vision of inclusivity, but guide books say they are about all-embracing conquest.



The building design is very similar to a Byzantine church – octagonal, **domed** and mosaic covered. Is this a sign of cultural melding or of domination? Jesus came as Son of God, yet not be served but serve: in an atmosphere of religious, cultural and political one-upmanship, how do you avoid the temptation to join the fray?

On Maundy Thursday evening, we followed Jesus and his disciples to **Gethsemane**, part of the olive grove near the bottom of the Mount of Olives. Today, ancient olive trees give a flavour of the place, although the formality of the garden makes it hard to see as the working copse it once was. (Gethsemane means olive press.) There was real stillness in the night hour; in the church of All Nations next door there was silent anticipation.



We went on, into the lower depths of the **Kidron Valley**, following the way Jesus would have been taken under arrest, amongst the tombs going back to the times of the Jebusites. We sang the Taize chant: *Stay with me, remain here with me; watch and pray, watch and pray.*

Then we walked up towards David's City, the Church of Peter in Galicantu sited on what was believed to be Caiaphas's house where Jesus was first taken. Silence: spent on the **Roman steps** that Jesus could have been led up; in the cellars and cistern beneath where a prisoner could have been kept; and in the chapels where modern icons show Peter denying knowing Jesus; **Peter, engulfed by remorse**; and Peter, later restored by the lakeside.



The final meditation will pick up the story from there. For now, I want to close with some thoughts for today from Munther Isaac, pastor of the Christmas Church in Bethlehem, and academic director of Bethlehem Bible College, and has been involved with a biennial conference called '**Christ at the Checkpoint**' asking what Jesus would do if he came back to the Holy Land today. Munther Isaac laments:

'So much politics, power and religion, but so little faith in our land. If Jesus came today, instead of palm branches, everyone would carry their own flags, but not mixed together. And everyone would want him for their own self and their own agenda, and still we would not know the things that make for peace. Jesus would weep over so much injustice, so much discrimination, so much dislocation. When Jesus weeps, we should weep with him, dwell with those tears, and be disturbed by them. Change begins only when we can lament.'



### Prayer for the People of the Holy Land

God of justice and peace,

We bring before you the Israeli and Palestinian people in all their need, pain and fear.

Bring an end to humiliation and injustice, corruption and violence.

Prosper those who work for peace with justice.

May both people groups enjoy security and prosperity.

We ask this through your Son, the Prince of peace,

Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen