



**As they were going along the road, someone said to Jesus,
“I will follow you wherever you go.”** LUKE 9:57

Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of Jesus

A pilgrim is someone who goes on a journey in the hope of encountering God, or of meeting God in a new way. There are many sacred places throughout the world frequented by pilgrims seeking to draw closer to God. But for the Christian, the Holy Land is unique. Christians travel to the Holy Land, not because God is present there in a way in which he is not in New York, Paris, or Shanghai. We go there because it is the place where our faith has its deepest roots. Here are the places where Jesus himself walked and talked, laughed and wept, where he was born, lived, suffered, died, and rose again. These places hold a memory of Jesus that carries an enormous sense of expectation for one seeking a fresh encounter with God.

Some have described the Holy Land as the fifth gospel. There are four sacred texts, but there is also the good news about Jesus revealed to us by the places which mark the events of his life. The gospel of the land can fill out the written gospels with tangible reality. Here we can imagine Jesus with his disciples along the lake, teaching on the mountainside, praying in the garden, and dying on the cross. In this fifth gospel we realize that we have inherited not only a history of salvation, but a geography of salvation. God was revealed to us in Jesus Christ not only in a specific period of history, but also in very specific places. Through studying the geography of God's revelation in Jesus, we come to realize how truly incarnational is our Christian faith.

Reflection and discussion

- Considering the above definition of pilgrimage, have I ever taken a pilgrimage, either internally or externally?

- How could studying the places of Jesus' life help me better understand the incarnational reality of my Christian faith (John 1:14)?

The Bible is filled with the stories of people traveling on pilgrimage. Abraham and Sarah left their homeland to journey to a new land which God would show them. They went out not knowing where they were going, traveling by faith at God's direction. Moses led the Hebrews from slavery to the land God had promised. They encountered God on that long journey and became God's people through the experience. The life of Jesus too was essentially an earthly pilgrimage, the goal of which was his return to the Father. He shows us the way to follow in his footsteps as we journey through life along our pilgrim way.

Christian pilgrims from the early centuries of the church traveled to the land in which Jesus himself was a pilgrim. They had their Bibles in hand, and they wanted to touch the places of his life which they had read about in the Scriptures. By the fourth century, Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome, began encouraging pilgrimage to the holy places of the faith after the pilgrimage of his mother, St. Helen.

Constantine built three major basilicas in the Holy Land, each built around a cave associated with the life of Jesus. He constructed the Church of the Resurrection which included a circular shrine at the empty tomb of Christ as well as a memorial at the site of Calvary. Constantine also erected

the Eleona Church on the Mount of Olives, built around a cave honoring the place where Jesus frequently taught his disciples. The third basilica was the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, focused on the cave marking the place of Jesus' birth.

While Constantine's churches were being built, an anonymous pilgrim from Bordeaux came to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. From him we have the first writings describing a tour through the Holy Land. He carefully noted routes and distances, and his descriptions of places like Golgotha, the house of Caiaphas, and the tomb of Lazarus confirm the antiquity of many traditions about the holy places. St. Jerome, a fourth-century biblical scholar who traveled the land, wrote this: "We will have a clearer grasp of Scripture after we have gazed with our own eyes on the sites where the events of our salvation unfolded."

The most extensive early travelogue was written by a woman named Egeria. Her writings describe the fourth-century rituals of Holy Week in Jerusalem. She described the Palm Sunday procession from the Mount of Olives, the Holy Thursday liturgy which ended by walking to Gethsemane by torchlight, and the Good Friday veneration of the cross. She then describes the Paschal Vigil at the Church of the Resurrection with its baptisms and Eucharist.

A beloved pilgrim of the Middle Ages was St. Francis of Assisi. In 1219 he journeyed to bring the message of peace to the Crusaders and the Muslim forces who were battling over the Holy Land. He encouraged his followers to travel to the land where Jesus lived. From that time on the Franciscans have staffed many of the places associated with the life of Jesus.

From these early pilgrims we realize that the holy places marking events in the life of Jesus are preserved not just for people to view. Many of them have been made into shrines or churches for liturgical worship. Through worship, the saving event is evoked and becomes sacramentally present for the worshiper. In liturgy the past becomes present; God acts in the lives of the pilgrims just as surely as God acted in the lives of those first followers of Jesus. Pilgrimage is more than a journey which recalls the past; it is a sacramental action, an experience that makes the sacred past present again.

The gospel account of the journey along the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13–35) describes some of the most important aspects of Christian pil-

grimage. The travelers along the way encounter Jesus who accompanies them on their journey. They discuss their life experiences along the way and they read from the Scriptures. The travelers offer hospitality and they break bread together. The journey became a pilgrimage because they experienced the Risen Lord. He was present with them on the road, in the words exchanged, in the Scriptures, in the signs of hospitality, in the Eucharist, and in the community formed through the experience. The experience of Christ in the journey offered new possibilities and new hope for their pilgrim lives. These are the elements of pilgrimage: journey, community, Scripture, sacrifice, hospitality, ritual, sacrament, and spiritual encounter.

Reflection and discussion

- What favorite memories do I make present again through celebration and ritual?

- In what ways could I describe my Christian life as a pilgrimage?

- Has a particular place ever been a means for me to encounter God?

The value of pilgrimage to sacred places has always been debatable for Christians, in the same way that venerating sacred images has been contentious. Religious images were destroyed during the eighth and ninth century iconoclast controversy because it was thought that divinity should not be expressed in material forms. Similarly, pilgrimage was sometimes discouraged

because it was thought that earthly places and human structures could get in the way of spiritual encounters with God. Had not Jesus said to the Samaritan woman that true worship had nothing to do with Jerusalem or Samaria, but was all about worshipping God in spirit and in truth (John 4:20–24)? We are too easily tempted to believe that going to a particular place or going through a particular ritual earns us God’s favor.

Yet images, places, and rituals can indeed be powerful means to experience God. God is at work in creation. Because God has become incarnate in the world, we can discover the presence of God through the world, especially through those created people, places, and things that remind us of God. All the world is holy and has a sacramental quality, speaking to us of the goodness of God. Particularly the places where Jesus spent his earthly life can be effective signs of his presence and love, effective means of his grace.

When controversies arose about the value of pilgrimage, Jerome said that external pilgrimage must always be accompanied by interior conversion. “It is not sufficient merely to go on pilgrimage,” he said. “Its success depends upon the pilgrim’s ability to journey in faith, with a new heart and with a will to conversion. Otherwise the journey might be the same as any other.” Pilgrimage is the simultaneous movement of the feet and the soul.

The ambiguity of Christian pilgrimage to holy places is summed up by the words of the angel at the empty tomb: “Come, see the place,” is balanced by “He is not here, he has been raised” (Matt 28:6). Because Jesus is the Risen Lord, the empty tomb at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is not necessarily any holier than my own living room. The whole world has become the Holy Land. The value of pilgrimage is determined by the persons we have become when we come back home. Pilgrimage to holy places can be for many an experience of real growth in discipleship, but the deepest value of pilgrimage is found in returning home and realizing that God was waiting for us there all the while. Sometimes it is necessary to go halfway around the world to discover that all the answers are within us.

Ultimately it is not we who travel looking for God. It is really God who is looking for us. When we go on pilgrimage humbly, listening for God to speak in the silence of our hearts, waiting for God to show us his presence, there is no telling in what ways we may be changed.

As we reflect on the sacred places and Scriptures contained in this Bible

study, we will unite our hearts with pilgrims through the ages and become pilgrims ourselves. Through the living word of God, the risen Lord is present with us, walking along our pilgrim way. As pilgrims our understanding of the gospels will be enriched through this study as we form connections between the sacred text and the holy places.

Reflection and discussion

- How could a greater understand of geography and topography fill out my understanding of the gospels?

- What is the difference between a tourist and a pilgrim?

- What do I expect to be different after I complete my study of the places of Jesus' life?

Many Christians desire someday to take a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, but as in many periods of history, the costs and dangers of travel to the Middle East, as well as work and family responsibilities, make such a trip prohibitive for now. Hopefully this study of the places of Jesus' life on earth will provide a real pilgrimage experience for homebound and workbound pilgrims. This pilgrimage in the footsteps of Jesus will be a personal and spiritual pilgrimage to the holy ground of the life of Jesus.



Prayer

Word made flesh, you have come and pitched your tent in our world. In your unfathomable will, you have come to us in a particular location in our world, through the ancient faith of Judaism, in a particular era of history. You had unique personal features and a distinct personality, you grew up in a human family, and you traveled to particular places. You have truly become incarnate in our humanity. Be present to us with your Holy Spirit as we study the places of your earthly life so that we can come to know you more personally. Guide us on our pilgrimage together.