

## **Tourist, Traveller, Pilgrim or Disciple? - Mark 6: 1-13**

*Tourists don't know where they have been; travellers don't know where they are going.*

Paul Theroux

*To journey without change is to be a nomad. To change without journeying is to be a chameleon. To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim.*

Mark Nepo

When I first returned from a short but packed – ‘packed’ being the operative word – pilgrimage to the Holy Land and people asked what were the highlights of the trip, I found it hard to know where to start. Did that place me in Paul Theroux’s category of ‘tourist’ – one who does not know where they have been? Upon further reflection I decided it wasn’t that I didn’t know where I had been so much as that I needed to unpack the experience. And that takes time.

So what is the difference between being a tourist and being a pilgrim? Certainly being a pilgrim is more than being a tourist – or should be. Mark Nepo says that we become pilgrims when we are changed by the experience of travel. It seems to me that how transformative a journey is may depend on the traveller’s intention in undergoing it, and reflection on it afterwards. In terms of my intention, I wasn’t just sight-seeing - there are probably other parts of the world that I would prefer to go for that purpose. Besides watching television is a much cheaper, safer and more comfortable option!

So why did I go? Good question. It was more like something I needed to do – a sort of reality check. My mind, heart and imagination had been nourished through a literary approach to the scriptures for some time. In the 1990s I had completed research involving a literary approach to the idea of wilderness in the scriptures. At that time I became excited about the ways patterns of imagery and metaphor conferred an overall coherence to this library of books we call the Bible. Practices like *lectio divina* and Ignatian methods of imaginatively entering the gospel scenes, along with Jungian notions of archetypes, also helped the scriptures to come alive in new ways.

But now I was ready for a first hand encounter with the history, geography and culture that had shaped these texts.

I sort of realised before I left that that I needed to put aside any romantic notion that I was going to walk exactly where Jesus walked, or enter into biblical scenes where the landscape had remained untouched for 2000 years. In Jerusalem, for example, where Jesus walked was up to 8 metres below current street level, buried under 2000 years of human habitation and detritus! Mind you it was spine-tingling to suddenly come across a street sign called 'Via Dolorosa' while wandering around the colourful bazaars in the old walled city of Jerusalem!

When we visited the sacred sites commemorating events and scenes from the gospels, we found churches and monuments to mark the site – sometimes there was more than one contender for the 'true site'. I guess I am not alone in wondering if the Jesus we see in the gospels would have found all this a bit bewildering.

The existing building was often built on the ruins of earlier versions - the earliest dating from 4<sup>th</sup> Century. In some cases we were able to go down through the crypt to explore the vestiges of these earlier buildings. In a sense this archaeological layering provides a useful metaphor, reminding us that we need to 'dig deep' at times through the accretions of history and culture to reconnect with our tradition. At the same time, people like Richard Holloway, former Bishop of Edinburgh, also remind us that our task does not stop there; each generation needs to distinguish between the 'historic packaging' and the essential meaning of our tradition to birth what is needed for our time and place in history. This requires a sort of bifocal perspective – one that takes account of the history *and* looks at the contemporary scene.

Our tour ('Holy Land Pilgrimage: One Land – Two Peoples – Three Faiths') attempted to do just that. In just over two weeks we were invited to look at a history that goes back 4000 years beginning with Abraham and the Patriarchs, the common ancestors to the three faiths in question: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. At the same time we were introduced to the contemporary social and political situation. On one day we visited an Israeli 'settlement' (Efrata) in the morning and a

Palestinian refugee camp (Dheisheh, near Bethlehem) in the afternoon so that we heard both sides. The wounds seemed to go so deep, and the divisions were so intractable – each side demanding justice – that it was hard to see how peaceful co-existence were possible. Yet our local Arab Christian guides, Bashira, and Father Kamahl are committed to peace and reconciliation, meeting with representatives of all faiths who are willing to join this work. As outsiders we could not presume to judge – besides we don't exactly have a clean slate here in Australia

You don't have to visit Israel to be reminded of the dark side of religion. The media offer daily reminders of the way people use religion to justify all sorts of unjust and violent behaviour. Such extremists are trapped at a developmental level of needing to confirm tribal identity, rather than recognising that mature religion requires us to transcend local loyalties and to cultivate compassion for all peoples. At the same time, our pilgrimage reminded me again how remarkable Jesus was in his inclusiveness and his challenging of deep divides of gender, faith and race that are still part of today's world. Needless to say, his followers have not always followed his example.

Today's gospel (Mark 6:1-13) is one of several accounts of Jesus visiting the synagogue on the Sabbath to teach. In the first chapter of Mark's gospel we hear how Jesus went to the synagogue in Capernaum, and how the people were amazed that he taught as one having authority, not as the scribes. They were even more amazed when he healed the man with an unclean spirit. In today's incident in his hometown Nazareth, the people were initially amazed because his deeds had preceded him but then offended: 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?'

In Luke's parallel and more expansive account of his visit to the synagogue in Nazareth we get a better idea why they were offended. For starters there was his manifesto (Luke 4:18-19):

*The Spirit of the lord is upon me, because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.*

*He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

And more challenges were to follow. In Luke's version the people were so enraged that they took him to the brow of a hill to throw him over, but he managed to elude them. In Mark's version that we heard tonight, they didn't seek to kill him, but his healing powers were restricted there because of their unbelief. He ruefully comments that prophets are without honour among their own kin.

So what does he do when rejected by his own hometown? He goes elsewhere, healing and preaching. He gets on with the job, commissioning his disciples to share the task. He tells them to travel light and where they are not welcome and people don't want to hear, to leave and 'to shake off the dust that is on their feet as a testimony against them'. So there are limits to his inclusiveness, or are there? Or is it simply that he is unable to bless, liberate and heal, if we are not open to the possibility?

While in Israel I was frequently struck by the distances Jesus and the disciples travelled, presumably on foot, and often through inhospitable terrain. Jesus wasn't a tourist – he was a man on a mission, as we have seen. There were also his disciples to train and they proved to be slow-learners at times. But he did take time to contemplate the wonders of nature. His reference to 'lilies of the field' and 'birds of the air' tells us that. I don't believe he was given an itinerary beforehand. Sometimes he moves on because he is pushed out, as we see in today's reading. At other times he moves on even when the locals are clamouring for his ministry, as was the case at Capernaum. And of course he sets off for that final journey to Jerusalem knowing what lies ahead.

A week or so after I returned from Israel, someone asked me an insightful question: Were there any places I felt particularly aware of God's presence? While on the trip I was often on sensory and information overload. However, there were some oases for contemplative solitude and reflection. One morning in Jerusalem we arose early

to avoid the crowds to walk and pray the 'Via Dolorosa' (The Way of the Cross) from 5.30-7am in the Old City, ending up in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (or the Church of the Resurrection in Greek Orthodox tradition).

On another occasion, our group, numbering about 26, were all packed into a small chapel in the Franciscan Church of the Transfiguration on Mt Tabor for a celebration of the Eucharist. When it came to the words of consecration, our priest-guide, Father Kamahl, without warning broke into Aramaic, Jesus' mother tongue, and the language he would have used at the Last Supper. One minute we were hearing English; the next the language those first disciples heard. Two thousand years dissolved. And in a sense so did I. When it came to receiving communion, using a 4<sup>th</sup> Century Byzantine rite, Father Kamahl said to each of us, 'Become what you receive', and we each replied, 'The Body of Christ'.

Such an invitation takes us into the heart of the divine mystery. And a lifetime may be insufficient to unpack its meaning. You don't need to be in the Holy Land, nor do you have to be at the Eucharist to hear that invitation. Aren't all places potentially holy, and all moments sacramental? As Daniel O'Leary says (*Unmasking God*, p.85), 'Just about anything to which we are truly present can be the sacramental moment that calls and lifts us to the vision of our divine source and destiny'. Even the rough bits – perhaps especially the rough bits – can remind us of our need for transformation. Richard Rohr is fond of saying that God comes disguised as your life.

Perhaps the difference between spiritual tourism and true pilgrimage boils down to who or what is in the driver's seat. Shortly we move into the meditation space that is at the heart of our liturgy. The practice of meditation is like a homing device, allowing us to vacate the driver's seat for a while to receive our bearings from God.

To conclude in the words of TS Eliot ('The Four Quartets'):

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this calling

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

But Eliot also reminds us that this is a journey 'costing not less than everything'.

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