

Tantur Ecumenical Institute

Newsletter

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Blades of grass in a parched desert..... A reminder that life still exists even in the most hostile of terrains.



Finding God in the Holy Land

by
Susan Brecht

One evening in June, I was sitting on the veranda with Fr. Tim (Rector of Tantur) and his wife Lisa pondering a question I am still asking myself. "What is it about this intoxicating, diverse, conflicted and sacred land that draws me to it?" "It is a thin place, where generations have felt God's presence in a special way". I'm no exception. But unlike other places I've been to, I feel not only God's peace, but God's pain in the Holy Land. I grew to love the sound of the Muslim call to prayer each day and the ringing of the church bells in the Old City of Jerusalem on Sunday mornings, awakening us to God's presence. I felt that presence in a special way listening to the heavenly voices of the nuns and monks praising God's presence. I could feel God's pain tinged with hope at an ecumenical service held by Sabeel* as Christians and Muslims prayed together and sang their plaintive hymns of support for those who continue to suffer under the occupation. I felt the breath of God in the winds that blew through Tantur late in the afternoon, reminding me that God breathes life into each of us, on both sides of the separation wall that we could see beyond the olive groves.

And God was there in the absolute silence of the desert sitting in the Negev, or walking along the ravines of the Wadi Qelt past ancient caves where thousands of monks once communed with God, consecrating it as sacred ground. One of our group, sitting in that immense silent wilderness, found blades of grass creeping through the rocky terrain. It was a reminder to him and to us that life still exists even in the most difficult of circumstances, against so many odds, through all the occupations, invading armies, destructions and rebuilding over the millennia. Individual lives, whole cultures are reborn sometimes out of the ashes and God is there through it all, alive within it.

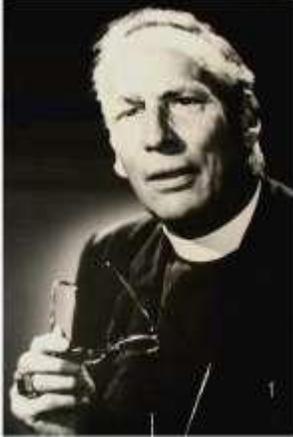
One afternoon while visiting the Disciples Greek Orthodox Church near Capernaum, a men's seminary choir arrived from St. Petersburg to sing evening vespers. We stood there transfixed some of us moved to tears, enveloped by the sound of their glorious voices. It was the most spiritual experience I had during my sojourn in the Holy Land. Afterwards I thought about how, when I was a child the Soviet Union was called the "evil empire" during the Cold War. These men were not alive then, but if they had been their choir could not have existed. Here they were transporting us to a little bit of heaven, halfway across the world. It gives me hope that change for the good can happen. It also made me aware that even in this divided and divisive region, filled with injustices against humanity, God is still present. Maybe that's what keeps drawing me back

*For an explanation on Sabeel, please visit www.sabeel.org

The Archbishop and Israeli – Egyptian Peace

by
David Andrews-Brown

Archbishop Appleton - (Anglican Diocese of Perth, WA) - Archives ©



Anwar Sadat ©



Archbishop George Appleton was staying at Tantar when I interviewed him sometime in the nineteen-eighties. Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem from 1968 to 1974, he gave me a fascinating insight into the possibilities of Middle Eastern peace – and intercession. As Bishop of Jerusalem, his responsibilities included other sees in the Levant and the Middle East, and shortly before leaving for Jerusalem, a well known journalist told him, “You are a very fortunate person”. “You are able, through the courtesy of governments, to move about freely in the Middle East, where people will be glad to hear anything you have to say, as you interpret situations as you see them. - You must be like a bee.”

Seeing that the Archbishop looked rather puzzled, the newspaperman went on, “A bee, when it scents a flower on the other side of a barbed-wire fence or a high wall, flies through the barbed wire, or over the wall, and moves on to impregnate other flowers indirectly through its little store of honey.” The archbishop should be like that bee, he said, sharing good things concerning differing individual countries with officials in other countries in the Levant, in the interests of peace.

In this way, Archbishop Appleton was able to act as a Go-Between in the Arab-Israel conflict. Although his talks in St George’s Cathedral, about peace and reconciliation, were not always well received, he would pray there that God would inspire some leading person, here in the Middle East, to indicate possible paths to peace. This same prayer was offered in London at a service of intercession, for peace among the Peoples of the Middle East, sometime in 1970. “It took seven years for that prayer to be answered, when Anwar Sadat was inspired to make that personal trip to Jerusalem,” the archbishop told me. I believe that his visit to the Holy City was the result of prayer. Indeed, Sadat had said that “he believed he was wanted by God to come to Jerusalem.” This strikes me as being the way in which God acts – not so much through external miracles but through internal miracles, so that well-disposed people may help to carry on His will.

Anwar Sadat would pay for his life for that his gesture. His helper, so I believe, Archbishop Appleton, died in 1993. Especially at this time in the history of the Middle East, these two men of God have something to say to us by way of encouragement – in the power of prayer.

(David Andrews-Brown is a freelance writer and broadcaster.)

Did Jesus ever visit Sepphoris?

by
Fr. Glenn de Cruz, C.Ss.R.

In 1997 I visited Sepphoris, a city about 6 kilometres (four miles) from Nazareth. I was told that it would take about an hour by foot from Nazareth to Sepphoris. I visited the city again about ten years later. There were some changes, like the upgrading of the synagogue, but most notable was the reconstruction of the theatre complete with a stage and theatre seats. I don't remember seeing the stage or the seats in 1997. Maybe small concerts are held there today.

The gospels never mention Jesus ever visiting Sepphoris. This is surprising, and probably not an accidental oversight, in view of his itinerant ways.¹ However, according to Bible scholar and archaeologist Jerome O'Connor, after 3 BC, Sepphoris was a centre of a building boom, providing opportunities for artisans such as Joseph. Did Jesus have a hand building the theatre of Sepphoris? Maybe, but we will never know for sure.

One other reason that might help us is the word "hypocrites". It appears about seventeen times in the Gospels, and three times in the Sermon on the Mount. Where would Jesus, growing up in the small village of Nazareth, have come into contact with "hypocrites" a Greek word for actors? Perhaps visiting Sepphoris where actors would act in the theatre. It's a possibility. What we do know, is that when Jesus used the image of "hypocrite" to criticize religious leaders for their exaggerated public display of piety, his message reverberated loudly and clearly throughout Galilee and Judea.

But Meier believes that despite intriguing hypotheses about Jesus the master builder travelling far and wide or imbibing Greek drama at the theatre in Sepphoris, all signs point to an uneventful adolescence and adulthood spent woodworking in Nazareth²



Synagogue at Sepphoris



Theatre at Sepphoris



¹ Jesus: An Historical Approximation, by Jose A. Pagola, Convivum Press, 2007, pg 47

² A Marginal Jew, by John P. Meier, Doubleday, Vol. 1, 1991, pg 351

A Reflection for October by Vera Kerr

On my first day at Tantur when I replied 'Yes' to someone who asked if it was my first visit there, Fr. Tim said enthusiastically "Well, you'll find it a life-changing experience".....So, did I? Now, three months later as I reflect back, what answer do I give? Yes, - and the change has been of 'the gentle breeze' variety - not the earthquake or mighty wind. Having experienced The Fifth Gospel and walked the land Our Saviour trod and learning something of that culture, I now read and/hear the Scripture with 'new eyes and ears. I hope that will continue to be life-changing on an on-going basis. Something else I've noticed over these past three months - how much of my living now seems to be filtered through my Tantur experience. it has to do with my inner response to such things as some of my reading, to conversations, to incidental, ordinary experiences. All is now coloured for me by Tantur. Lastly and very especially I carry within me many precious memories of the special people I encountered in Tantur. Such an open, friendly, inclusive group! I treasure the memories of our adventures together as well as those things that touched me deeply in more hidden ways. Oh yes, Tantur has left its mark on me!

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