

Tantur Ecumenical Institute

Newsletter

Finding the Holy

by

Rev. Paul Burden

Latest News and Events:

- **Finding the Holy** by Rev. Paul Burden of Bath, UK.
- **Spiritual Traditions** by Kelsey Dyck (MESP Program) of Trinity Western University, Langley, Canada
- **Jesus & his Home Town** by Rev. Dr. David J. Bryan, (Director of Studies, Lindisfarne Regional Training Partnership, UK)
- **A Reflection for February** by Dr. Saliba Sarsar of Jerusalem (Professor at Monmouth University, NJ, USA)



Pilgrims at the Stone of the Anointing,
Church of The Holy Sepulchre.....
Evokes many different feelings for those who visit

An interesting article in the November newsletter (Spiritual Wifi) contained a line that intrigued me. It said of visitors to Jerusalem that “most people prefer the presumed sacredness of the Holy Sepulchre”. My experience was, initially at least, the opposite. I had the privilege of joining the four week course at Tantur in July 2008, and after our first visit to the Holy Sepulchre members of our group had shared their disappointment. One new friend caught the mood when, very simply, he admitted: “I thought I’d meet God, and I didn’t”. There was something about the over-decoration of the place, alien to our Western eyes, the crowds and the conflicted history which conspired against a sense of holiness.

I, like many, had entered the church with a forensic eye, trying to establish whether or not this was really the place of Christ’s death and resurrection. It is the recurring question of a visit to the Holy Land: did it really happen here? Perhaps subconsciously, we think that holiness is linked substantially to geography. On entering the Holy Sepulchre, I had walked past the Stone of Anointing, surprised by the number of people kneeling and placing their hands on it to pray. Surely they knew too that this stone dates only from 1810? I queued for the sepulchre itself, and as I bowed to enter that most sacred place, the Polish priest I’d met in the queue was continuing to tell me about his recent visit to my home town. This was not how I’d imagined it all to be! I identified with my friend’s comment that “I thought I’d meet God, and I didn’t”. But the huge privilege of the month at Tantur was being able to spend time in these places. Something in me resolved to seek the holy in the Holy Sepulchre. I still grappled with whether I sat in a church marking the actual place, or in a 1600 year old hoax. I spent time sitting and praying, people watching as I did. I saw the tourist and the pilgrim, and began both to recognise the difference and to realise that most visitors to Jerusalem are actually a mix of the two. I saw different cultural expressions of reverence, and glimpsed the holy in other people. On one day I saw a mini-theophany in a shaft of light from an upper window in the Rotunda, piercing the dust and illuminating the Tomb. It spoke to me of grace, beauty and glory. I began to understand what we all think we know, that holiness doesn’t begin with the place, but begins with the heart that perceives the place. And so one day I came again to the Stone of Anointing, only 200 years old, and knew what I had to do. The words from T.S. Eliot’s ‘Little Gidding’ flooded into my mind: “*You are not here to verify, instruct yourself, or inform curiosity or carry report. You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid.*” I knelt, placed my hand on the stone, and prayed as people holier than me have prayed in that place over many years. In that moment, I found that meeting God in the Holy Sepulchre, in Jerusalem or Galilee is not so much about walking where Jesus really walked, but about recognising that pilgrims over the centuries have found prayer that has been valid here, and have made it indeed a Holy Land.

MESPER's at Tantur at the start of their Middle East adventure.....



Kelsey Dyck from the Middle East Study Program (MESP) with fellow MESPER's, staff and visitors at Tantur



Spiritual Traditions

by
Kelsey Dyck

Living at Tantur was possibly the most enriching part of my semester abroad in the Middle East. So much of what I experienced during my three months living at Tantur was so different from what I expected when I signed up for the Middle East Studies Program; however, I do not believe that I could have planned it to work out more perfectly. At Tantur I was exposed to so many spiritual traditions that are very different to what I was raised on. Whether I was taking part in the daily prayer service, or having conversations about faith over dinner, I was always challenged to think about my own faith in a different light.

I consider myself unendingly blessed to have the privilege to sift through tough questions with so many devoted people of God who are so chock full of wisdom, understanding, grace, and sensitivity. When else would a college-aged, Protestant girl have the on-going opportunity to converse with Orthodox priests, a Franciscan Friar, Catholic Sisters, or Islamic and Jewish scholars while feasting on chicken and rice? I do not believe that I could plan that if I tried!



Kelsey Dyck from the MESP Program (Centre) with some of the many people she met during her stay at Tantur

Furthermore, at Tantur I found adults who truly care about the generation that is growing up and trying to make a difference in the world. Not only were these people full of wisdom from which to glean, but they also took the time to try to understand the younger generation and even learn from us. I left Tantur feeling incredibly encouraged, believed-in, motivated, and empowered.

Jesus & his Home Town

by
Revd. Dr. David J. Bryan

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus' home town was Nazareth. He is 'Jesus the Nazarene'. There can be no doubt that Nazareth was, as the Germans put it, his *Heimat*, the place that gave him his identity. What was it like to live there at turn of the Era?

Today, the modern city of Nazareth is the largest Arab city in Israel and is populated mainly by Christians. It has around 65,000 inhabitants, which is about 2/3rd's the size of Darlington. The Nazareth that Jesus knew could not have been more different. We get some idea of the scale of the village from the painting which was made in 1842 by the Scottish artist, David Roberts (see right).

Jesus' Nazareth would have had a population of no more than four or five hundred people, possibly as few as 50! And, living conditions would have been very basic. Indeed Jesus' family may, like some of his neighbours, have lived in a cave. In the 1950s archaeological work was undertaken at the Church of the Annunciation (right). Fr Bellarmino Bagatti was the principal archaeologist. Bagatti and his team uncovered various underground grottos. In one they found an oven, which implied that the cave was once a home – though it was considered 'so small as to serve one family only'.

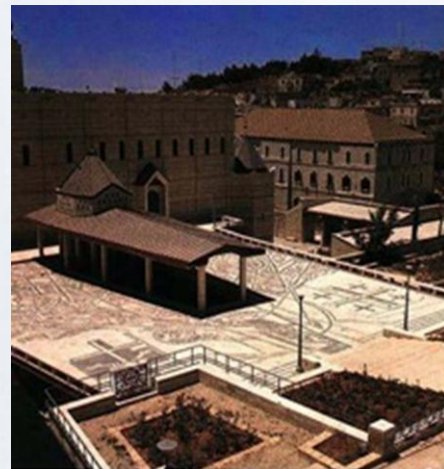
Not everyone finds palatable the idea of Jesus' family home being a cave – including the present-day mayor of Nazareth! But living in a cave might not have been so bad we imagine....there are **Modern Cave Dwellers**.

When I was at Tantur in 2011, I visited the Nassar family in Israel. Their home is the base of the Tent of Nations Project, which aims to promote reconciliation in Israel-Palestine. Their vision is summed up on the stone at the entrance to the vineyard, 'We refuse to be enemies'. Nayef Nassar (right), whose father Daheer purchased the land in 1916, lived in a cave on the site for more than 60 years. Located between Bethlehem and Hebron, they have found themselves embroiled in a long dispute with the Israeli government, who declared the area, including Daheer's Vineyard, state property in 1991. So far, they have successfully resisted this equivalent of a compulsory purchase order. They have experienced many pressures, including the prohibition to build on the surface. Such is their determination not to be forced off the land that they are excavating more cave dwellings and other underground facilities on the site! If the idea of a home in a cave for Jesus, Mary and Joseph, is off the map for you, you might be relieved to know that caves were not the only option in Nazareth. The Nazareth Village Farm Project thinks that the caves formed just part of the homes of the people. They might have been their equivalent of a cool room. Even so we are still dealing with basic living conditions.

Painting of Nazareth by Scottish artist David Roberts



Church of the Annunciation



Nayef Nassar



A Reflection for February by Dr. Saliba Sarsar

Living and working away from Jerusalem, I often find myself listening to my life, to my calling, to my identity. These are all intertwined and connected to Jerusalem—my city, our city. It is always in returning to Jerusalem that I feel energized or truly “at home.” It is in reference to Jerusalem that I feel most responsible for “the Other.” In Jerusalem, we are closer to the Creator. The earth is nearer to the Heavens. On a clear summer night, we can touch the moon, we can capture the stars! Everywhere we turn, we witness sacred sites and sacred narratives that identify both particular and universal markings and values. Yet, the Creator’s love and our human compassion instruct that we recognize that every house of worship and every community anywhere around the world *is* Jerusalem. Jerusalem radiates light to all, but all equally nourishes its life. The Creator is at home not only in the physical Jerusalem, but also where the heart is pure, where the spirit is high, and where love is inclusive and unconditional. Our life in the Creator’s grace brings forth our shared—moral and practical—responsibility toward ourselves, toward each other, and toward our environment.

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Tantur Ecumenical Institute for Theological Studies
PO Box 11381
91113 Jerusalem,
Israel



Ph: int +972 2 676 09 11 Fax: int +972 2 676 09 14
e-mail: tantur@netvision.net.il Website: www.tantur.org

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