

For some years now I've been bringing students from Assumption with me to visit Israel. The Assumptionists have a place in Jerusalem where we can stay—it's secure, inexpensive…and wonderfully located just outside the walls of the Old City. It serves as our base as we hike around the city. We visit the chief sites, especially those there linked to the Biblical texts—the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the Western Wall, the Temple Mount-- places the students have all heard of, but which come awesomely alive as they walk about that city so dense with history. Right on our property in Jerusalem, for instance, there is a stone stairway, part of an ancient walkway between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives; it dates to the time of Jesus and was certainly used by him as he made his frequent treks between the Mount of Olives and the Temple Mount just opposite.

It does something to you when you are brought to see that the scriptural stories are tied to events as real as those stones right now under your own two feet.

We spend about a week in Jerusalem, but we also rent a van and spend another week or so on the road. Israel is a small country, hardly the size of New Jersey, so in a week's time we can cover a major part of it and acquire at least an initial sense of the lay of the land. It's not only the trek between Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives, then, but the long hike from Nazareth south to Bethlehem or east to Capernaum or north to Caesarea Philippi… Or when Jesus and a few of his disciples went "up a very high mountain" where he was transfigured, it was Mount Tabor, which perhaps isn't very big at all by American standards, but which is remarkably visible

from places all over the northern part of the country. A little bit of geographical experience there allows all sorts of Biblical events to take on an entirely new clarity in the mind's eye. Scripture ceases to function as a sort of myth and becomes instead what it is meant to be, an account of real events. The faith ceases to be a more or less abstract set of beliefs and becomes instead an attunement to what actually happened…and to what *is* happening. So for example, Genesis tells the story of Abraham's two sons, Ishmael, son of Sarah's maidservant, and Isaac, Sarah's son and the inheritor of the promise made to Abraham. Ishmael was eventually sent off and lived separated from Isaac, but returned once, on the occasion of Abraham's burial. That was four thousand years ago, but *today*, at the tomb of Abraham in Hebron, about thirty miles south of Jerusalem, the sons of Isaac—the Jews—are there, and are there every day, present at their father's final resting place, and facing them, on the opposite side, are the sons of Ishmael, the Arab Muslims, present every day, and in no easy relationship with their Jewish brother. Isaac and Ishmael are still there. In Israel, history does not flow off and away into the past but gathers, like the bitter salts of the Dead Sea, the lowest point of the face of the earth, into which the Jordan has flowed for millennia but out from which there is no egress.

The sheer presence of the Jews back in their land after two thousand years of exile (and after the nightmare culmination of Modernity that is the Holocaust)…their dazzling living presence there, speaking and singing Hebrew again as a living language, makes one feel in his bones the stunning reliability of the Biblical word.

It's deep and serious stuff…but we have a heap of fun in the process. Floating on the Dead Sea, driving through mountain passes in the southern desert, peering from Israel down into Syria or Lebanon, swimming in the Sea of Galilee or having picnic on the Mount of Beatitudes… I haven't gotten tired of it yet after all these years. My experience there has significantly altered my grasp of the faith; my hope in making this trip again and again is that it will touch my students as well.

Fr. Barry