

It's almost a year since Revd Terry and I led a pilgrimage to Israel. In a few weeks we are having a reunion lunch together for all the pilgrims who are free and able to come.

As well as the joy of getting together it will be interesting to hear what has made any lasting impression. For me, various places we visited come to mind as we read the Canticle at morning prayer on Tuesdays.

- 1 The wilderness and the dry land shall rejoice,\*  
the desert shall blossom and burst into song.
- 2 They shall see the glory of the Lord,\*  
the majesty of our God.
- 7 For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,\*  
and streams in the desert;

I love the imagery of the wilderness blossoming and streams in the desert and it reminds me of two places in particular.



The first is En Gedi. It is well below sea level, incredibly hot, dry and dusty. The pathway leads through the nature reserve to this wonderful waterfall and pool. A few of the group went down and took off their shoes and waded about.



The second is the view point overlooking St. Georges monastery in Wadi Qelt. I remember getting out of the coach and feeling the heat like a blow. I planned for us to read the wilderness canticle while standing at this spot.

Look how barren it is, yet down in the valley is a stream and greenery. This is very, very likely to be the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23) and this gorge is the pathway from Jerusalem down to Jericho, the scene of the story of the Good Samaritan.

The two pictures I've chosen illustrate something about visiting Israel and about our Gospel reading.

Some people think that Elijah hid in a cave where this monastery was built and this is the Kerith brook where he was fed by ravens.

Some people say Elijah's "Kerith brook" was Ein Gedi, east of the Jordan.

The truth is they don't really know BUT if you can claim a biblical event connected to your monastery or visitor centre or church then pilgrims will come and not to be too cynical about it, there's money to be made.

It's typical of Israel that there are disputes about exactly where something happened (the crucifixion is another one and the transfiguration) and it's typical of the Christian Faith that there are disputes about what Jesus said and what it means.



There's little doubt that Jesus' conversation "who do people say that I am" took place here among the pagan temples where Pan was worshipped. You can see a niche carved in the rock where an image would have been.

Here is an illustration of how it might have looked.



Jesus asks the question – who do people say that I am?

Simon Peter has a moment of clarity and understanding, a Holy Spirit inspired leap of faith. You are the Messiah the son of the living God. In his response Jesus says And I tell you that you are Peter,<sup>[b]</sup> and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades<sup>[c]</sup> will not overcome it.

There are two broad understandings of what this means.

The Theology of the Catholic church is build upon the authority given to Peter and passed on apostolically from pope to pope to the present day. The church is built upon the authority of leadership.

The understanding of the Protestant church is that the truth about Jesus is the rock on which we are built. That He is Messiah, the Son of the living God.

We could spend some interesting time discussing the theological debates of the church, but I'm not sure it would take us anywhere. Perhaps a better question would be.

Who is Jesus to you?

C.S.Lewis makes the point that Jesus himself doesn't leave any room for bland statements about Jesus being a great teacher, or a moral guide. We either think his claims and statements are completely mad or accept the truth of what he said and claimed to be.

If we accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour how does that impact each day? Each moment?

Brother Lawrence tells us that we must empty ourselves of everything so that Christ has the supremacy in our lives.

But what does that actually mean? I think the example of St.Peter is a useful guide this morning because not long afterwards

*Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things*

*<sup>22</sup> Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"*

*<sup>23</sup> Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."*

Following his revelation that Jesus was the Messiah, Peter continued to blunder in his faith seeking to impose his version of things on Jesus.

We visited the High Priests house and in the courtyard is a sculpture of Peter denying he knew Jesus. Linda read the account of that night and almost got through it before the emotion of the reading and the place caught up with her.



But we also visited the lake shore and the place Peter was restored. Here we shared an imaginative re-telling of that scene and I read it and I nearly got through it without the emotion catching up with me.

What we share in common with St.Peter and as followers of Jesus Christ are the times we failed.



We failed to follow his teaching.  
We failed to adopt the same love and compassion.  
We imposed on the faith and the church our version of what it should be (just like Peter tried to do on Jesus).  
We allow ourselves to be motivated by deep inner impulses we barely recognise but are not Christ like.

It reminds me of a line from a worship song "a thousand times I've failed" and I could add from our liturgy: "in thought and word and deed"

But the lyricist had Jesus in mind when writing the words...

A thousand times I've failed  
Still Your mercy remains  
And should I stumble again  
I'm caught in Your grace.

And perhaps the lyricist has read Brother Lawrence because later in the song writes "I give you control, my heart and my soul, consume me from the inside out Lord"

I have a longing to see the wilderness of pain and hurt and loneliness and failure transformed, blossoming through forgiveness and acceptance.

I want to see the glory of the Lord and the Majesty of our God evident in the transformation of our lives, of this church building and in this community.

But it won't be by imposing my ideas or whatever authority I might think I have, but by the clear acknowledgment that Jesus is Lord, his purposes are our only concern and that it's only by allowing Him to live in me that we shall see His kingdom come  
Let us pray.