

BIBLE LANDS STUDY TOUR

by *Eileen O'Dea*

Recently, I was privileged to travel with a wonderful group of fellow Christians on a Bible Lands Study Tour led by Father Michael Trainor. We had a few days in Rome, including guided tours of the Vatican Museum, the Catacombs and the Colosseum. These tours were all very crowded but packed full of information. It was great getting to know our fellow travellers during meal times. The vino helped.

Our night flight to Israel gave us the bonus of witnessing sunrise over snow capped mountains. This was very different from leaving South Australia on a very hot day!

Staying on the Sea of Galilee was very relaxing. The trip on "Jesus's Boat" was a highlight of the tour. As I closed my eyes, it was easy to feel Jesus and his disciples nearby, especially when Fr Trainor was reading the Bible story of Peter walking on the water.

On the visit to Tel Dan, walking among the gum trees reminded me of south western Western Australia. However, the big difference is the presence of another (unfriendly) country only a few miles away. We visited lots of old places, not just hundreds of years old as would be the case here, but up to three thousand years old and in ruins. All that history was amazing. Masada and Herodium were two which I particularly remembered.

Nazareth is now a big city, but at its centre lies Nazareth Village which is as it was in Jesus's day. There was a carpenter's shop and a flock of twenty or so biblical sheep which were quite different from our large mobs of sheep.

We moved onto Jerusalem where the Notre Dame Hotel felt very much like Rome.

I understand it is owned by the Vatican. There was so much to see in the walled city. I was impressed by all the markets with fresh fruit and vegetables, but not so impressed with the butcher shops which are so different to ours. There were big slabs of meat, offal and tripe with no refrigeration. There are so many churches within the city's walls and the highlight of the tour was Mass in the Holy Sepulchre. It was a very special experience. The inner chamber was tiny and only seven people could fit into it, the remainder of us watched from the outer chamber. Whilst we were in Jerusalem, George Bush was there along with lots of armed soldiers and several times we had to travel the long way around them. Our visit to the Church of All Nations for Mass, joined by a couple of French ladies was another great joy. We visited several different churches, synagogues and the ladies section of a Muslim mosque. We had prayerful times whilst on the bus whilst travelling with readings, prayers and singing.

I went on another visit with a small group to where horses were washed in Jesus's time. We went down lots of steps and past many alley ways. I would have got lost if I had been on my own!

We visited Bethlehem on 6th January which is Greek Orthodox Christmas Day. We had the extra joy of seeing a parade of very happy children and the clergy in great procession. This made up for the delay getting into the church. We still had time afterwards for shopping in the tourist traps. I still spent my money, knowing these people need all the help they can get.

We travelled down to Beersheba and were delayed on route, but that made for an interesting experience. On the way, we passed some bigger fields or paddocks which had been formed by the Bedouins. We also saw tiny vineyards and smaller fields which are more like our farming area. These people work their vineyards with a donkey and consequently, they comprise just a few vines, so different from our wine growing areas.

We drove around Beersheba which is a very modern city. There is a rail line to Tel Aviv. We visited the world heritage site, Avdat National Park in the middle of the desert. There had been a busy Nabatean city called Ein Avdat there. It was interesting to see a wine press from the year 98AD. Brother John May, a fellow traveller, told us what most likely happened to the grapes to make wine. The park is part of the "Spice Route" or rather the "Incense Route" starting in Oman and Yemen in 2,400 BC through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Negev to part of Gaza. I have so many memories of different places on the tour.

The Gospel readings are now taking on new meaning for me, especially the transfiguration. The Basilea is just so beautiful and has a 'presence'. I remember the scary ride up and back in the taxi over a narrow road with too many tight bends for busses.

The friendship of fellow pilgrims, as I suppose we were best described, was wonderful and helped me get over the long airplane journey and the long periods waiting around at airports. However, I am pleased to be home in our 'lucky country