

Jesus IN HIS Homeland

Words by Joy Adan

Before the sun rises, there is a solemn silence that permeates the Old City. The chaotic crowds that bustle through the streets of Jerusalem by day are still fast asleep. A small group of pilgrims carry a wooden cross through Via Dolorosa and as the first morning light hits and the cool morning air dissolves, they enter the Holy Sepulchre and bow low before the scene of Calvary.

For **Jason Gereis**, this early morning walk through cobblestone streets while praying the Stations of the Cross was unlike anything he had ever encountered before. Jason first visited the Holy Land with his parents when he was seven years old, but returns decades later, bringing his own children along for the experience. This time, stepping into the same spot where Jesus was crucified and laying his hand on the indentation where Jesus' head would have laid in the tomb, had both a physical and spiritual effect on him.

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"I didn't know what I was expecting," Jason says. "But it made me shudder. I felt as if there was an earthquake happening, a movement - I thought it was my imagination running wild. We had the whole church to ourselves. I touched the spot where Jesus' head laid, and the same thing happened again." The scent of myrrh, the candlelight, and the freedom of walking around the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the quiet of the morning without the usual crowds made it all the more moving for Jason and his family.



Via Dolorosa

"It was the best experience I could have ever had," he says. "I wanted to show my kids Jerusalem - it's the place where Jesus walked and it's a fabulous place to be. I think emotionally, we were all touched by the experience. To me, touching something that our Lord has, and has risen from, you know, that puts a full stop on my faith."

Teacher and father, **Anthony Gordon**, "felt a sense of warmth" in the tomb. It was one of many places during his pilgrimage where he felt a powerful encounter with the person of Jesus of Nazareth; "People who've been to the Holy Land constantly talk about the Scriptures coming alive and the encounter with Jesus. Now I understand what they mean."

The journey through the Holy Land follows the chronological footsteps of Jesus' birth, ministry, death and resurrection, starting in Bethlehem, then through Jordan and Israel visiting landmarks made familiar through stories in scripture, before concluding in Jerusalem, where Jesus delivered His Great Commission at the Chapel of the Ascension.

"It's good to always be reminded that He really lived here in these places, that He performed miracles, told us the parables, taught us about God the Father, the Spirit, and Himself," Anthony says. "These places are tangible, you can touch it, feel it, smell it."



Church of Saint Peter in Gallicantu, Jerusalem

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In the centre of Lake Galilee, the engines of the pilgrims' private 'Jesus Boat' come to a stop, allowing the pilgrim group to float in tranquillity and celebrate Mass in the same place where Jesus calmed the storm. "Coming here with a really good spiritual director and excellent guides who are bringing out the spiritual and cultural significance of each place, tying it back to scripture, it's such a dynamic way of exploring and experiencing faith," says Anthony.

The gentle breeze and lull of the same waves Jesus would have once walked on provide a welcome pause on a warm day. So too, does the opportunity for a timeout on the Mount of Beatitudes and in the Garden of Gethsemane. Leaning against the gnarled trunk of an olive tree, pilgrims sit and soak in their surrounds; the heat of the afternoon sun, the bright purple bellflowers and pink Jerusalem sage that adorn the garden beds, the distant hum of the crowds that are just streets away.

"You're pinching yourself that you're here. We're in chaos here in the middle of Jerusalem in this busy town, but it's strange, there's a sense of peace and tranquillity," he says. "You're moved by an overwhelming need to say 'thank you'. I know that this is an experience we'll share going into the future, this experience of deepening our faith and our love of the Scriptures and our love of Christ. It's a real honour to have my own faith nourished in such a deep way."

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Anthony at the Sea of Galilee



Mass afloat the Sea of Galilee

