

Meeting God in the Holy Land

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[0 : 00] Antje, despite having a Dutch name, is actually from Switzerland. She has a... she's just completing tomorrow... She's convocating from Rita with a Master of Arts in...

Theological Studies. Theological Studies. She has a background in medieval literature. And she's struggling with the difficult choice of doing her PhD at...

Oxford or Cambridge. Well, who want her? But I think Dr. Packer, I think you may have had some influence. She's living at Oxford.

But if you want to put in a prayer for her, she's just flown back to Switzerland to compete for a scholarship to Oxford. So that would be a real blessing, because we all know that studies and life are expensive.

And we need talented, resourceful Christian academics. So that would be wonderful. She is here today to share with us Meeting God in the Holy Land, Evangelical Exploration.

[1 : 03] And I just... I know having spoken to her, she's got a very interesting way about her. And I ask you to sit back, do it with your seatbelt, check, or be prepared for 40 minutes of exciting endeavors.

Thank you so much. Thank you, John. Thank you, John. I'd just like to start my talk mentioning that I was able to go to the Holy Land last June because of a bursary from Dr. John Conway.

And this presentation is in memory of him. Protestants do not go on pilgrimage.

Those are the words of a friend of mine, Jacques, newly retired after more than 30 years of pastoral ministry in French-speaking countries. When I told my friend that I had gone to Israel in order to research pilgrimage, his uneasy response was unsurprisingly similar to the ones that I had received from quite a number of evangelicals.

Of course, Protestants go to Israel, Palestine on biblical tours, or as tourists, walking where Jesus walked, seeing what Jesus saw, as they wander around different historical sites as part of a study trip.

[2 : 32] While ignoring the ideology of pilgrimage, Protestants are often made uncomfortable with references to holy sites and even to the holy land.

They are unsure about the erecting of churches and shrines over every place that claims historical significance, with the ornate nature of churches, the lighting of candles, and the incense that draws people in.

Without forgetting to mention the great number of people rushing in, in order to kneel, often with struggle, touching with sensuality, kissing with emotion, embracing fully the sacredness of the place.

This presentation will address the hesitancy that some Protestants have towards pilgrimage, from two different angles. The first part will be historical, tracing the concerns that people who have come before us expressed towards pilgrimage.

And the second part will tackle a reconsideration of pilgrimage in light of contemporary theologians, people who live in the land, and my own experience of pilgrimage.

[3 : 45] And so I'd like to start us off with a search on Google that I did. And so when you search Protestant pilgrimage on Google, you have 500,000 entries.

And the second entry is, why are Catholics better at pilgrimage than Protestants? And when we search Catholic pilgrimage, we have 16 million entries.

And Anglican pilgrimage, just for us at St. John's, 900,000 entries. And so let's start with this historical approach.

So to enlighten my friend Jacques, weariness of pilgrimage predates the Reformation. Gregory of Nyssa, from the 4th century, the Cappadocian father, addressed in a letter to a friend the question

of divine presence in a divine earthly place by asking whether God dwells in one place more than in any other.

Gregory showed how the very definition of a holy place points to the divine presence in a specific space. And he pointed at the fact that the essence of pilgrimage is the encounter with the divine in such a place.

[5 : 03] Gregory affirmed that thus there is no contemplative value in visiting the Holy Land. He wrote, Wherefore, all ye who fear the Lord, praise him in the places where you now are.

Change of place does not affect any drawing nearer unto God. But wherever thou mayst be, God will come to thee. If the chambers of thy soul be found of such a sort that he can dwell in thee and walk in thee.

For Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century Cistercian abbot, going on pilgrimage is leaving behind one's own responsibility for the sake of one's spiritual comfort.

It is a misunderstanding of Christ's call to follow him. In a letter, he admonished the abbot of St. John's of Chartres. I agree that it may be a good thing for a man who strives for perfection to leave his own country according to these words, Go forth out of thy country and from thy kinsfolk.

But I do not see how it follows that you are justified in dissenting those who have been entrusted to your care. Why do you want to do so?

[6 : 25] Are you attracted by the prospect of being free from the burden of responsibility? But charity-seekers not its own. That the pleasant prospect of peace and leisure beckon you?

But you would be obtaining it at the cost of others. How can anyone who prefers his own quiet to the common good possibly say, with truth, For me, life means Christ and death and death and death is a prize to win.

So this suspicion towards pilgrimage that still permeates Protestant circles find also and mainly hits roots in the categorical views of the reformers.

the 16th, late 15th, early 16th century reformer Martin Luther in his letter to the Christian nobility of the German nation written in 1520 wrote, All pilgrimages should be dropped.

There is no good in them. No commandment enjoins them. No obedience attaches to them. Rather, do these pilgrimages give countless occasions to commit sin and to despise God's commandment.

[7 : 46] One of Luther's chief reasons for advocating the abolition of pilgrimages is because of its close affiliation with the theology of merits and work, which he calls works righteousness.

Pilgrimages undertaken as a form of penance or in a fulfillment of a vow are seen as meritorious works, which ought to be rewarded with grace.

He also objected to focusing on particular geographical locations, addressing an eschatological problem. Since Christ's coming, God is no longer confined to one place.

He denounced the villainy which he wrote lured us to Rome, Compostela and Jerusalem, thinking up one pilgrimage after another. This is where the people were to go and pray just as though we could not find God at home, in our bedroom, wherever God happened to be.

Remaining in one's own parish meant embracing God's revealed eschatology and sacramentality as one participated in the life of the church through baptism, the Eucharist, and as the people of God.

[9 : 06] Like Bernard, Luther also pointed to a pilgrimage as fostering escapism from one's true duties of the Christian life. John Calvin follows Luther's footsteps and comments thoroughly on the veneration of relics as a purpose of pilgrimage in his treatises on relics of 1543.

Pilgrimages and relics, according to Calvin, take the Christian's heart away from the ways in which God chose to reveal himself. He wrote, But the first abuse, and as it were, beginning of the evil, was that when Christ ought to have been sought in his word, sacraments, and spiritual influences, the word, after its want, clung to his garments, vests, and swedling clothes, and thus, overlooking the principal matter, followed only its accessory.

As Graham Tomlin underlines in his article, Protestants and Pilgrimage, the main attacks that Luther and Calvin made towards pilgrimage denounced the abuses connected to it rather than pilgrimage itself.

They called for the ethical responsibility behind pilgrimage as corruption has deeply infiltrated the pilgrimage industry, pointing to the open-hearted nature of faith as vulnerable to exploitation.

Thus, Luther added, after saying that all pilgrimages should be dropped, that if one desires to go to the Holy Land not for the sake of good works or to fulfill a vow, but out of curiosity for the land, one

may receive the authorization from one's bishop.

[11 : 06] For his part, Gregory of Nyssa, after having visited the Holy Land on a diplomatic mission, admitted that when I saw, he writes, when I saw and felt the holy places, I became filled with such a great joy that words cannot describe it.

As he met good and pious people on his journey, and saw the Lord's grace towards them, his heart rejoiced. Gregory was deeply encouraged by the piety he saw in the encounters he had made. So these different perspectives showed a tension that inhabits the very concept of pilgrimage, which is also illustrated in the Bible itself. Whereas in the Old Testament, pilgrimage was ritualized and formalized, taking time out of one's daily activities to recenter one's life on God, the New Testament's theological framework points at Jesus as the fulfillment of the significance of Jewish pilgrimages.

Christ, the incarnate one, became flesh and tabernacled among us. As Andrew Lincoln writes, the goal of pilgrimage, temple, worship, has been transformed Christologically.

Jesus is the true place of worship, and so to go on pilgrimage is to come to Jesus. Therefore, pilgrimage in the New Testament perspective has become a metaphor for the Christian journey after Christ.

[12 : 47] With all the eschatological implications that the metaphor contains, human beings, embodied as they are, still feel the need to identify themselves with places and things, especially significant in their own narrative.

Eugene Peterson in *The Wisdom of Each Other* writes, I am more and more convinced that holiness infiltrate a place.

In such places, I always have a sense of homecoming, heaven coming. We necessarily live much of our lives in exile, so to be able to spot the people and places that re-establish our true identity is so important.

in the second part of this presentation, I will attempt to show that pilgrimage, bearing in mind the tension it entails, has a legitimate place in the spiritual life of evangelicals who live in a post-modern context where experience, all things visual, and the communal aspects of places and things are prevailing.

I began my research looking at the importance of place in pilgrimage, engaging with the work of modern scholars and not so modern ones, as you can tell.

[14 : 19] But once I found myself in Israel and Palestine last June, I realized that pilgrimage was not so much about place, but about people.

I began to see the importance of listening to the narratives of the people of the land, which led me to carry on interviews. I also realized that researching pilgrimage in the Holy Land meant that I could not escape but being my own first case study.

Taking that into account, the three things that I will explore are, first of all, pilgrimage as a journey unto God, second, pilgrimage as journeying with the people living in the land, and finally, the Holy Land as a paradigm for Christian unity.

When reading the N.T. Wright's book, *The Way of the Lord*, where he reflects on his own time in the Holy Land, I echoed strongly with his analysis that evangelicals are slowly coming to terms with the sacramental nature of God's created order.

Discovering God's presence, not only in the word, but also through the word. Whereas some places remain special, as they've been trodded upon by the incarnate one, or marked by others who, indwelt by the spirit, lived a life of faith, the God of Abraham claimed the entire world to be his own.

[16 : 03] Whether one worships him in the market in Bethlehem, or at the St. John's service, here, another locus of God's created space, and another moment of God's created time, has been claimed as his own.

A Christian life, which can be equated to a pilgrimage, just takes place in the now and not yet reality of the kingdom. As disciples of Christ, we live in the tension of the invitation of the angel of the Lord in the Gospel of Matthew.

Come and see the place where he lay, and the proclamation that he is not here, for he has risen. With a teleological and eschatological intent in mind, the act of pilgrimage illustrates humanity's trajectory, which is set, by Christ's self-emptying and incarnation, and his subsequent return to the Father.

We have been given a purpose, we hold on to our eternal hope, and as we live cruciform lives here on earth, as we follow Christ, we long for the day when we will be joined with him in heaven. and so the primary understanding of pilgrimage in the medieval church was this teleological journey, a biblical concept of Christians as exiles, pilgrims, who travel the world towards the heavenly Jerusalem.

[17 : 39] The Christian is endowed with a travel plan, a meaningful destination to reach. pilgrimage. The medievalist D. Dias calls it life pilgrimage, which is the overarching theological concept of a multifaceted understanding of pilgrimage by the medieval church.

William Langland, in his 14th century satire of popular religious culture, *Piers Plowman*, affirmed, for pilgrims are we all.

According to Dias, the central non-negotiable expression of life pilgrimage was to live in daily obedience to God in the place of one's calling, resisting sin and serving others, whether as laborers, lord of the manor, merchant, or priest.

Life pilgrimage as daily obedience, journeying towards the heavenly Jerusalem, is thus the canopy under which other pilgrimages are undertaken.

as a small case study, Marjorie Kemp, who is an early 15th century lay woman, whose life of devotion is recounted in her autobiographical book of Marjorie Kemp, embodies the integration of pilgrimage in one's own spiritual life and its purpose.

[19 : 06] book of Marjorie's book of Marjorie's book of Marjorie's book of Marjorie's book of Marjorie's response to the Holy Land illustrates how one's devotion could be to see this earthly city, Jerusalem, above the city of heaven.

Marjorie's response to the Holy Land illustrates how one's devotion can be deepened by encountering the place where God became incarnate, facing in an embodied way the life of Christ. She remembers, then the friars lifted up a cross and led the pilgrims about from one place to another, where our Lord had suffered his pains and his passions, every man and woman bearing a wax candle in their hand.

And the friars, always as they went about, told them what our Lord suffered in every place. And the foresaid creature wept and sobbed so plentifully as though she had seen our Lord with her bodily eye suffering his passion at that time.

Marjorie's experience of Jerusalem led her to a depth of contemplation which would be formative for the rest of her life as she embraced the mystical life.

[20 : 37] We are told that she had such very contemplation in the sight of her soul as if Christ had hung before her bodily eye in his manhood. At the end of her trip, Marjorie was reminded by the voice in her heart which she interpreted as the Holy Spirit that the spiritual experiences that she had in the Holy Land would not stop once away from the country but that Christ's presence was wherever she was.

The theme of meeting the people of the land is seen even as early as the 5th century. Some of you may know Algeria who was probably a nun from Spain and is one of the first Christian pilgrims that we can read about.

In her account of a diary of a pilgrimage probably written for some religious women in Galicia in the first part of the 5th century, Algeria traced her journey in the Holy Land as she lived in Jerusalem for three years as a pilgrim.

Algeria was very conscious of the monastic milieu in Jerusalem and by her writings we are made aware with precision of the liturgical life that was lived there.

Algeria's pilgrimage in the Holy Land resembled much Marjorie's one as her main purpose was to vivify and strengthen her faith in the truth of scriptures by being present in the places where God revealed himself to humanity.

[22 : 26] Whereas Marjorie's emphasis was on places and her own spiritual experience of these, Algeria intentionally sought to meet those who inhabited these places and pray with them as according to her they are the ones who best exemplify the Christian life.

With joy she told that quite by chance they had to stay at a resting station of Arabia for the epiphany where she interacted much with a saintly bishop.

A truly holy man of God she wrote a former monk who had been raised from childhood in a cell and is therefore as learnt in the scriptures as he is above reproach in his way of life.

Azizuria undertook to visit all the places of significance in the Bible from the Israelites journey out of Egypt to the apostles missionary enterprises.

She expressed a great thankfulness for those holy people she met. While visiting some Mesopotamian monks on the footsteps of Abraham in Haran and Jiria wrote we stayed there for two days on account of the martyr's feast and in order to visit the holy men who consented very readily to receive me to exchange greetings and to speak.

[23 : 51] although I was not deserving of it. This theme of meeting people of the land is also at the heart of an ecumenical institute in Jerusalem and so when I was in Israel I spent a week with a group from Tentour Ecumenical Institute and this is where I met Frederick Mason a 40 years old Frenchman who is the program director there.

Frederick has lived in the Middle East for more than 15 years. According to him pilgrims who come to the holy land just as Ejiira should have in mind the people who inhabit it.

The programs that Tentour runs does attempt to expand the pilgrims experience by inviting them to discover who are the people who live in Israel or Palestine nowadays.

But also through some educational courses that explore the different faith present in the land as well as the different churches of the East their liturgy their history and their daily reality.

The holy land is not a disincarnate land Frederick said with a glimmer in his eyes which means that a land without people to vivify it is either a land that is slowly dying or a land that is being taken over by nature again.

[25 : 25] The 40 year old man continues a land with its culture its civilization is a land which is inhabited by people and people have a story and these people have a daily life which implies daily struggles and thus we automatically reach some points of conflict.

Frederick underlines that we are all witnesses of a land that is shared referring to the earth globally. Tensions appear when we realize that there is difficulty in sharing.

He says that the tension that the pilgrim encounters when coming to the holy land is between Palestinians who were disposses of their land and Israelis who are trying to get more and more land.

While acknowledging the tension it is however difficult not to take sides. As this quotation found in St. George Cathedral in Jerusalem says pray not for Arab nor Jew for Palestinian nor Israeli but pray rather for ourselves that we might not divide them in our prayers but keep them both together in our hearts.

This is the philosophy Tentour Ecumenical Institute has been trying to adopt this past 40 years. to meet the people who inhabit the land learn about their history their faith and their culture while putting aside the fear of the unknown.

[27 : 11] Frederick explains thus that for him pilgrimage is to leave one's comfort zone to meet Christ who takes us further in our understanding of life.

By leaving one's home when he's faced with the unknown and this unknown is God calling us to discover him a bit more. Frederick concludes what if the unknown was the stranger through whom God revealed himself to us.

While traveling throughout Israel Palestine I had planned to reconnect with a family friend in a small Palestinian village of Cana for a couple of days and I actually ended up spending an entire week there.

I was warmly welcomed in Sally's family who live in a tall building at the top of one of the hills that make up the topography of Cana.

Sally's mother Rashi lives on the ground floor. One of his brothers lives on the first floor, another brother on the second floor and Sally and his wife live on the third floor.

[28 : 29] The fourth floor, half built, is there for any other siblings or grandchildren who would want to live with them. As I found myself living with this couple and their Muslim family, I got to experience the other, the unknown, the stranger that Frederick Mason calls instrument of God's revelation.

being there in the season of Ramadan, at the end of each day, I was invited to partake in Iftar, the breaking of the fast at sunset.

The whole family is seated around the table. The children can hardly hold themselves still as they come off and on their chairs playing with each other.

It is 7.51 in the evening. There are at least two dozen of small dishes on the table, no plates, just a spoon in front of each person. Rashi, the grandmother and the eldest in the room, has a plate with three dates in front of her.

The Mwudzin, the man who calls Muslim to prayer. Abid, the son-in-law of Rashi, announces the breaking of the fast. Rashi's deep and beautiful voice resonates in the entire neighborhood.

[29 : 55] Rashi slowly picks a date and meticulously opens it. As soon as she brings it to her mouth, the meal can start.

The tension on people's faces gives way to mouth full and glimmering eyes. As I partake in their meal, they tell me that now I am family.

The conversation moves from one side of the table to the other. I recognize a few Arabic words here and there, which at times gives me some context, but most of the time I am fully unaware of the discussions.

But in that moment, it does not matter. I sense God's presence as I share in the joys and afflictions of those who have welcomed me, the stranger, into their family.

As I get to spend time with the other, I am relentlessly reminded that God reveals himself through the stranger. One late afternoon, Valerie, Sally's wife, and I leave behind the poverty of the Palestinian village of Cana as she drives me to a Jewish town not too far away, which very much reminded me of a nice residential area in the south of France.

[31 : 23] She stops in front of a nice villa. We knock on the front door to see Miriam open it.

Miriam's husband, Danny, sitting down in the living room, slowly comes towards us, dragging his feet, and he welcomes us.

Danny is in his seventies. His grey hair covers two-thirds of his head. His shirt, open a third of the way, lets us witness that Danny is nothing but skin and bone.

He used to be a fine arts professor at a local university. Retirement has proved itself mind consuming. In the sight of an artist, Danny evades all my questions about pilgrimage and living in the Holy Land as a Jew.

Those are questions too big for him to talk about. As I look around a dim living room, sculptures and paintings are everywhere, and each one has its particular place, mostly abstract pieces.

I am led to ask Danny about finding truth in one's art. As we plunge into a discussion about beauty and truth, Danny slowly opens up.

[32 : 43] Looking at me intently, despite a veil in his eyes, the retired professor tells me, the last few years I have had a lot of very difficult questions about this subject, truth, with no answer.

answer. The most difficult thing is that you don't have an answer. And I can't say that I have a telephone to God. You said before that people have access to God, but how do you know?

How do you know? And how do you believe then? After sharing that in his early twenties, he had read the New Testament and had deeply identified with Christ's stories, truth, having been raised in the same Jewish setting than Jesus, Danny goes on saying that later on in life, Johann Sebastian's bar is the closest thing that echoed with how he felt while reading the Gospels.

The painter declares deeply in his thoughts, words, I think rationally there is no difference between experience of art, religion, the spiritual and so on.

But in effect, in life, there is a difference. But sometimes, for a rare moment, you feel this truth, that it's all one, that there is no difference.

[34 : 15] In the great moment in art, it is very near to great moments in other spiritual experiences. Our discussion slowly shifts from truth to knowing oneself.

The intellectual, born in a kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee, has become an agnostic Jew in his older age. With a hint or two of sadness and perplexity in his voice, Danny says, life is very serious, but we become more and more.

Actually. More questions, less answers, and more stupidity of human beings. As I leave the house of Danny and Miriam, I have the sense that I had one of the most meaningful discussions of my entire life.

I pose and thank God for having enabled me to see him in the person of the stranger, Danny, the Jewish agnostic artist. Danny might have seen perhaps a glimpse of the ultimate truth, God, through our conversation, stranger to stranger.

And so, now the last part of the presentation on the Holy Land as a paradigm for Christian unity. Meeting Jews, Muslims, and Christians, whether Israeli, Palestinian, Druzes, or foreigners, makes

the experience of pilgrimage in the Holy Land deeply grounded in the realities of the people who inhabit it.

[36 : 01] Among the Christian community, Jerusalem appears as the microcosm of the church in all its sensibilities. communities. After visiting the Holy Sepulchre, Gregory Faulkner, a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey, who did a doctorate with a focus on Orthodox theology, and who happens to serve as well sporadically as an oblet in a Benedictine monastery, declares with a hint of excitement in his voice.

It's true. I mean, the Holy Sulfur Christ, it's a mess, right? It's just, it's a hot mess. And yet, the Ethiopians and Russians and Belarusians and Italians and French and all come, and you think that this is what the kingdom is like.

It is kind of messy. at least in jerkly form, but from all over, we've come because of Christ. And I think that city we're going to is, we're going to be surprised, you know, at how many of us are there and the beauty of that diversity.

Gregory's openness to the other, his compassionate ear, his desire to understand the cultural and religious context which surrounded him are an invitation to meet the stranger and to try to understand his or her own perspective, which enables one to see beyond the differences, to look at the substance of the faith.

Gregory's research on orthodox theology developed in him a love of the orthodox use of the senses. You kiss the icon, you smell the incense, you taste communion, and you move, you stand, you prostrate.

[37 : 51] As he comments on Protestant churches, the Presbyterian pastor says, we can do our worship and so stay above our necks the whole time.

As he spends time in other traditions, there is something that echoes particularly with him in orthodox churches, the physicality. There is something about physicality being somewhere, touching something, declares Gregory.

While being at the Church of the Agony in Gethsemane, he cannot leave without touching the stone on which Christ would have leaned to pray. And then I thought, I have to touch this stone.

And so I'm very non-Calvinist that way. I really like things, touching things, you know, holy things. And so I knelt down and I touched this cool stone.

And I look up at this fresco of the Lord, praying. And I think, Antier, for me, you did this.

[39 : 03] Right? For me. And it was sweet.

Right? And a little bit. And a bit overwhelming. And I wasn't expecting that. I thought that would happen in Bethlehem.

I thought that would happen in Nazareth. I thought it would happen. Of course, I could just help her. And I'm listening to those. As I was explaining my first visit of the Holy Sepulchre to Gregory, this Presbyterian minister, Benedictine Oblitt, Orthodox admirer, he invited me to look beyond the crowd, beyond the many Russian tourists prostrated on the stone of anointing with shopping bags, beyond the crowd in the place of Calvary, pushing and rushing to be able to place one's hand. Into the hall, touching the stone where the cross was raised. Beyond the voice discontentment as people's touching was longer than they ought to. And beyond the selfie takers.

Gregory mentioned the opportunity to do a night of prayer in the Holy Sepulchre. He told me that every night the Franciscans are allowed to have 25 people remain in the church in order to pray, and so are the Orthodox.

[40 : 34] A week later, I went to knock at the Franciscan sacristy. The priest who opened the door was from Italy. juggling between words in French and Spanish, he understood that I wanted him to say a mass in my name.

I shook my head quite frantically to say no, and after a third attempt, he understood my intention. or nearly did, has he made sure to let me know that the Holy Sepulchre was not a hostel for backpackers, and I would have to pray for the entire night.

A few days later, a Saturday evening, I was back in the Holy Sepulchre. It was right before 9pm.

The guards went around to tell people that the church doors were closing.

A young Franciscan monk checked our identities. The guards locked the heavy doors, and once the old key had turned all the way in the keyhole, a deep silence filled the place.

I found myself praying while walking in the silence of the church. Without the crowd, the church's beauty was wide open to me.

[41 : 55] The icons no longer half of hidden by people passing by could be read as windows into the divine. Through prayers and meditation, I found myself looking at candles burning while kneeling in front of a painting of Christ on the cross, surrounded by a crowd of people.

A few hours later, two Ethiopian Orthodox women were kneeling in that very same place, with hearts full of thankfulness for our Lord's sacrifice.

Before I knew it, it was 11 at night, which meant that it was time for a vigil on Christ's tomb in the Aedical. I found myself kneeling down.

It was the only way three of us could fit in such a tight space. The air was heavy, as if the lantern's flames were jealously consuming it all.

The feeling on my knees, on this hard, stony ground, led me automatically into a prayer of repentance. Silence set in, almost in a ceremonial way, only disturbed by a slow, regular breathing.

[43 : 08] I looked to my left. The fellow, eyes closed in deep meditation, had decided to sit into what seemed an uncomfortable huddled-up position.

I looked to my right, kneeling. The other student from the Pontifical University of Rome was deep in prayer, his lips moving subconsciously.

And here I was, an evangelical Christian, with a mixed Calvinist Reformed Plymouth Brethren background, not to mention an Anglican in the making.

Here I was, a theology student, yes, but indeed not from Rome, from Vancouver's very own Regent College. As I leaned towards the cold marble stone, softened by the touch of countless hands, I responded to the angel of the Lord's call.

Come and see. As I joined my hands and bowed my head, joy overwhelmed me as I sensed the glory of the place. He is not here, for he has risen.

[44 : 19] As the first verse of Psalm 115 resonated in me all night long, not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name, give glory for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness.

I got to witness this verse being lived out by five different communities of the Holy Sepulchre during their Sunday early morning celebration.

The Greek Orthodox started right after midnight with a divine liturgy dedicated to the nativity of St. John's the Baptist. The liturgy lasted for three hours with beautiful chanting from the priest and the people at the edical was filled with a strong smell of incense, while the priests were going back and forth into the Holy Sepulchre with a mechanical movement of the arm, making the terrible chains clank in a surprisingly rhythmical way, composing its own melody.

The Armenian Orthodox liturgy followed less ceremonial, but also with chanting an incense around the tomb and inside the edical. Then the Coptic Orthodox liturgy happened right at the rear of the tomb, where a priest undertook the chanting right by the iron lattice work.

Concretely, the service of louts was being held by the Roman Catholic congregation in a side chapel, while the Ethiopian Orthodox were singing their liturgy in their white clothing, leaning on their prayer sticks in their chapel in the upper part of the Holy Sepulchre.

[45 : 59] All of them were confessing that Christ was not there, in the place celebrated for centuries as the place of his death and resurrection. Indeed, he was not there, for he has risen.

Despite the Holy Sepulchre being often portrayed in the media as a place of discord, videos showing priests arguing, even to the point of coming to blows, a band on YouTube.

But that Sunday morning was a simple illustration of church unity amidst diversity, confessing one and the same Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who was for our sake crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffering death and being buried, rising on the third day and ascending into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

Christ incarnate is the reason, the goal, and the experience of pilgrimage. Christ, who was incarnate in Israel, is now present in all places, whether in Gregory of Nyssa's Cappadocia or in the Cistercian monasteries of 12th century France, in Wittenberg or in Calvin's Geneva, at all times for all people.

Christ incarnate in forming and transforming one's interior pilgrimage, one's moral pilgrimage and place pilgrimage. Christ incarnate in the faces of the land, in the stranger's turned family at the table, breaking the fast, iftar. Christ incarnate in the search for truth of Danny, the Jewish agnostic.

[47 : 49] Christ incarnate in the physicality and non-physicality of Christian denominations, in the prayers of the Roman Catholic seminarians, and in the chanting, icons, and incense abounding in the Holy Sepulchre.

Throughout this pilgrimage in Israel and Palestine, I have met our Lord Jesus Christ, the incarnate one, in expected and not so expected places.

Acknowledging with the empty right that this act of pilgrimage was indeed a metaphor, a sacramental metaphor of the pilgrim's progress from this earthly life to the life that is to come.

And with Aduria, I can attest that pilgrimage, whether to the Holy Land, to one's childhood's home or in one's heart, vivify and confirms one's faith in the truth of Scripture through personal contact with those places marked with the action of God on man, which is indeed in every place where the Spirit of the Lord is.

God bless you.

[49 : 10] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.