

Pilgrimage

Following the Footsteps of Jesus



Five Bible Studies

John Birch

Introduction

The word 'pilgrimage' can mean different things to different people. Some may find, within a period of reflection away from their everyday lives, a way of understanding themselves better, and seeing their relationships, health, hopes and anxieties in a new light perhaps.

If looked at from a spiritual standpoint, for those undertaking a pilgrimage it is generally a journey to a holy place, which may lead to a time of spiritual refreshment, and from which the pilgrim returns home to continue their everyday walk of faith.

There are, of course, many destinations and pilgrimage trails throughout the world, each with their own spiritual and historical significance. Wherever we live, it is possible to take time out of our daily routine and associated stresses, and connect with both God and our inner self, be it at a site connected directly with Jesus' life, one where healing miracles have been recorded, or simply somewhere quiet where time can be spent in contemplation.

Christian pilgrimages have diverse themes, each resonating with different aspects of faith and devotion. Examples might be...

1. Penance and Atonement: Historically, many pilgrims travelled as a form of penance, seeking forgiveness for their sins. This theme still resonates, especially during Holy Week in places like Rome and Jerusalem.
2. Healing: Sites like Lourdes in France and Fatima in Portugal draw pilgrims seeking physical and spiritual healing, inspired by reported miracles and appearances of the Virgin Mary.
3. Devotion to Saints: Many pilgrimages are centred around the tombs and relics of saints. Santiago de Compostela in Spain is a major site where pilgrims honour Saint James the Great.
4. Connection to Jesus's Life: The Holy Land remains a key destination, where pilgrims visit places associated with Jesus's birth, ministry, death, and resurrection, such as Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jerusalem.
5. Marian Pilgrimages: Devotion to Mary leads pilgrims to various Marian shrines, including Guadalupe in Mexico and Medjugorje in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where apparitions are said to have occurred.
6. Spiritual Renewal: Some pilgrimages are about personal spiritual growth and renewal, like walking the Camino de Santiago. The journey itself, with its physical and contemplative aspects, is part of the spiritual experience.

©2024 John Birch. Permission is given to reproduce copies of this Bible Study for individual church usage. If used over several churches, it would be lovely if you could purchase one per church! It should not be republished in any other way or offered for sale without the express permission of the author.

More information about the author and other Bible Study Guides on www.faithandworship.com

Cover picture: An AI generated image of Jesus and followers

A brief history of pilgrimage



Pilgrims from Canterbury, artist unknown

Christian pilgrimage has its origins in the very earliest days of Christianity, probably with Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, and encouraged by church fathers like Saint Jerome.

In the 4th century, after the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, giving a significant boost to pilgrimages, mainly to sites associated with Jesus and the Apostles, Saints and Martyrs.

As Christianity spread, the concept of pilgrimage evolved. By the medieval period, other sites gained prominence. Rome became a significant destination, with the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul drawing pilgrims from all over Europe. Santiago de Compostela in Spain

also rose to prominence in the 9th century, with the shrine of Saint James the Great.

Pilgrimage during the Middle Ages was not just about religious devotion; it was also a penance, a form of atonement for sins. It wasn't without its perils -pilgrims faced dangerous journeys, with bandits and harsh conditions. But the spiritual rewards, both in this life and the next, were deemed worth the risk.

In the Renaissance, pilgrimage declined due to the Reformation. Protestants, including Martin Luther, criticized practices associated with pilgrimage, considering them corrupt and superstitious. Large amounts of money were being made from offering hospitality to pilgrims at vastly inflated rates. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church defended pilgrimage, leading to a revival during the Counter-Reformation.

In time the sites associated with the Celtic saints of the 7th and 8th centuries, Iona, Crouagh Patrick, Lindisfarne and others became places of pilgrimage as people sought contact with the great names of Celtic Christianity.

In the modern era, pilgrimage remains a key aspect of Christian practice, and the advent of modern transportation has made these journeys accessible to more people.

And here we are, with pilgrimage adapting to the 21st century. Digital pilgrimages have emerged, where people engage in virtual tours of sacred sites. Yet, the essence remains the same: a journey of faith, devotion, and spiritual growth.

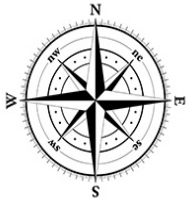
The key sites that we are engaging with in our virtual pilgrimage are busy tourist areas as well as destinations for pilgrims, some busier than others. The route maps are intended purely as a rough indication of where we are going, so please don't be too critical!



The scallop shell is associated with pilgrimage and particularly with the famous Camino de Santiago pilgrimage route in Northern Spain. The scallop shell's origins are linked to a legend about Saint James the Greater. In the legend, a knight was saved from drowning and found covered in scallop shells after a wave brought him to the shore. The knight discovered that the boat was carrying the body of Saint James, and the shells linked the knight to the apostle. The scallop symbol is used in our study.

Contents

Introduction	2
A brief history of pilgrimage	3
Preparation	5
Journeying	9
Arriving	13
Encounters	17
Returning	21
Using the images	25
References	26



Study One

Preparation



Pietro Perugino, *Baptism of Christ, Sistine Chapel, 1482*

Someone said...

'Probably the first time I left Italy was to travel by train to Lourdes. I went with my mother and my grandmother - who was a very religious person - so it was a pilgrimage of sorts. I remember it as a very intense, but beautiful experience.'

(Andrea Bocelli)

Key verse

'And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."'

(Psalm 4:8)

Jesus begins his journey

(Read Matthew 3:1-17)

There was a four-hundred-year silence between the Old and New Testaments, with no new prophets called by God. So, there was a real hunger to hear God's Word again when John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness in Judea talking of the need for baptism of repentance, and the promise of someone greater than him to follow.

Wilderness was an important place in Israel's history, for the giving of the Law, prophesy and the expected messianic delivery. John's message is clear, the 'kingdom of heaven is near'. A similar Hebrew expression means a feeling of reverence and not wishing to blaspheme the name of God.

Jews, even the Pharisees and Sadducees, heard of John's call and in response travelled to the Jordan River, to see what was happening, sense the atmosphere

in that wilderness place, and for many, confess their sins and be baptized.

Twenty-five years or so had elapsed from the time Joseph took his family to Nazareth before Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptised. John showed great humility, knowing he was related by birth, but knowing Jesus' birth and knowledge of Scripture was way beyond his own. However, Jesus wanted to go through that symbolic water, demonstrating his willingness to take on his servant role and identify himself with a sinful human race.

And then God's voice and Spirit confirmed that the silence was now broken with the beginning of Jesus' journey and ministry.

Discussion

- 1: Would John have made a bigger impression if he'd begun his message in the centre of Jerusalem where so many people lived? Why pick the desert or wilderness?
- 2: Jesus' hometown of Nazareth is around 85 miles and several days walking to where John appeared. If that's where he started from, how important must this meeting, and this place, be to him, and us?
- 3: Does Jesus feeling the need to go through a baptism of repentance seem right considering who he is?



Stage 1: Bethany beyond the Jordan



The Jordan Valley, between Beit She'an and Jericho, looking towards Jordan (pic byTango7174)



And so, our pilgrimage begins, hopefully with suitable clothing, footwear, and sun protection! We begin in the Jordan Valley at Al-Maghtas, north of the Dead Sea, and known as 'Bethany beyond the Jordan', 10 km (6.2 mi) southeast of Jericho. It is considered by many Christian denominations to be the location where John the Baptist baptised Jesus (although lacking archaeological evidence).

Do not expect a simple riverbank! This is a Unesco Heritage Site since 2015, with the remnants of a monastery on a mound known as Jabal Mar-Elias (Elijah's Hill) and an area close to the river with remains of churches, baptism ponds and pilgrim

and hermit dwellings. Generations of monks, hermits, pilgrims and priests have stayed in and visit the site, leaving testimony of their devotion and religious activities between the 4th and the 15th century CE.

Sadly, this site is no longer the wilderness area it once was. Several modern churches and chapels have been built in the area, alongside a coach park, gift shop, visitor centre, changing rooms and other tourist facilities!



The Baptism site of Jesus Christ (pic by Farahae)

Discussion

- 4: How important is water to our daily lives, and how does it provide us with spiritual images or feelings?
 - 5: Are what we know as sacred sites spoiled by the remains of ancient, or more recent buildings around them, or can that help in our connecting with their significance faith-wise?
 - 6: Is there a difference between 'spiritual tourism' and 'pilgrimage' or can they overlap?
-



Preparation for the road ahead

(Read Hebrews 10:22-24, Philippians 4:4-9, Isaiah 40:25-31)

For any spiritual journey or pilgrimage that is undertaken, and by whatever method, a certain amount of preparation is desirable to enable us to engage fully with the experience. Being in the right place with God and our fellow travellers is helpful, encouraging one another and not feeling weighed down by our everyday anxieties and baggage.

The writer of Hebrews and Paul in his letter encourage their readers to hold fast to their faith, all that Jesus Christ has done and revealed for them, and don't be anxious, however difficult life might be at this moment.

Draw close to God, sense his presence, be thankful, bring the baggage which is weighing you down and prayerfully leave it at God's feet. Be positive in your thoughts and encourage others who are on this journey.

Isaiah suggests looking outward and upward as you travel, and on a clear night gaze up at the universe of which we are such a small part. Be amazed and thankful that the Creator of all this is concerned about us as individuals, bringing strength to the weary, and power to the weak.

Discussion

- 7: How easy is it to find hope, peace and strength within the busyness and anxieties of a normal day, and if your answer is 'very' what advice could you offer?
- 8: What do you see when you look up at the night sky on a clear evening, and what does this say to you?
- 9: Isaiah appreciates that to some, seeing the path God wants them to follow is difficult, but this is not because God has forgotten them. Has this happened to you, and did the picture clear?
- 10: Do you have a favourite place that you go to if in need of a time of quiet reflection, or spiritual refreshment?

Someone said...

I think everybody has their own way of looking at their lives as some kind of pilgrimage. Some people will see their role as a pilgrim in terms of setting up a fine family, or establishing a business inheritance. Everyone's got their own definition. Mine, I suppose, is to know myself.

(Eric Clapton)

As we've lost this idea of pilgrimage, we've lost this idea of human beings walking for a very, very long time. It does change you.

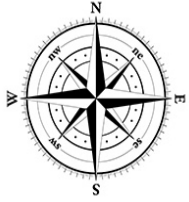
(Robyn Davidson)

Key verse

'those who hope in the Lord
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.' (Isaiah 40:30)

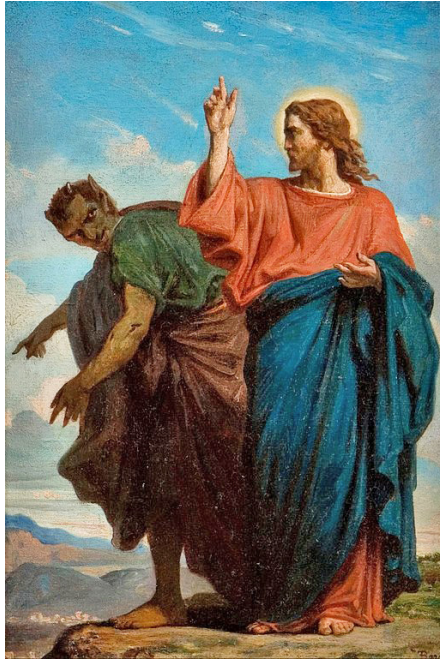
Takeaway

Have you one particular place in this world you would love to visit before your travelling days are over, and why?



Journeying

Study Two



Félix Joseph Barrias, *Temptation of Christ*, 1860

Someone said...

'A pilgrim is a wanderer with a purpose.'

(Peace Pilgrim)

Key verse

'Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.'

(Matthew 4:11)

Obstacles on the road

(Read Matthew 4:1-11)

When we read Matthew's account of Jesus being led by the Spirit into the wilderness soon after his baptism by John, it is likely that the author is reminding his readers of God guiding his people through the wilderness for forty years. Deuteronomy 8:2 encourages Israel to remember how God led them for those difficult years, to test them, and through their struggles teach them that 'man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.'

Now we find Jesus repeating these same words when tempted to turn stone into bread.

Matthew's words also point to Jesus being a God-approved model for believers struggling with life's temptations in their own wilderness situations and give readers a correct understanding of

Jesus' messiahship when compared with contemporary interpretations by political and military leaders of the day.

Following his baptism by John the Baptist, Jesus follows the Spirit's prompting to find a quiet place, which becomes a time of fasting and testing before beginning his public ministry, as had many biblical leaders and prophets before him, such as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David and Job.

Jesus passed the test, particularly when challenged to abuse his position as Son of God and use his unique calling and power for selfish gain, to abuse power as many in the world did and still do.

From the very beginning of his early ministry Jesus had embraced, as one, both kingship and suffering servanthood.

Discussion

- 1: Central to three of the gospel accounts of Jesus' life, why was this wilderness experience so important for him, and how does it speak to you?
- 2: What was so special about a wilderness, a rough and uninhabited area?
- 3: Is it reasonable to suggest that at some point Jesus shared this experience with his disciples, to encourage them in their own spiritual journeys, and if so, should we be open to sharing our own experiences in a positive way with others?



Stage 2: The Mount of Temptation



Mount of Temptation, Jericho (pic by tango7174)

From Al-Maghtas we face a rather circuitous route in our virtual pilgrimage of around 40km (25 miles) to Mount Quruntul, a limestone peak and a short distance north-west of the city of

Jericho, which has dictated the path of travel from Jerusalem and Ramallah to Jericho and the River Jordan since ancient times. The mountain's name has its roots in the Latin word for 40, Quarentena, the length in days of Jesus' fasting and period of temptation.

The easiest option for reaching the summit (around 360m above sea level) is a 5 minute cable car ride from Tel Jericho, or you can opt for a 30 minute trek up a steep path, passing through the cliffhanging Greek Orthodox monastery on the way. Monks and hermits have inhabited this mountain since the early centuries of Christianity, living in natural caves which they turned into cells, chapels and storage rooms.

The present Greek Orthodox Monastery is a 19th century reconstruction of what was originally a hermit-based monastic community and welcomes visitors from all over the world today. On its south side there is a cave-chapel containing a stone upon which, tradition states, Jesus sat during his temptations.

From the summit of Mount Quruntul there is a spectacular view of the Jordan Valley and Dead Sea, along with the winding road along which Jewish priests and Levites would travel when on shift in the Temple. In Jesus' day there were around 12,000 priests and Levites in and around Jericho.



Greek Orthodox Monastery of the Temptation on Mt Quruntul (pic by Alexey Goral)

Discussion

- 4: There is a strong spiritual and historic connection between this mountain and the surrounding area within the Gospel message. Does a historic connection, perhaps in a cathedral or old church, add a spiritual dimension when you visit one?
 - 5: If this indeed is the mountain Jesus was taken to, what might be going through his mind as he looked down on the Jordan Valley and those walking along the road to Jerusalem?
 - 6: How important is taking time out now and then from the daily rush and routine of life, to take stock, unclutter, and centre thoughts and actions on the more important things, physical and spiritual?
-



Overcoming temptation

(Read Mark 4:14-19, James 1:2-4, 1 Timothy 6:7-12)

The temptations of our lives may differ from those described in the Bible, but the overall theme returns us to the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis and those first connections with each other, and with God. In these short readings we take an overview of the distractions in life, where they can lead us, and the importance of facing up to temptations, as Jesus did so memorably.

Mark presents Jesus' interpretation of his parable of a farmer sowing seed. Hearers would have grasped that God was the farmer but may have misunderstood what happened after seed was scattered, as that depends on the soil, or hearer. At this point the story becomes less about farming and more about spiritual life.

Faith needs to be deeply rooted, or we may become like the disciples and so many others who scatter when winds of doubt or fear begin to blow. Faith also needs to overcome temptations such as money and other 'things', the weeds and thorns around that, unchecked, can suffocate.

James and Paul encourage perseverance, not giving up when temptations and trials impact on daily life but growing stronger by facing up to and overcoming difficulties, increasing our spiritual stamina. Paul adds that the world might tempt us into greed of all kinds, but contentment with the basics of life coupled with a strong faith is a target worth aiming for.

Discussion

- 7: Looking at your own spiritual journey, which of those soil types can you relate to?
- 8: How easy is it to get lost in the ways of the world, and which temptations shout loudest?
- 9: You might not be a farmer but if you have a garden, small or large, how would you relate Jesus' parable to caring for it through the seasons?
- 10: Paul talks of godliness and contentment being a 'great gain' to aim for. How do you understand his words?

Someone said...

'Man is a creature who walks in two worlds and traces upon the walls of his cave the wonders and the nightmare experiences of his spiritual pilgrimage.'

(Morris West)

'Religion points to that area of human experience where in one way or another man comes upon mystery as a summons to pilgrimage.'

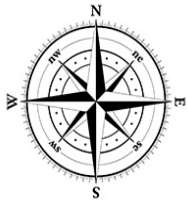
(Frederick Buechner)

Key verse

'Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful. Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop—some thirty, some sixty, some a hundred times what was sown.' (Mark 4:18-20)

Takeaway

How easy is it for you to become distracted, or tempted away, from your own journey of faith, and what might you do to prevent this?



Arriving

Study Three



Harold Copping, *Sermon on the Mount*

Someone said...

'The pilgrim is humble and devout, and human, and charitable, and ready to smile and admire; therefore, he should comprehend the whole of his way, the people in it, and the hills and the clouds, and the habits of the various cities.'

(Hilaire Belloc)

Key verse

'Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.'

(Matthew 5:1-2)

The kingdom is near

(Read Matthew 4:17 - 5:12)

After his time of testing in the wilderness, Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been imprisoned, so it made sense to move away, heading northeast to settle for a while in Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee (4:13), fulfilling Isaiah's prophesy of 'a people living in darkness seeing a great light'.

Walking in the area, Jesus found his first disciples, and as news about him spread so crowds gathered from nearby and further afield, seeking healing and hope from his teaching. The core of Jesus' message was plain, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' (4:17)

So, with a much bigger message to share, Jesus found higher ground where the crowds could gather and hear what we know as the Sermon on the Mount, teaching which has influenced so many, including influential figures

such as Mahatma Gandhi, Leo Tolstoy, and Martin Luther King Jr., whose nonviolent movement was born out of his understanding of what it meant to live out Jesus' words.

What Matthew presents is almost certainly a summary of a longer sermon, as Jesus is known to have spent many hours teaching, and the words we have in Matthew 5-7 can easily be read in thirty minutes. But what Jesus did talk about was kingdom life, with guidance and instruction as to what this might mean for individuals and how it is seen by others.

Some of the blessings might be difficult or uncomfortable to read and understand, unless seen in the context of Jesus' own sacrificial life and ministry.

Discussion

- 1: We might often think of Jesus as continually on the move, but we're told that he lived and made a base for his ministry for a while in Capernaum. How important might that stability have been at this point in Jesus' work?
- 2: Which of the Beatitudes speaks loudest to you, and which are the hardest to understand?
- 3: How do the Beatitudes, or life in the kingdom, compare with life in today's world?



Stage 3: The Mount of Beatitudes



Mount of Beatitudes (pic by Olevy)



There's quite a distance to travel, around 154 km (95 miles) by foot from the second to third stage of our virtual pilgrimage at the Mount of Beatitudes, located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, between Gennesaret and Capernaum.

There are recordings of pilgrimages to here from the 4th century, and remains of an early church and its cistern from that time can be seen, alongside what is left of an early monastery on the hill, which is not too far from the area around Bethsaida where Jesus is believed to have fed the 5000, and overlooks the fields of Gennesaret where Jesus healed many people who had been brought to him, and chastised the Pharisees and teachers (Mark 6:53-56).

The hill would certainly have provided Jesus with ample room for crowds to gather and hear the Sermon on the Mount. Pope John Paul II celebrated a Mass nearby in March 2000, and there was space available for 100,000 people.

At the summit is the Church of the Beatitudes, built in 1938 and designed by the Italian architect Antonio Barluzzi. The church is octagonal, symbolizing the eight Beatitudes, and surrounded by lovely peaceful gardens. In the courtyard in front of the church is a mosaic, depicting justice, prudence, fortitude, charity, faith, and temperance. There is also a modern Christian centre called Domus Galilaeae (House of Galilee), with an adjacent functioning monastery and hostel.



Church of the Beatitudes (pic by jawcey)

Discussion

- 4: Pilgrimage has been an aspect of Christianity since its early days, but not to the extent of some other faiths. Is there a reason for this, or are we missing out today?
 - 5: Jesus gathered crowds around him on a hillside to hear his words. Today we might join a Zoom (or similar) meeting online to hear someone teach. What's the difference for an individual?
 - 6: If you were there, gazing down from the hillside onto the very countryside where Jesus walked, taught and healed, what would be going through your mind, do you think?
-



Walking in the kingdom

(Read Colossians 1:9b-14, Matthew 25:34-40, Matthew 18:1-5)

There is no shortage of Bible verses relating to how we ought to live our lives. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, even in its summary version, is three chapters long, but for Paul as he writes to the believers in Colossae, it is 'living a life worthy of the Lord and pleasing him in every way; bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God...' and this is enabled through the wisdom and understanding that the Holy Spirit gives in their lives, along with the patience to cope with the challenges that lie ahead as they journey together in faith.

The image of 'bearing fruit' reminds us that a young tree once planted needs to become established in good solid ground before growing, blossoming and

hopefully producing fruit. The Beatitudes do not give us entrance requirements to the kingdom of God but do give us a picture of the kind of people God wants to see, and it's not the power-seeking and money-grabbing, but the humble, the vulnerable, the persecuted, seekers of peace and justice, givers rather than takers.

Jesus made that clear when his disciples questioned him about greatness in the kingdom of God, and he places a child in front of them as an example. A child's humility is in their vulnerability and need for a parent's help as they grow.

Discussion

- 7: Of the verses you have read, which speaks loudest to you, and why?
- 8: What differences can there be between a fruitful life in the world's eyes, and one as God sees it?
- 9: A crowd arrived to hear Jesus' teaching. How did your own first encounter with the words of Jesus affect you and life's journey as it was then?

Someone said...

'If you're walking down the right path and you're willing to keep walking, eventually you'll make progress.'

(Barack Obama)

We all want progress, but if you're on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; in that case, the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive.'

(C. S. Lewis)

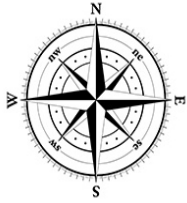
Key verse

'For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.'

(Colossians 1:13-14)

Takeaway

How do we know we're on the right path?



Encounters

Study Four



Gerard David, *Transfiguration of Christ*, 1523

Someone said...

'God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform. He plants his footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.'

(William Cowper)

Key verse

'A voice came from the cloud, saying, "This is my Son, whom I have chosen; listen to him."

(Luke 9:35)

A unique meeting

(Read Luke 9:23-36)

This unique event is found in three of the gospels, and it is one of only two places where we hear of 'heaven' speaking directly about Jesus, the other being at his baptism.

Before taking three trusted friends aside and up a mountain for prayer, Jesus told his disciples that walking with him on this journey would mean changes to their personal lifestyles and outlook, involving taking up their own crosses and walking a different road to that of the world. And that would involve a very steep learning curve, with hearts and minds open to accepting all that happened along the journey.

On the mountain Jesus opts for a time of prayer, during which he is transformed into a glorious figure with a brilliant light around him. Then two famous Old Testament figures appear with him,

Moses representing the past (the Exodus), and Elijah as a figure who points to the future as a precursor of the Messiah, heard in the words of Malachi 4:5, 'See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes.'

Luke tells us that the words passing between these three are about the journey Jesus is taking, which will bring him to Jerusalem and the Cross. Before Peter can arrange accommodation for Moses and Elijah a cloud descends, and from within it a voice calls out, 'Listen to my Son'.

Then they were alone with Jesus, and made their way down the mountain, trying to understand all that had happened, and keeping it between themselves for the present.

Discussion

- 1: Reading the whole of Luke 9, we glimpse something of the busy routine of Jesus and his disciples. How important spiritually is finding quiet within the busyness of a day?
- 2: Do you see this important moment in the Gospel message as being primarily for Jesus, or the disciples, and why?
- 3: What is the message God wants Peter, John and James to take home from the Transfiguration?



Stage 4: Mount of Transfiguration

We now head southwest on a 40km (25 mile) virtual trek to Mount Tabor in the lower Galilee region and at the eastern end of the Jezreel Valley, identified by Origen in the 3rd century as the Mount of Transfiguration. It is also mentioned in the 4th century by St Jerome and St Cyril of Jerusalem.

Other locations such as Mount Hermon have been suggested more recently, but Mount Tabor is still considered the traditional pilgrimage location, upon which is the Church of the Transfiguration, part of a Franciscan



Looking across the Jezreel Valley to Mount Tabor (pic Eliot)



monastery complex completed in 1924 and built upon the ruins of a 4th-6th century Byzantine church, and a 12th century church of the Crusader period. There's also a Greek Orthodox church on the mountain, again built upon previous ruins. Oh, and this is also one of the most important paragliding locations in Israel (should you have spare time)!

The Jezreel Valley is also known in Biblical terms as the Valley of Armageddon.

The Transfiguration Church is an important stop for many pilgrims in the Holy Land, and as with other locations offers not only a

spiritual experience but also an opportunity to view a landscape through which Jesus walked and ministered to the needs of many. There are hiking trails from here, and panoramic views of the surrounding valleys and nearby archaeological sites such as Gat Hefer, possibly the birthplace of the prophet Jonah



The Franciscan Church of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor (pic Bantosh)

Discussion

- 4: With many visitors milling around, it is difficult to appreciate the quietness that Jesus and his friends found on this mountain, unless within the church built upon it. Have you had similar experiences when visiting a famous city cathedral or churches?
- 5: Picture yourself as one of those disciples descending from the mountain. What would be going through your mind, and where would it lead?
- 6: This was a very special spiritual experience for the three disciples. Have you had times like this, that are still a central part of your faith story?



Encounters with God

(Read 1 Kings 19:3-18, Luke 19:1-10, Acts 8:26-39)

Elijah was on the run from Jezabel and finds himself alone in the desert and under the shade of a broom tree, praying that death might come. Instead, we are told that he is led, by the intervention of angelic prompting to Mount Sinai, the sacred site where Moses received the Ten Commandments, and here Elijah encounters God.

Elijah needs to do a little self-evaluation, somewhat bitter at his current fate despite serving God so earnestly. But he follows the instruction to wait on the mountain for God to pass by, and discovers that God does not always work in the realm of the spectacular, as it's in the gentle whisper, not the storm or fire, that he experiences God's presence.

As a chief tax collector Zacchaeus was a rich man, though many considered

his wealth ill-gotten. But wealth is not necessarily the source of all happiness or contentment, and something prompted him to climb that tree and become visible to Jesus passing by, and as a result Zacchaeus finds himself hosting Jesus in his house. It was an important encounter because it tells us that no one is refused access to God. As Jesus tells him, 'The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost'.

Spiritual encounters take many forms, as the story of Philip and the Ethiopian official tells us. Here God uses Philip to not only open this man's eyes and heart to Scripture's truths, but being there enables him to also offer baptism and send the Ethiopian away a changed and thankful man.

Discussion

- 7: Which of these 'encounters' with God resonate best with your own journey of faith?
- 8: Can you think of other ways in which we can connect with and hear God's voice and message?
- 9: How might we become the means by which others encounter God?

Someone said...

'There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, 'All right, then, have it your way.'

(C. S. Lewis)

'The best remedy for those who are afraid, lonely or unhappy is to go outside, somewhere where they can be quiet, alone with the heavens, nature and God. Because only then does one feel that all is as it should be.'

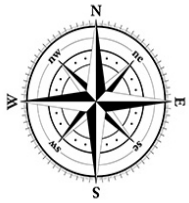
(Anne Frank)

Key verse

'Jesus said to (Zacchaeus), "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'" (Luke 19:9-10)

Takeaway

Give thanks for all those 'God-instancies' where something said or happening just shouts out that God was in that moment.



Returning

Study Five



Agony in the garden Andrea Mantegna, 1455

Someone said...

'For most of us the prayer in Gethsemane is the only model. Removing mountains can wait.'

(C. S. Lewis)

Key verse

'Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."'

(Matthew 26:39)

The journey almost over

(Read Matthew 21:1-3, Matthew 23:37-24:1-5, Matthew 26:26-46)

Bethphage is located on the southeast slope of the Mount of Olives, not far from Bethany where Mary, Martha and Lazarus lived, and Jesus stayed. From Bethphage, Jesus made the short journey to Jerusalem with his disciples.

After a warm welcome to Jerusalem which we remember as Palm Sunday, the mood changes. As well as Jesus teaching and healing, there's overturning tables in the temple, accusing teachers of the law of hypocrisy and prophesying the future destruction of the city.

Then Jesus heads back to Bethany via the Mount of Olives, and his disciples look across to that beautiful city and think about Jesus' dark prophesy. After all, Jerusalem was the holy city, and the rebuilt temple was the pride of the nation.

Jesus' words form the fifth and final discourse of Jesus in this Gospel. All three Synoptic Gospels contain it, though Matthew gives the fullest description, including Jesus talking of his own death and return in glory, familiar words from The Last Supper, whilst sharing bread and wine.

Then it's back to the Mount of Olives, a prophesy that even his closest disciples will desert him (despite Peter's protestations that such a thing could never happen), and from there to the olive groves of Gethsemane, where Jesus opens his heart in prayerful sorrow and agony, addressing God as 'My Father', as the disciples fall asleep rather than support him and Judas and the Roman soldiers approach.

Discussion

- 1: Jesus has trained his disciples, and in a short while so much is going to be expected from them. How would you rate their progress?
- 2: The disciples look across to Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. Can you imagine what is going through their minds when they think of the history of that place and its Temple, following Jesus' prophetic word?
- 3: How important to Christians is the remembrance of that Last Supper, and why?



Stage 5: The Mount of Olives

The Mount of Olives has great significance in Jesus' life and final days, as well as in the history of Israel, due to its proximity to the Temple. At its base is The Garden of Gethsemane.

It is actually a moderate size mountain range extending from Mount Scopus in the north to the slopes of the Kidron Valley in the south. From its peak there are



Aerial view of Mount of Olives (pic Andrew Shiva)



panoramic views of Jerusalem to the west, and to the east the wilderness of Judea and the Dead Sea. Like most of our 'Mounts', the title refers to its spiritual importance rather than height.

On this mountain Jesus gave his famous Olivet Discourse in Matthew 24, and Luke tells us that from its eastern slopes Jesus ascended to heaven. After the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, the Jewish population used the Mount to celebrate biblical feasts, and it has been a Jewish pilgrimage site for thousands of years. On its peak is the Arab village of Abu Tor, adjacent to the graves of the prophets.

There are seven churches on the Mount of Olives, some marking the traditional site of Jesus' ascension, one including

a stone with embedded footprint said to be from Jesus as he stepped up to heaven.

Another is built in the shape of a teardrop, remembering Jesus' weeping whilst prophesying the destruction of Jerusalem. The Church of All Nations is next to the Garden of Gethsemane where you will find ancient Olive trees next to a Franciscan prayer chapel.



Gethsemane_ (pic tango7174)

Discussion

- 4: The mountain has changed since Jesus' day, more cluttered with both buildings and graves, but down in the garden are the ancient olive trees. How do you find space and peace with God in a modern built-up world?
- 5: This might be the end of this journey, but is it possible to picture our day-to-day lives as an ongoing pilgrimage?
- 6: If you were planning a pilgrimage by foot, where would be your destination, and why?



Returning and responding

(Read Psalm 23:1-6, Ephesians 2:4-10, Hebrews 12:1-3)

It is good to know as we journey through life that God is there, not only when needed, but with us in the day-to-day of our walking, pointing us in the right direction. And even if we should find ourselves in the 'darkest valley' and this path become more difficult to walk along there is no need to fear, David tells us in Psalm 23, for God is always there, our strength and support.

And this love, which David talks of in ancient times, is seen in all its fulness in the New Testament, encompassed in all that Jesus is to believers. Despite the people we were, or are, God's love brings mercy and new life for those who are spiritually dead. And as the disciples discovered along their own journey with Jesus, even abandoning him in his hour of need in Gethsemane was not enough to

distance them from his love and mercy, for he had prepared them well for what was to follow, and their understanding and faith would grow, and empowered by the Spirit they would become the ones to sow the seeds of the Good News throughout the world in their words and faithfulness.

There are so many people of faith in the Bible, a great cloud of witnesses as the writer to the Hebrews tells us. He reminds us that no athlete can win a race with weights strapped to their legs and ankles, and encourages all believers to put aside the self-imposed burdens of life that slow us down so we can make progress on the road of faith, becoming the faithful witnesses of this and future generations.

Discussion

- 7: How easy is the spiritual journey for you when the path gets tough to follow, and where do you find help?
- 8: Is it useful to remember Christians of the past, their lives, writings, and experiences, and learn from them? Do you have favourite examples?
- 9: How would you describe the everyday Christian life to someone making enquiries?

Someone said...

'Sometimes it's the journey that teaches you a lot about your destination.'

(Drake)

'The feeling remains that God is on the journey, too.'

(Saint Teresa of Avila)

Key verse

'The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing.
He makes me lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside quiet waters,
he refreshes my soul.
He guides me along the right paths
for his name's sake.'

(Psalm 23:1-3)

Takeaway

Does the journey stop here, or down the road, over the next hill, or go on forever?

Using the images

There are quite a few images within these studies, and you may like to try this way to prayerfully use them.

It is called *Visio divina*, or 'Divine seeing' and all it requires is a few minutes of quiet, while we look at the images, what the artist might be saying, even putting ourselves into it, and allowing God to speak to us.

The four stages of *Visio divina*, assuming we are relaxed, quiet and with a copy of the picture in front of us, are as follows:

Here's an image you might like to practice with. The stages are the same.



1. Look at the picture slowly, noting the colors, people, places and things. Start in one corner and work your way around it. Remain with the image for one to two minutes. If you would like, jot down a few words about what you see, particularly anything you missed at first glance.
2. Take a second, deeper, look. Where is there movement? What relationships do you see? Engage your imagination. Where might you be within the picture? What do you see from that perspective? What deeper meaning emerges?
3. Respond to the image with prayer. Did the image remind you of an experience, person or issue for which you'd like to offer thanksgiving or intercession? Offer that prayer to God.
4. Be still. Breathe deeply. Relax your shoulders, arms and legs. Rest in this quietness and let God speak.

Image is Harold Copping's Sermon on the Mount

References

Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicized, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible, Zondervan/Harper Collins World (4 Sept. 2018)

Expositor's Bible Commentary (Abridged Edition): New Testament, Zondervan Academic; Abridged Edition (4 July 2017)

MacArthur Study Bible (NKJV), Thomas Nelson; REV UPD edition (November 5, 2013)

NIV Study Bible, Copyright © 1985, 1995, 2002, 2008, 2011 by Zondervan.

Zondervan Bible Commentary (One Volume), Zondervan; Illustrated edition (June 4, 2008)

All images used are, to the best of my knowledge, free of copyright and used with permission.

Quotes come from brainyquote.com

There are more Bible Studies, collections of prayers and free prayer resources available on www.faihandworship.com



Marker on a wall along the Camino de Santiago, or Way of St. James (pic John Birch)

