

Sermon – June 2, 2019 – Jerusalem Sunday

Jerusalem Sunday:

Today is Jerusalem Sunday. You may wonder what Jerusalem Sunday is. Honestly, I have just learned about it this week. So here it is.

In 2013 General Synod passed a resolution to “observe the Seventh Sunday of Easter, as Jerusalem Sunday.”

Jerusalem Sunday is an opportunity for we Anglicans in Canada to learn more about and to support the Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East.

The Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East is a prominent global partner of our Anglican Church of Canada. Who are the people, churches and ministries of the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East? They are a **remnant community** spread thinly across the Middle East and Jerusalem. They are part of a Christian minority in these lands. They face complex challenges in every aspect of their lives. Even though millions of Christian pilgrims, visit the land of the Holy One to walk on the stones where Jesus walked, those Christian pilgrims rarely pause to notice, or worship with, or learn about the “living stones” of the local Christian community. Here’s a little video to introduce you to the Diocese of Jerusalem.

Video

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSAZEvkQPjA&feature=youtu.be&t=5>

The Anglican Church of Canada has had a long, close relationship with the Anglican (Episcopal) Diocese of Jerusalem and the Middle East. They are a diocese of about 7000 members in 30 parishes who worship in the name of Jesus and serve faithfully in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. They oversee an enormous outreach ministry of 30 institutions, employing more than 5000 people. They provide education, vocational training, medical care in hospitals and clinics, rehabilitation for the hearing impaired, care for children with disabilities, and residential support to the elderly. They are a vibrant faithful community offering a bold witness to the compassionate love of God in action. They need to know that they are not forgotten, not ignored, but recognized and valued as part of our oneness in Christ.

So today, in a few moments we will pray for them. As Christ in our Gospel prays for the oneness of his people, we pray for oneness. God’s action of restoration, through the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, fashions a pilgrim community, reconciled in Christ and sent into a broken world as agents of God’s love, healing and compassion. Each one of us is a part of the pilgrim community, reconciled in Christ and sent into a broken world as agents of God’s love.

In some Canadian parishes the open offering on Jerusalem Sunday will be given to the National Church to strengthen the ministry in the Diocese of Jerusalem.

But before we pray, I would like to share the other 'bit' or part of Jerusalem Sunday. This year the theme is on Pilgrimage. It includes some very interesting information. Did you know that tourism is one of the fastest growing industries globally? According to the United Nations World Trade Organization (UNWTO) tourism accounted for 10% of the global economy in 2016. Tourism is projected to increase by 4% or more, every year until 2030.

Last year Israel welcomed 4 million tourists up 14% from the previous year, and up 38% from 2016. 56% of those who visit Israel are Christian pilgrims.

A study of Catholic pilgrimage sites in Europe reports that Western Europe's 6,000 pilgrim centres are generating over 60 million 'religiously motivated' visits each year. This is huge. It is being called a **renaissance in pilgrimage**; a resurgence of interest to encounter places of spiritual significance.

One might ask is this renaissance in pilgrimage only because travel is becoming more affordable. Is it because of an increase in disposable income or the Baby Boom effect, or is something deeper taking place? The churches of Europe are empty but its pilgrim routes are overflowing. What might we learn from this?

On this Sunday, "Jerusalem Sunday," let us consider the global resurgence in pilgrimage. Let us also think about what spiritual principles might be 'responsible tourism' for Christians, especially those visiting the biblical lands of Israel-Palestine and Jordan. Jesus did not favour one people nor the story of one people. Christian pilgrims who follow a Lord who said "Blessed are the peacemakers," deserve to be immersed in the totality of a land; in the story of all of its peoples, their hopes and dreams, and a geography made sacred by the activity of God in salvation history.

As many of us prepare for summer holidays and travel to other settings we might wonder in what ways the journeys we make can become pilgrimages; become more than just a drive, become an intentional effort to immerse ourselves into another landscape seen to be sacred, with a sacred human-divine story, where a resident community of the people in Christ give witness to the Risen Presence of Jesus in the world. Join them. Worship with them. Learn about them . . . that the world may know the love of God in Christ.

Now let us Pray - video

<https://vimeo.com/92146460>

Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land:

The earliest recorded special visit to Jerusalem occurred in the year 170 CE. Melito, Bishop of Sardis (Sardis is near Ephesus) made a scholarly visit to confirm aspects of the Gospel accounts for himself. Thirty years later, Alexander from Cappadocia visited the land “to inquire of the places” and “to pray.” He demonstrated the principle aspects of pilgrimage; the desire to engage a geography of spiritual significance and to do so devotionally. Over the following thirty years further recorded visits occurred by Origen and other Christian leaders and scholars. Then in the early 300’s Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea Maritima (located on the Mediterranean coast about a half hour drive north of present day Tel Aviv) produced a gazetteer of the holy land listing 340 locations that corresponded to the gospels. The *Onomasticon* (places names in scripture) became a handbook for the swell of Byzantine Christians making pilgrimage to the land. Eusebius is credited as the first to refer to the biblical lands as the “Fifth Gospel.” What this means is that the land itself, its topography, climate, agricultural variations, locations and proximities all together serve as a fifth gospel that can inspire startling fresh insights into the other four gospels.

By the 4th century Christian pilgrimage had come of age. A new devotional practice had arisen in the imagination of Christians sending thousands to visit the land and prayerfully encounter the gospel accounts on location so as to return home with renewed vigor and faithfulness.

(see essay by Peter Walker “Pilgrimage in the Early Church” in *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage*, Bartholomew and Hughes 2004)

Without exaggeration, Christian pilgrims to the biblical lands since then, over 17 centuries, always joined in the worship of the local Christian community, sought the comfort of Christian guest houses and monastic centres and requested local Christians to present the places of spiritual significance. Oddly, this cannot be said of many Christian pilgrimage tours to the holy land today. Very often now Christian pilgrims are not taken by their Guides into Bethlehem, are not allowed to shop in the local Christian shops but are taken to the shopping districts of another ethnicity, are not taken to worship with the local Christian community on Sundays, and are presented with an experience and commentary that cannot easily be described as “multi-narrative.” Christian Pilgrims to the land of the Holy One need become informed; need to ask for a Christian guide, ask to worship on Sundays with the local Christian community, ask to visit for instance one of the magnificent outreach ministries of the Anglican church in the land such as the centre on the Mount of Olives serving children with disabilities called the Princess Basma Centre. Why is this important?

Gospel: Jesus prays for the whole body of believers: “May they all be one.”

The gospel reading presents the conclusion at the end of Jesus’ Farewell Discourses. (John chapters 14–17) In this culminating section of Jesus’ prayer he prays no longer only for his disciples. Instead, looking to the future, he prays for all who will believe saying, “May they

all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” The mission purpose of life-giving witness to the world is hinged to the unity of the Body. The love of God is revealed in the koinonia (community) of the Christian community. “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” The sending of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (promised earlier in the discourse) heals a broken koinonia. (Genesis 3-4, Rom 1:18-3:20) God’s action of restored koinonia, through the incarnation and paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, fashions a pilgrim community, reconciled in Christ and sent into a broken world as agents of God’s love, healing and compassion. “You will know them by their fruits.” (Matt 7:16)

O God, We give thanks that your dear Son has gathered us in the embrace of his redeeming love and sent us to make that love known to the ends of the earth.

We pray your continued blessings on the steadfast witness of the Church in Jerusalem and throughout the Middle East.

Give your deep joy to those who welcome the pilgrims seeking to know this land and its many peoples.

Grace those who proclaim the Gospel.

Guide all who teach a new generation of young people.

Draw near to those who are sick and bless those who tend them.

Sustain the hope in all who long and labour for a just and lasting peace in the land of The Holy One.

And may the companions of Jerusalem be many and faithful.

We pray in the name of our merciful Saviour, Friend, and Brother, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen. *Written by the Most Rev. Fred Hiltz*