



FRANCISCAN FOUNDATION FOR THE HOLY LAND

A Religious Perspective Of Jerusalem

Fr. Peter Vasko, ofm

The region is called the Middle East, a land of mystery and intrigue but also a land of ancient antiquity as well as civilization. It is also a land, which has played a major role in the development of the world's three great monotheistic religions - Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Judaism in many ways is the religion of a nation. The early history of the Jewish nation is outlined in the Hebrew Bible, or the Old Testament and more especially in the 'Pentatuch' known as the five books of Moses or the 'Torah' (Law). Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are revered as the foundation of the Jewish people with a special emphasis on Abraham. The revered Moses led the Jewish exodus from Egypt in 1300 BC to the Promised Land. During this exodus God made a covenant with the Israelites on Mt. Sinai which is enshrined in the Ten Commandments. After forty years in the desert, Moses, along with Joshua and Aaron arrived at Canaan, the 'land of milk and honey'.

Christianity followed Judaism where some of the initial disciples were Jewish. These disciples or apostles believed that Jesus Christ, a rabbi and teacher, was indeed the Messiah and Son of God and the one pre-figured in the books of the Old Testament. He was the only founder of the three monotheistic religions that was actually born in the Holy Land. After his birth in Bethlehem he later grew up in Nazareth, and eventually began his ministry at the age of thirty in Galilee. He went about teaching, admonishing the sinners and healing the sick. Today he has a following of over one billion believers and adherents. For Christians, Jesus took the responsibility for the sins of the human race, reconciling God with man through his death on a cross. He later rose from the dead to give new hope that after death a new life in the heavenly kingdom will follow.

Lastly, Islam traces its roots to the Prophet Mohammed, who was born in Mecca, Arabia around 571 AD. At the age of 40, he received a revelation calling him to denounce the paganism and polytheism of Mecca and preach the existence of the one God. Soon after the death of Mohammed, the revelations he received were put together to form the Qur'an (recitation) or, the infallible word of God. The 'Dome of the Rock' in Jerusalem is considered the third holiest shrine after Mecca and Medina. The actual rock inside the dome was the starting point for the Prophet's 'journey to heaven'. The five pillars of Islam are: the Shahada, or confession of faith; the Salat, or prayer (Muslims pray five times a day); Ramadan, or fasting; Zakat, or almsgiving and lastly, Hajj, or pilgrimage (every Muslim is required to go to Mecca once in his lifetime). It is then, within this general religious context that Jerusalem has played and will continue to play a major role when speaking about the three monotheistic religions.

For Christians in particular, the Holy Land is a special region where Jesus was born, where He lived, where He ministered, where He died and where He rose. Millions of pilgrims have come from afar to see these shrines and to touch and to pray at these holy places.

Jerusalem, the Holy City, is in many ways the point in space and time where God intervened for the salvation of mankind and where He continues to work in history. It is a meeting place and the point of contradiction between the sacred and the profane, between holiness and sin. It is a city that belongs equally to the 'here and now' as well as to the transcendent, to the human and divine, to time and eternity and whether one is Jewish, Christian or Muslim, each has it's share, large or small, in its history and spiritual heritage.

The Christian presence permeated this region and country from the very first century, and, prior to the Protestant

Reformation in the 1500's, many Catholic religious orders sprang up to provide pastoral care of the faithful. But it was the Franciscans, the sons of St. Francis of Assisi, who dominated this area since 1216 and were officially promulgated to become the 'official custodians' or caretakers of the Holy Sites of Christendom in 1342 by the Papacy. As a Franciscan friar/priest who has served in the Holy Land for the last 2 decades, one of the greatest joys has been experiencing the 'universality' of the Christian faith, not only among those living here but those hundreds of thousands of pilgrims who come with fervor, with devotion, and with a thirst for understanding their religious roots and heritage.

I am often asked... 'As a Christian, what is it like living and working in the Old City of Jerusalem inside its ancient walls'. Well for Jerusalem, it is, in many ways, a modern enclave with a strong western influence and very little cultural differences except for the obvious such as language, whether it be Hebrew or Arabic as well as a strong ethnic religious presence of the respective groups. Christians? They number only 160,000 out of a total population of 8.4 million, which includes Israel, the West Bank and Gaza. What is a bit disconcerting though is the political polarization that continues to exist between the Israelis and Palestinians.

The Old City of Jerusalem is actually divided into four sections - the Armenian Quarter, the Jewish Quarter, the Muslim Quarter and the Christian Quarter. Among the 33,000 who live within its walls, political and economic tensions have unfortunately sparked concern about the uneasiness and sometime violent clashes that occur in this city between the inhabitants of this city. Today there is a waiting situation that is neither peace nor war, which seems to have concealed itself into a state of permanent tension and mutual ignorance among the conflicting parties.

On a lighter note, it is interesting to see the interaction of American pilgrims, when they are able to visit, with the local Palestinian merchants. Perhaps it is because of the fact that the majority of Palestinian merchants in the Souk (bazaar) speak English. The Palestinians though are by nature both hospitable and warm. Whenever an American pilgrim or tourist walks through the Souk, one hears... 'Please come in and have a cup of coffee', or, 'Are you American - welcome', etc. One of the greatest pastimes when shopping in the Souk in Jerusalem is the concept of 'bargaining' - one must never accept the initial price of an article and since most Americans do look for bargains, the interaction becomes easy. Actually, the best time to purchase an article is a few minutes before a merchant closes his shop. They consider it a sign of 'good luck' to sell something at the end of the day and you are guaranteed a great price.

On another sphere one can certainly experience the various spiritual energies and devotion that is daily expressed by the faithful of the three Faiths here in Jerusalem. For with the call of Muslims to prayer by the Muzzein, the blowing of the Shofar to gather Jews to prayer on high holy days, and the melodious sound of Christian church bells announcing their services, the spiritual allegiance to the one God is daily confirmed. Yet for a Christian, going to the actual site of Jesus' crucifixion or visiting the tomb where he rose, or going to Bethlehem to the grotto where he was born, or traversing along the northern shoreline of the Sea of Galilee where Jesus performed so many miracles can be transforming. For many this may probably be their first and last pilgrimage. For years, they have been reading the sacred scriptures and listening to gospel stories and now they are here walking in the 'footsteps of Jesus'. What an experience it must be! I am sure the same can be said for Jewish and Muslim pilgrims for it is here then that the religious and historical perspectives converge.

Lastly, defining my role as a priest and minister, as one who is an arbitrator, a link from men to God, is certainly accentuated in this Holy City for this is 'the' city of clergy, rabbis and sheiks. In the Holy Land alone, there are over 900 synagogues, 65 Christian churches, 72 monasteries and 60 mosques. Our roles are further imbedded when dialogue and sharing take place among all of us. It reflects that commonality that each of us shares with each other as teacher and as minister to our respective faithful. It is indeed very enriching.

In conclusion, then, whether one is a Christian pilgrim, a Jewish pilgrim, or a Muslim pilgrim coming to Jerusalem, all are seeking to reorder their priorities and to rediscover their perspectives. In many ways it is a venture in faith like that of Abraham who at the command of God, left Haran for an unknown destination and with uncertain blessings awaiting him. It is always a time that is, set apart, to renew our faith, whatever that belief is, by recalling how God has revealed himself to particular men and women in history. Jerusalem's history has been a long road marked by rivalries and conquests, persecutions and revenge. The city still carries in its stones and in its hearts the marks of ancient struggles but Jerusalem is also a symbol of hope. For Jerusalem is the 'high place' where for the believers of the three great monotheisms, God intervened in human history. It was here that He revealed to men his proposal for unity and peace. Let us be fervent in that goal.