

A Very Special Palm Sunday

I got to thinking today about Palm Sunday 2006 when I was in Jerusalem. I was staying at St. George's College, which is part of the Anglican cathedral complex. We had Mass at the cathedral early in the morning and then we were to meet at the top of the Mount of Olives. How to get there.

Jerusalem is served by three different bus companies. The west side of Jerusalem is mostly Jewish, and their buses are sort of maroon with Hebrew lettering on the side. Those buses are the same size as our Vía buses. The east side is mostly Palestinian, and they have two different bus companies. The buses of both companies are smaller, white with Arabic lettering, but one of the companies has blue lettering and the other has green. This is not to say that the buses are segregated in any way. They are not. It's just that different companies operate different routes. I figured out that the bus to the top of the Mount of Olives was the #71, and it operated from the station of the company with the blue lettering.

I got to the station and found a #71 bus. I was about to get on it when I was elbowed out of the way by a group of Italian nuns. I guess they needed the bus more than I did, but it was no matter, because there was a bus about every five minutes. As soon as a bus was full, the driver took off and another one moved into place.

The driver took us up the mountain, but he couldn't get all the way to the end of the line because the street was full of great crowds of people. So he got us as far as he could, and we got off. I started wandering around to see if I could find someone I knew. After a few minutes I found some of my fellow pilgrims, along with the young priest who was our chaplain, the dean of the cathedral, the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem and the Middle East, and Lord Carey of Clifton, a former Archbishop of Canterbury. So I stuck with that group.

People were just milling around like it was a carnival or something. A man had a donkey, and was charging money to ride what he called "the Jesus Taxi." Suddenly, for no apparent reason, the crowd started moving. The march was less like a religious procession and more like the Battle of Flowers Parade. There were

even high school marching bands. I thought we would sing hymns, like "All glory, laud, and honor," but nobody was singing. Of course we didn't all speak the same language, since there were people from everywhere.

The place where Jesus and his disciples started from is now behind the Wall of Demarcation, the Donald Trump-type wall that the Israeli government uses to steal land from the Palestinians. And the gate of the city through which Jesus entered was bricked up during the Middle Ages, so we entered through a different gate. Once we got into the Old City, we made it as far as a small park-like area that they identify as the Garden of Gethsemane (although nobody knows if that's really what it is). Then at that point it all fizzled out. There was no ceremony or activity of any kind once we got inside the city gates. Everybody just spread out and went their separate ways.

On Maundy Thursday we had the Mass of the Lord's Supper in the cathedral, but instead of keeping vigil in the cathedral itself, there was a procession with the Blessed Sacrament to that place they think is the Garden of Gethsemane, and the vigil was held there. Also, although Stations of the Cross are mounted on the walls of the cathedral, they aren't used, because they go down the street to the Old City and follow the traditional route along the streets of Jerusalem. Hundreds of people were doing that at any given time.

Jerusalem has been destroyed and rebuilt at least seven times, and every time it's rebuilt, the new building rises over the rubble of the old. So Jerusalem is honeycombed with tunnels, some of them going back to Old Testament times. We were in one of the tunnels, and there were ruins of houses from the time of the Roman Empire. In one of these houses there was a large room. The guide told us that there was no way to know if this was the Upper Room of Jesus and the disciples, but that room would have been something like this one. Later on in the week we went inside an old building and up to the second floor. The guide told us this was the Upper Room for fundamentalists. He said that there are some denominations that insist that because the Bible says it's an Upper Room, it still has to be an Upper Room, and they won't accept the idea that it's underground. The building only dates back to the Crusades, so it couldn't have been there when Jesus was in the flesh. But that makes no difference.

Some of us attended the Great Vigil of Easter with a group of Japanese-speaking Roman Catholics who were staying in a nearby hotel. They had chartered a bus, and they had room, so they let us go with them to a place called Abu Gosh (it's one of the possible sites of the town of Emmaus). There is a Benedictine monastery, with a house for women on one side and a house for men on the other, but the chapel and the refectory are shared. The community is French-speaking. The Abbot celebrated the Vigil and the First Mass of Easter. Although it was in French, the liturgy was the same as what we were used to in the Book of Common Prayer. It was mostly sung. It was beautiful.

I remember some things better than others from that trip. I can't remember all the museums, or even all the churches, because there were so many. One of the things I remember most is that when we gathered for Evening Prayer in the cathedral we could hear the Call to Prayer for Muslims. We felt that we were praying with them every night. I missed that when I got home.

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