

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

When traveling in the Holy Land a few weeks ago, one of the first things we noticed as we went about our daily visits to pilgrimage sites is the sheer number of Christians from every part of the world – large groups from exotic places like Indonesia, India, Ethiopia, Greece, China, the American Bible Belt, all descending upon these ancient sites, hordes of the faithful, with floppy hats and little audio receivers hanging around their necks, spilling out of large buses. I noticed the tour guides often had to be a bit hard-nosed with other leaders when asserting a turn in line. Variations in cultural understandings of personal space, for example, provides a challenge for many at first in acclimating to the pilgrim's journey – let's just say there are a lot of elbows, or so it seems, when one waits in line to descend to the cave where it is believed Jesus was born.

And, quickly, one realizes that this is part of the pilgrim experience – unexpected reactions to sites, such as Bethlehem, which looms large in our ecclesial imagination, sometimes come up short in the crush of humanity likewise trying to access the holy site. Other times, though, moments of unexpected beauty happen – for me, it usually has had to do with personal interactions with real people I've met. One day, as we gathered in the courtyard of St. Catherine's church in Bethlehem, most of us feeling harried, tired, and a bit jostled after fighting our way down to the manger and back again – as we often did, spent a few minutes in quiet contemplation and prayer. Our leader, Mary June, passed out copies of the hymn "Away in a Manger" and we began to sing, amid the din.

On the second line, around the time the little Lord Jesus lays down his sweet head, the evening call to prayer from a nearby Mosque began to loudly wail. Most of us, myself included, looked around a bit – frustrated at yet another intrusion into our moment of peace. But as we sang the first verse of the familiar carol, I noticed a man from a small group of Chinese Christians look our way, recognizing the tune. He came over, very quietly, and stood next to us and began to sing the carol with us in his own language.

As one travels around the Holy Land, one quickly realizes also that not all tours there are made the same. The Anglican Cathedral, through whom we organized our pilgrimage, does an excellent job of providing us with both a first-rate archeological point of view, as well as a chaplain to lead spiritual reflections. When we visited Magdala – the home of Mary Magdalene – a small town just discovered perhaps eight years ago and only available to visit in the past year or two – we stood around the ancient seating area of the synagogue and imagined the high likelihood that Jesus, a devout Jew, would have visited and perhaps taught in that very first-century enclosure. We visited, too, the surrounding homes – now, just essentially stone foundations in the ground, and noted the mikvoht – the deep baths used for ritual cleansing in a Jewish person's home – and a group of Baptists from the deep south came in behind us. They seemed to be in a hurry, so our group stood to the side to let them pass. As they passed, one of the ladies said to the other one – “What do you think those bathtubs are for?” And her friends said, “I dunno, but I'm thinking....fish hatcheries?”

I mentioned this to our own tour group leader, Mary June, herself an accomplished archeologist who dug for more than two decades on sites in the

Holy Land – and she shuddered. “The things you hear out here – it’s astounding.” And shook her head. Not all tour guides are created equal, as it turns out. I was from then on EVEN MORE THANKFUL for our own guide – whose detailed and rich knowledge of almost every site seemed bottomless. And, as an Episcopal priest, she took seriously the importance of good scholarship in forming a faith with a solid foundation. When there was relative certainty that a particular event happened at a particular site, she told us so – but also admitted up front when a site was less certainly known.

And so all this week, I’ve been thinking about Thomas – doubting Thomas, as the Church of my childhood (and probably yours) tended to call him, with a bit of an implied wagging finger. The church has often rather chided him for his seemingly petulant demand for evidence after the resurrection – the implicit message is, that somehow Thomas’s faith was weak or in some sense lacking. I mean, come on Thomas, all the other disciples just believed. Why is it so hard for you? Can’t you just choose to believe it?

Thomas is dear to me. I’m on team Thomas. I think Thomas was right – to be forthcoming about his doubts, and to make that kind of bold request. And Jesus did not scold him for asking – he said, here, come and see for yourself.

When scripture talks of belief, it is not so much a matter of belief in our own concept of it – informed by post-Enlightenment philosophy, the scientific method, and other wonderful things. When the Bible speaks of belief, it is more speaking of a matter of trust – Jesus was inviting Thomas not so much to believe in a factual-verifiable sense, but rather inviting him to a deeper level of trust. “Trust in me,” Jesus seems to be saying to him. “I have proven myself worthy of your trust

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– but I will honor your need to verify. But I want you to trust in me, and rest in that trust.”

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