

Pamela Shier
Sermon Lent II

Several years ago, I spent some time at St George's College in East Jerusalem on Salah ad Din Street. The College is part of St George's Episcopal Cathedral and runs workshops and courses throughout the year on the life and times and geography of the Bible and the relationship of the three Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Christianity and Islam - that are so visibly alive in East Jerusalem and the Old City.

One morning we met outside the Cathedral right after an early breakfast to do a short walk to the Old City and follow the Stations of the Cross on the Via Dolorosa, the path that Jesus walked from his condemnation to his crucifixion. Our tutor met us carrying a rather large cross on his shoulder and I thought, "Really? I'm gonna follow this guy carrying a large cross in public through Jerusalem? No way!" And then I thought, "Oh, yeah, I'm following a guy carrying a cross through the streets of Jerusalem. I really can't say I have a problem with this, can I?" Let me just say, it isn't comfortable! And it gives you a whole new way of looking at things.

And as we walked, the sun was rising and I noticed that we walked along with Muslim men in long robes carrying their prayer beads and Christian nuns in their habits and rosaries. Israeli soldiers with their Uzis. Israeli moms carrying Uzis while escorting their kids to school! Arab school kids running and skipping and jumping on their way to class. Shopkeepers just starting to open up their awnings and setting out their wares for the day, fruits and vegetables and kubz, the local pita bread. Knaffeh and baklava. Kahwah! A couple of tourists groups from the Philippines and Ethiopia as we passed the shops displaying Bethlehem olive wood nativities and priests' stoles with Palestinian cross-stitch. And suddenly we weren't so strange at all. We were part of this diverse, multi-colored and multi-lingual family of one God who were called to be in what we believe to be a holy place.

Jerusalem is a holy place, a holy city. I felt this keenly during the two semesters I spent in East Jerusalem a few years later studying Arabic. While attending Hebrew University which is on Mount Scopus, I lived just up the ridge on Jebel Izzetuun. Jebel, mountain; zetuun, olives – the Mount of Olives. This is the ridge just to the east of the Old City of Jerusalem where the Garden of Gethsemane is located and the place from which Jesus began both his triumphal entry into Jerusalem and the events of his crucifixion. The Mount of Olives is where Jesus' disciples saw him

being taken up into a cloud on the day of the Ascension, forty days after Easter, and the church complex in which I lived is called the Church of the Ascension. Christian tradition says that the Messiah will come again in glory first appearing on the Mount of Olives, and this is a tradition we share with the Jews who also await the messiah. There are thousands of Jewish graves on the western slope of the Mount of Olives, facing the Old City walls, because they believe that the messiah will call first from their graves those who witness his coming in that place. It was an almost scary thought, to hear the call to prayer on the Mount of Olives every morning, because it is in Palestinian East Jerusalem, and know that each morning could herald the coming of Christ right on top of you. Jerusalem is the kind of place that gets you thinking about that kind of thing! Every day I would walk along the narrow ridge and see the Old City with the golden Dome of the Rock on one side and the Judean desert and the Dead Sea and the mountains of Moab (now in Jordan) on the other. There were some days I could swear I saw Ruth and Naomi make their way from Moab to Bethlehem.

The last day I was in Jerusalem, my friend Danielle and I went to the Haram a Sherif, or Temple Mount, in the morning. Danielle had been studying Hebrew and her final exam was the translation of Genesis 18, the sacrifice of Isaac, on what is traditionally thought to be Mount Zion, the Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock in Islam. We walked the large space of Temple Mount – 34 acres – and peered into the mosque of the Dome of the Rock - with its central rock on which Abraham was called to sacrifice his son Ishmael (yes, Ishmael) and the Al Aqsa Mosque. As we sat and chatted in the shade, she said that her feeling about Temple Mount was that it was empty – God had left. Pondering that, I found I don't have a bit of trouble with that concept. Jesus himself said "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. God is spirit and those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." I find the whole idea that the ultra-Orthodox Jews and the crazy right-wing Christians have of destroying the Muslim Dome of the Rock and rebuilding the Jewish Third Temple in its place in order to resume animal sacrifice (the Jews) and to force God's hand in hastening the coming of the messiah to destroy the Muslims and the Jews (the Christians) extremely distasteful and just bad theology. Ezekiel and Isaiah in the sixth century BC, before the building of the second temple, both spoke of a universal God whose temple is the world and who is not confined to one nation or one people. Jerusalem is a holy place, for some, but it is not the only holy place.

We do recognize holy places and holy times, and we recognize holy people. For me, the experience in Jerusalem was a wonderfully mixed blessing. You can feel

free, in Jerusalem, to ask someone about his or her faith and its practices without fear of giving offense, or hearing someone stutter, “Well, I’m more spiritual than religious.” People were much more articulate about their faith and felt very free to practice. I’d not interacted with observant Jews much before, many of my classmates would touch the mezuzah at the door of every classroom and kiss their fingers. Most of the boys wore kippahs. Many were kosher and a few were strict sabbatarians. You could hear the call to prayer echo around the city, and Muslims would stop and unroll their prayer carpets to pray as the sound of church bells rang out. But I came to appreciate the incredible wisdom of our founding fathers who declared that there would be no state religion in America. I found in Israel that when there is state religion there is inevitably and inescapably religious tyranny by the minority of the ultra-orthodox. It was an interesting experience to be actively discriminated against because of my religion. I had not felt that to such an extent living in conservative but polite Muslim countries like Oman and Qatar for so many years. In the US when we discriminate, we pretend we don’t and we apologize if we are caught doing so. In Israel it is overt and unapologetic. I found out in a hurry just how American my religious values are. That was a valuable learning experience.

I hope this Lent, this year, is an opportunity for all of us to question our religious values. We do have them and they are worth considering, exploring, and sorting out. Especially in this day and age. Especially this year. I am a Christian, but I am also an American who believes passionately in freedom of religion and non-discrimination. There are other Christian nations who frankly say that their citizens do not have the right to choose in matters of, say, divorce, or birth control or abortion – Ireland, Portugal. Israel even says that non-Jews cannot do certain things on the Sabbath, and strictly defines who can be married to whom and divorced. Those are not my religious values. We may believe the same things as Christians, but we may differ a great deal on the way we believe our faith should be lived out in the public sector. As Christians we cannot pretend to be united in our religious practices and I believe this serves as a valuable check and balance on the imposition of our values on others. And you may disagree with me! And isn’t that great! As we enter Lent, let us open ourselves to the new places and new visions that a journey with Jesus offers us.

I certainly felt a little bit like Peter on that day in Jerusalem. Following the way of the cross isn’t something we would expect or choose, for us or for those we love. But when we do, we find that it is - in the words of the prayer book - the way of life. We become open to those around us, their suffering, their differences, even

their hostility. We see with new eyes and new love. And of course, when we reach the Fourteenth Station of the Cross, we reach resurrection and life eternal.