

They call it “The Fifth Gospel”, the Land itself where Jesus walked and preached, and healed, and into which we sent his disciples in today's Gospel. The Land where earlier Amos, a man of Judah, had denounced the rich of the kingdom of Israel. To understand the four Gospels, to get to grips with the Bible, you need to be familiar with the fifth Gospel, the Land itself.

I have often described the topography of Palestine, the name which the Romans gave to this bridge of land ever caught between mighty empires; its four stratae that run from north to south, from the Mediterranean coast to the desert, now I was seeing it. I had visited Israel once before on pilgrimage, but that was just for a week and was back in the 1980's. I have learnt a great deal since then about the Land, its archaeology and its Bible.

Ben Gurion Airport is near the coast on that thin fertile strip that forms the first strata. The Phoenicians called this area home. They were a Canaanite people who traded across the Mediterranean; Carthage was one of their foundations. They gave the world the alphabet. Previously writing was either Egyptian hieroglyphs or Assyrian cuneiform. Both are pictograms, requiring thousands of images to be learnt by a diligent scribe. The alphabet reduced the learning to fewer than thirty symbols, opening the way for the masses to be literate. The people of Israel and Judah would be among the first to see the importance of teaching this skill to their children.

As the taxi sped away from the airport, the mountains of the second strata were already in view. These hills saw an explosion of settlements at the end of the late bronze age. Over two hundred small settlements suddenly appear in the archaeological record. This in inhospitable terrain where the rainfall is meagre, and every five to seven years the rains fail completely and devastating drought is the consequence. These peoples could only settle because they had the technological advances of being able to dig and plaster cisterns and terrace the hillsides to retain and maximise the use of the precious rainfall. No one knows for sure where these people came from but they were the people who became the children of Israel.

In the middle of the range is Jerusalem, the city David took from the Jebuzites, around 1000BCE. A city can exist here because in the valley there is a spring. The Gihon Spring still provides water. King Hezekiah's engineers with great skill tunnelled through the rock to bring the water safely within the city's walls. Some of us walked through that tunnel, at times need deep in water, to emerge at the pool of Siloam.

Leaving the city to go towards Jericho and the Dead Sea, our coach does not go up and over the Mount of Olives as Jesus had often done. We go through the Mount of Olives and emerge in the third strata of land, the desert. Bedouin camp here. Now with trucks and satellite dishes on their huts, but they follow the mode of life of their ancestors. The fourth strata is the rift valley which runs from the Mount Herman range of Mountains in the north and far into Africa. Here is the lowest inhabited place on earth. The Dead Sea is drying up as its minerals are harvested. Our destination is Khirbet Qumran, the ruins of a small community who might have placed their library in the hills around here for safekeeping, but who never collected them. They were found by a Bedouin boy searching for a stray goat in 1947 and are known as the Dead Sea Scrolls.

To spend a month in Jerusalem, in the Old City, a stone's throw from Al'Aksa, the Temple Mount, and to be able to gaze at the domes of the Holy Sepulchre Church just up the hill was a privilege. Next time I would spend more time in Galilee, whose valleys are as hugely fertile as they were in Jesus' day. We had four days there but it is not enough.

It is a holy Land, but not a peaceful land. While there are many on all sides who want a just peace for all who live there, the government are following policies which are intended to drive Palestinians away. They are not welcome in the land which is theirs and was their ancestors for thousands of years.

The everyday greeting is “Shalom”- Peace. For the peace of Jerusalem pray. May peace reign in your homes; in your palaces, peace.