

“Bethlehem, Ephrathah, least of the clans of Judah” is the topic of our reflection today.

Unlike Nazareth, which is not mentioned in any extant literature before the Gospel of Mark, Bethlehem is well known in the Scriptures. It is most famously the family home of Jesse and his seven sons, the youngest of whom is called from tending his father's flocks to be anointed king of Israel by the prophet Samuel.

Earlier in chronology but probably a later work Bethlehem is the home of Naomi. Bethlehem means 'House of Bread' but there is famine and Naomi with her husband Elimelech and two sons have to seek refuge in neighbouring but hostile Moab. The sons, who both have unfortunate names Mahlon and Chillon, meaning 'sickly' and 'wasting away'. Unsurprisingly both die as does the husband and Naomi decides to return home. She urges her daughters-in-law to stay with their own people. Oprah does so, Ruth commits herself to her mother-in-law in one of the most moving affirmations of love, of cleaving, in the Hebrew Bible or any literature:

*“Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!”*

To understand what is happening, we need to remember not just the hatred between the two peoples, but that each had their own god. Ruth should worship the god of the Moabites, Chermosh. She is demolishing all her bridges behind her.

It is as if in the Troubles in the 1970's a Catholic girl from the South had married a Protestant from Ulster and return to an Orange estate in Belfast to be with her mother-in-law. She would have been viewed with suspicion, if not blatant hostility. But this is a love story. The beautiful Ruth, who cleaves so tightly to Naomi, finds a new husband, the noble Boaz, and becomes the great grandmother of David, the King. This is a story proclaiming that foreigners can find a place in Israel. Aliens can be good, people. Like so much of the Bible it is a contemporary tale.

Our visit to the place of Jesus' birth was simultaneously a high and a low spot in my month's sabbatical in June. Our first stop, having crossed through the check-point at the hideous wall which defaces the landscape across a swathe of ancient Judah south and west of Jerusalem, was the University of Bethlehem. This is a foundation of the

Christian Brothers which was upgraded to University status after a wish-command from Pope Paul VI during his visit to the Holy Land in 1968. It teaches about 3,000 students, 73% of whom are Muslims, and 77% are female. The authorities need to raise millions of dollars a year to maintain it. We were addressed and our questions were answered by two students, a Muslim young lady and a Christian young man. They were very impressive in their friendliness and dignity as they told their stories which included descriptions of the intimidation they endure on a daily basis from the Israeli Defence Forces. One of the 'attractions' we were shown was the hole in a wall where an Israeli shell hit in one of the many, seemingly, random attacks during the frequent outbreaks of hostilities, brutally suppressed.

It is uplifting to hear a Muslim speak of her pride in her Catholic University, and how she does not know the religion of her friends – they are simply friends; and depressing to hear of the blatant intimidation that makes life a constant misery for them which so much resembled the stories of the apartheid regime in South Africa. Perhaps the similarities are grounds for hope. No one imagined how quickly those walls would tumble down.

Our last visit that day was to a shop selling those olive wood sculptures such a speciality of the town. Our group were the only shoppers, and maybe the first customers, late in the afternoon though it was. The owner was in tears as he told me how difficult it was to make a living these days when access to Bethlehem for pilgrims is increasingly difficult and the numbers of resident Christians is dropping alarmingly.

In between these visits, after a splendid lunch in a restaurant just off Manger Square, we did the holy thing and went to the Church of the Nativity, bending low to get through the tiny door, designed to prevent horsemen riding into the Church to cause havoc. The caves under the Church give a sense of the Gospel-story. It was in these caves too that Jerome translated the Scriptures into the vernacular Latin for the common people.

On Monday night there will be festivities in Manger Square. The world will watch as pilgrims adore at the place of Jesus' birth. But there will be fewer than previous years. The numbers are declining. The effort to get there is off-putting. And the Christian population here and around the Middle East is declining sharply. The message of Bethlehem, and the message of Ruth needs to be heard again. People of different backgrounds can cleave, can be loyal to each other, even to death and beyond.

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