

HOLY LAND PILGRIMAGE 2022

Rector Chris Girata

In March, thirty-nine pilgrims travelled on the Saint Michael Family Holy Land Pilgrimage. This pilgrimage was originally scheduled to be in March 2021, and even though we were delayed a year, we were thrilled to go!

BACKSTORY

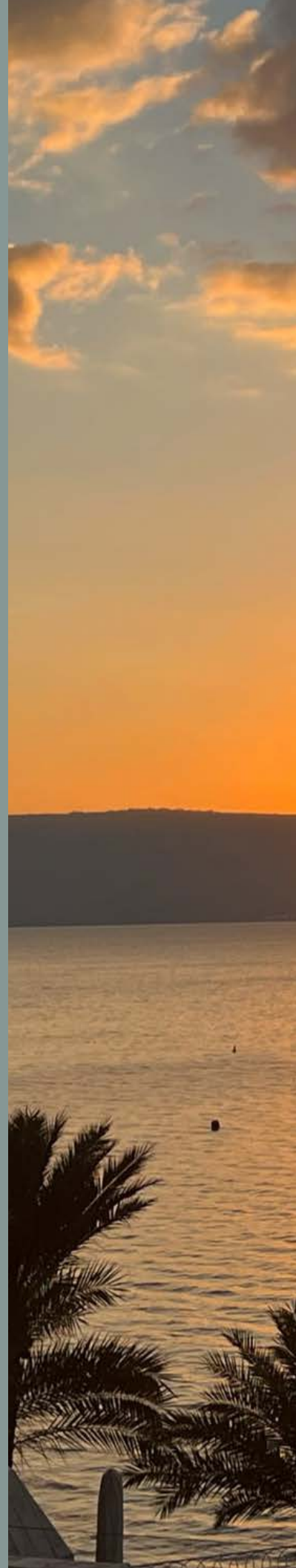
Before we get to the official tour notes, I want to make a quick and important point: The Christian sites we visited are ones that have been identified for at or less than 1600 years. All you math sleuths will see that there is a 400ish-year gap between Jesus's life and these sites. Until Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire, Christians often met in secret for fear of retribution. Once their faith practices were legalized, Roman authorities, such as Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena, began to track down sites of special importance. Wherever Christians gathered to remember a special moment in Jesus's life, Roman leaders would plant a flag and most often build a church. Modern pilgrims, like us, visit holy sites that trace their roots back to the fourth century and later. As we saw along the way, the churches, chapels, monasteries, and the like that have been built upon holy sites can often cover up what was original.

Regardless, being there is incredibly special, and I hope you will be inspired by the journey as much as we were.

THE TRIP

Our first official day of touring began at the Chapel of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. The chapel is located on top of the rock where early Christians believed Jesus last touched the earth physically. Next, we walked down the street to the Church of the Pater Noster. Also on the Mount of Olives, this church is built on the site where early Christians believe Jesus first taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer. Pater Noster means "Our Father" in Latin, and the church is a tribute to this most holy prayer. Lining the walls of the church, hallways, and courtyards is the Lord's Prayer in 140 different languages from around the world. The pilgrims climbed down into the grotto below the courtyard to be near the rock upon which the early Christians believed Jesus sat to teach.

We hopped back on the bus for the relatively short ride out of Jerusalem and into Bethlehem. We went straight away to Shepherd's Field, the site where early Christians celebrated the appearance of the angel of the







LAYNA G.

“Media only tells you one side of a story. While living in America, most of the stories you learn are from a certain perspective about certain topics. Coming to the Christ Anglican School gave me an opportunity to hear stories about people’s everyday lives from their perspectives. It showed me that even though we live in different countries and lead different lifestyles, we are very similar.”

Lord to the shepherds. Shepherd’s Field has a beautiful chapel built above a very simple chapel set in an ancient cave. We gathered in both spaces and were able to sing “Angels we have heard on high” together!

After a big lunch at The Tent Restaurant, we headed to the

Church of the Nativity. Built on the site of Jesus’s birth, the Church of the Nativity is more popular than any other Christian holy site except the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (built where Jesus was crucified and buried). When we think of the manger, we often have in our minds a barn full of hay and a wooden trough in which the newborn Jesus was laid. It is most likely, however, that Jesus was born in a cave where the whole family would have been safe from the elements and from wild animals.

The next day began with a walk to the Temple Mount. One of the holiest sites for Jews and Muslims, the Temple Mount is perhaps the most contested property on the planet. Today, this holy site features the iconic Dome of the Rock and the simpler Al-Aqsa Mosque. Because of its sacred identity and governing authority, there hasn’t been any modern excavation of the site.

The Saint Michael pilgrims gath-

ered on the Temple Mount between the shrine and the mosque to learn its dynamic history and how the site functions today. They also learned about how the Jewish people seek to pray as close to where the Temple had been as possible, which is a retaining wall on the west that we now refer to as the Western (or Wailing) Wall. Although we are not allowed to pray on the Mount, we felt God’s holy presence and it was a privilege to be there.

From the Temple Mount, we traveled east out of the Old City to St. George’s Cathedral, the seat of the Anglican Diocese of Jerusalem. One of our sister churches, St. George’s Cathedral is a beautiful space that has supported faithful disciples for more than a century as they witness to the love of Christ in one of the most dynamic areas of the world. I was privileged to vest for the service and proclaim the Gospel, and Archbishop Hosam Naoum celebrated the



Eucharist. It was a wonderful way to center ourselves in the early part of our pilgrimage.

Following the Eucharist service, we headed east out of Jerusalem toward the Dead Sea. The Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth, with a drop in elevation from Jerusalem of nearly 4,000 feet. We went to floated in the Dead Sea first, a real treat—nearly ten times saltier than an average ocean, the water in the sea creates a high buoyancy so everyone floats without any effort—it's quite the ride! The salty environment also creates a minerality that has been touted as an exceptional skin treatment. Many of our pilgrims spread the mineral-rich mud on their skin and came out even prettier.



After our time in Jerusalem, we moved to the Galilee region near Nazareth. We spent our first day in the region at Christ Anglican School in Nazareth. When we arrived at the school, our group was greeted by some students and teachers, and after a quick breakfast, our youth went with students their own age to get to know the students. While the youth were with the students, the adults took a tour of school and learned about all the different classes offered at the school. Our youth pilgrims shared thoughts about their visit to the school that are peppered throughout this article.



Following lunch at the school, we walked into town to visit the Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches of the Annunciation. The Greek Orthodox Church of the Annunciation is built over the well where Mary would gather water each day. The Orthodox tradition holds that Gabriel appeared to Mary at the well to tell her the news that she would become pregnant through the Holy Spirit. From there we headed to the Roman Catholic Church of the Annunciation which is built over Mary's home. The Roman tradition holds

that Gabriel appeared to Mary at home. This second church is the largest Christian Church in Israel and it's beautiful. Inside and outside the church are different

the hometown of Peter, Andrew, James, and John. It's also where Jesus performed many miracles, documented clearly in the Gospel of Luke. After his death and resurrec-

Next, we traveled to Tabgha on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. This was the site where Jesus called his first disciples—Peter, Andrew, James, and John—and where he performed the miracle of the multiplication, feeding more than 5,000 with five loaves and two fish. Being down on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is always a moving experience. This time, we celebrated Holy Eucharist in an outdoor chapel directly next to the sea! It was amazing to be in the place where Christian discipleship began and to be celebrating our own faithfulness together. There were many tears shed and I think everyone will remember the experience for the rest of their lives.



artistic depictions of Mary from different countries, each with an incredible uniqueness.

Back in Galilee, we visited Capernaum, the “Town of Jesus.” Located on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee, Capernaum is believed to be the place where Jesus lived most often during his public ministry. It was the hometown of Matthew, and very near Bethsaida,

tion, it's believed that Peter's mother-in-law's house became one of the earliest house churches. Over time, this site was expanded and developed by faithful Christians, with multiple churches being built over the site during the next five centuries. Today, the original first-century building has been excavated and can be seen outside a memorial church that was suspended over the site in the 1980s.

We ended the day on top of the Mount of Beatitudes. The most important single teaching Jesus offered is the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew, and he offered that teaching on top of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. It's a beautiful place—truly stunning—and today, has been made into a sprawling garden maintained by the Franciscan Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The garden contains many walking paths with stones along the path that quote from the beatitudes themselves. Visitors are invited to quietly move along the paths and meditate about the powerful

THOMAS G.

“I had no idea what I was walking into when we went to the school, but the experience ended up being amazing. All the students seemed genuinely glad to host us and talk with us. Some of them had tests the next period, but they still showed up to talk with us. The students created a really welcoming environment, and their wanting to be there made me love being there. Really, all of them are exactly the same as us in everything from spending a little bit too much time on their phones to being stressed about school.”

THOMAS R.

“Before our trip to Nazareth, I had a preconceived notion of what schooling systems overseas would behave like. Entering Christ Anglican School, all of these barriers were broken. The students here were more similar to me and my peers than I could have ever expected. During our tours and discussions, we covered topics such as pop-culture, our day to day lives and even politics.”

words of Christ that continue to impact the world. One of the topographic features that I find most striking about the mountain is seeing the volcanic rocks scattered all around the hillside. Before I first visited Galilee, I imagined it to be grass-covered rolling hills. Instead, large volcanic stones sit everywhere, and those listening to Jesus would have been sitting on the stones or leaning against them during his teaching. I loved watching our pilgrims sit quietly, gazing out on the Sea of Galilee, perhaps praying softly. The power of this place continues to amaze me.

We spent our last full day in Jerusalem walking through the streets of the Old City. The goal was to walk in Jesus’s footsteps, to see where he performed miracles, where he was put on trial, and where he died and was buried. We began at the Church of the Flagellation where Jesus was put on trial before Pontius Pilate. The area once held the palace where Roman Governors lived while in Jerusalem, but today is the site of a church and beautiful courtyard. In that courtyard, we began the Via Dolorosa, the “Way of Sorrows.” The path of the Via Dolorosa traces the way Jesus walked through the city on his way to Golgotha. We prayed the Stations of the Cross as we went, and it was moving to hear the words of each station prayed by our pilgrims, especially our young people. In addition, all the pilgrims helped carry a wooden cross through the crowded streets on our way.

When I first walked the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem, one of the most powerful observations for me was just how busy the streets are all the time. In my mind, Jesus’s trial and watching him carry the wooden cross through the streets would have been the most im-

portant thing happening that day. However, I quickly learned that Jerusalem is always busy and people are moving constantly. Rather than being the focus of the day, I now began to imagine that Jesus was an annoyance to those trying to make their way through the streets. What a humbling experience.

We ended the stations on the roof of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, a large church built over the historic sites of Jesus’s crucifixion and burial. Today, the Chapel of the Crucifixion and the Tomb of Christ are powerful pilgrimage sites. Not only are they unexpectedly beautiful, but the overwhelming sense of the sacred permeates the walls themselves. Watching our pilgrims touch the stone upon which Jesus was crucified and seeing them walk into the tomb was incredibly moving. Spending time in prayer where Jesus’s earthly ministry found fulfillment was a wonderful way to officially end our trip.





Following a good lunch, we made our way to the Garden of Gethsemane. The garden is on the west side of the Mt. of Olives, facing the Old City. Gethsemane literally means “olive press,” so it’s no wonder that the hillside is full of beautiful olive trees. Although some are new, there are many trees that have been dated at more than 1,000 years old. These exact trees may not have seen Jesus praying in the garden, but they grew from trees that surely did. On the place of Jesus’s prayer before his arrest sits the gorgeous Church of All Nations. Built with the major gifts of twelve nations (including the U.S.), this church represents the unity we find in Christ, no matter where we come from or who we are.

Our last stop of the day is one of my personal favorites: the Church of St. Peter of Gallicantu, meaning “cock crows.” This church is built on the historic site of Caiaphus’s house. Caiaphus was the High Priest who had Jesus arrested in the garden and held as a captive until his Roman trial. The church is built upon the excavated caves that were used by Caiaphus and his household. Most notably is the cistern into which Jesus was lowered and held overnight. The horror of this space is apparent: it’s a deep stone cavern with no windows or door, just a hole in the ceiling. Jesus would have been strung up by his shoulders and lowered into the pit and left hanging until the time of his trial before Pilate. Today, we are able to descend modern steps into the pit and say prayers together.

The church above is covered in the most exquisite mosaics depicting the plight of Peter. After Jesus’s arrest, he was taken to Caiaphus’s house and Peter followed at a distance. Afraid for his own life, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times, just as Jesus had predicted, and when the cock crowed, Peter ran away weeping bitterly.

CATE G.

“I loved visiting the students and teachers at Christ Anglican School. They were outspoken, expressing their love for their community, culture, and academics. I learned about their specified high school major paths and their thoughts on US culture. We are definitely more similar than different which was delightful to discover.”

JOHN W.

“Having been told seemingly dramatic legends of the generosity and genuine intrigue by our visitors, I strongly expected disappointment. However, not only was I satisfied, but my preconceptions were exceeded. The average student was friendly, open, and kind—though many didn’t understand a word I said. Those that were fluent in English were even more so. The experiences they shared were not far off base from our own: We shared favorite celebrities, career aspirations, and social habits, to name a few. The experience was frameshift-changing, as well as a much-needed reminder of our globally shared humanity.”

Today, this church witnesses the redemption possible for everyone. Peter, the disciple who knew Jesus personally, who loved him, and upon whom Jesus built the church, denied even knowing him. And yet, even that intimate, fearful denial can be redeemed through Christ’s love. A most appropriate way to end our last official day.

I know that this trip made a deep impact on our pilgrims, and I hope you’ve found some inspiration by following along with us. May we all continue to follow in Christ’s footsteps each and every day!



For more pictures and full details on each day of the pilgrimage, visit our blog at saintmichael.org/blog.