

Pilgrim or Tourist?

Well, we are finally here. What seemed like an eternity a year ago is now a reality. The days and weeks leading up to this moment seemed to go by so fast. Some of us were so excited that we packed a whole week before we left! Now we all share in that excitement and now we are in the Holy Land, the mother of all pilgrimages.

But now what? Now that we are here, what do we do? What makes this pilgrimage different from a religious tour? How do we enter into this most holy pilgrimage?

In a way, we could stereotypically say that we are all on the pilgrimage of life. Some of us in this past year have experienced the joys of ordination, the changing of parishes or positions, the thrill of marriage or the beauty of new life. At the same time I know that some of us or those we love have experienced the pains of pain, the sorrows of loss and the heartbreak of life. Although we faced various circumstances in our life, although we have come from many a pilgrimage and a journey, all of our pilgrimages are converging upon this ONE point right here right now. So we need to recognize that our pilgrimage here is not by chance as St. JP II writes: in the designs of Providence there are no mere coincidences.

Recognize now then, that God has intentionally called you, called me, called all of us here from our individual pilgrimages of joy and pain to share in the one great pilgrimage of his. And this is his annunciation to you.

After St. Ignatius of Loyola had his profound conversion guess where he desired to go first? Jerusalem. But he wanted to go to Jerusalem in the most difficult way. He wanted to beg in order to pay for his way there eating nothing but herbs and going barefoot the whole way. One of the interesting things about his journey was that when he went to the Mount of Olives he saw a stone that was believed to have borne the footprints of Jesus before he ascended into heaven.

However, he didn't just look at it and say 'cool!'. He imagined how Jesus stepped on it, how he ascended from it, what angle, what movement in what way etc. Why did he do this? He did this because he was trying to imagine HOW Jesus walked in this land. He was literally trying to relive the steps of Jesus. Why? Because he was joining his pilgrimage with the one, great pilgrimage of the God-

man who walked through these very streets. He was entering and participating in the mysteries of Christ and not just as a tourist.

This is the invitation that God is making to us today. We are literally in the place (or the place believed to be) where the Angel Gabriel announced the plan of God to Mary, and he is asking each and everyone of us as he did of Mary, "Will you unite the pilgrimage of your life with that of my Son, will you unite the mystery of your life with the mysteries of his pilgrimage?"

Our readings present us with two ways in which we can respond to this invitation.

King Ahaz who is the king of Jerusalem had just found out that he was going to be attacked by the northern Kingdom of Israel and Syria and he and the people were so afraid that "their hearts shook as the trees of the forest shake in the wind." King Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem were terrified and so they were tempted to turn to ANY other means to defend themselves, to survive. They were even tempted to turn to their mortal enemy, Assyria, for help even though Assyria had previously tried to invade them.

King Ahaz would be like the equivalent of Mayor Naheed Nenshi fearing the alliance between Airdrie and Red Deer and in an act of desperation, he was actually looking for help from Edmonton.

So then the Lord asks the Prophet Isaiah to speak to King Ahaz to reassure him that God will take care of him: "Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint. It shall not stand, it shall not come to pass...if you do not stand firm in faith you shall not stand at all." Knowing the hesitation that was in his heart, the prophet tried to reassure him, "I know this can be hard to believe but I'll prove it to you. Ask for a sign from the Lord your God; let it be deep as the netherworld or high as the sky and it will show you that God is faithful!"

What does King Ahaz do? He refuses even to ask for a sign out of false humility and he makes an alliance with the mortal enemy, Assyria. Rather than trusting in the Divine Providence of the Lord, he relied in the human politics of the time because being in control seemed easier than abandoning oneself into the arms of the Father. Temporarily, Jerusalem survived but less than 200 years later it would fall to Babylon. If we do not stand firm in faith, we will not stand at all.

Therefore, the Lord was inviting King Ahaz, “will you allow your pilgrimage to be united with that of my Son, the one born of a virgin, the one whose name is Emmanuel? I know your pilgrimage looks like it is going to be tough but my yoke is easy and my burden is light so trust in me.” Yet he refused.

Despite the rejection of God’s offer, he remains faithful. He still makes the offer to humanity but this time he does not turn to the king, but the future King’s mother, he turns to Mary: “Will you bear the Son of God, will you bear the one whom nations longed for, the one whom prophets foretold, the one who is to redeem the world? “Let it be done unto me according to your will. I will allow my pilgrimage to be united with that of my Son so that the mysteries of his life may be intertwined with mine”

Mary offers us another way to respond to his question: choosing to allow the mysteries of Christ to be born in us, so that it takes flesh in us as it did in her.

For the mysteries of Jesus are not yet completely perfected and fulfilled. They are complete, indeed, in the person of Jesus but not in us (St John Eudes).

Therefore, I invite you brothers and sisters not just to be tourists, not to participate in this journey externally. Enter into the sanctuary of your heart, open your heart to receive the grace he wants to give you. When we were at Stella Maris yesterday at the Carmelite monastery just before we walked into the chapel where Elijah encountered the Lord, I could feel the desire to listen to the Lord well up in my heart. This is the very place where Elijah heard the still small voice, where Elijah encountered God! And here we are standing in that very place and so I was no longer wanted to be an observer recalling an event 2700 years ago—I was THERE and I heard his still small voice.

The Annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary 2000 years ago is now happening to us here. Let the mystery of Christ soak into your heart until your life becomes one with Christ. Not only can the mysteries of his earthly pilgrimage encompass the mysteries of our life but they can also transform our lives if we allow it. Let us stand firm in faith or else we will not stand at all! Let us stand firm in the mysteries of Christ rather than watch from the outside. If we unite our pilgrimage with his and walk the paths that he trod in the innermost depths of our heart, then we will find that we will also share in that one, great pilgrimage of the God-

man who passed over from this world to the Father, who passed from death to life and that invitation is given to you today.