

Dear Friends,

We arrived in Jerusalem yesterday evening (October 2nd) at about 5:30 p.m. (or 10:30 a.m. in Indiana). The weather is hot and dry here - a big change from the cool (or nearly cold) and wet weather of Scotland and Wales. I finally got a pair of shorts out today - and put my sweater away.

As we have traveled, I am aware that some things are universal. I've experienced one of them this week - I've got a cold. Now this is truly an international cold. It started in Wales, became worse when we got to London to leave Great Britain, and was full blown by the time we got to Jerusalem. While I have had plenty of colds, I've never had an international cold. I feel better today thanks to some decongestant - and time.

Of course, there are many other things that are universal - which is really what is on my mind. One of those things is how we, as human beings, search for an encounter with God. This search was clear to me as I reflect on the places we have been during the past month. St. Cuthbert would go to a small island off of Lindisfare in order to remove himself from the demands of the monastery and pray. At high tide that small island would be cut off from Lindisfarne Island, just as Lindisfarne would be cut off from the mainland. He was not very far removed, but certainly he was searching for an encounter with God in prayer.

On Iona we saw a hill where tradition tells us that St. Columba went to be alone and pray. Also on Iona was another location where he had a small stone cell where he could go to study the scriptures, read and write - away from the abbey and monastery. Again, this was a search to encounter God.

We also visited St. Ninian's Cave near Whithorn, Scotland, where St. Ninian would go to pray. This was a shallow cave, perhaps 10 feet back into the cliff along the Scottish coastline. It was more a recess in the cliff wall than what we often think of as a cave. This cave was miles from his church and the monastery where he carried out his mission in the 5th Century. This was his place for a retreat and an encounter with God.

Beside these places being places of retreat for St. Columba, St. Cuthbert and St. Ninian, they became places of pilgrimage for other people. For centuries people have followed these saints to these remote places seeking to encounter God - to draw closer to the holiness of God. The pilgrims went to these places perhaps in part because of the reputation of these men for their holiness of life and dedication to God. Also, I am sure people continued to go to these places because they encountered God for themselves. They are holy places - places that have become holy through the prayers offered there.

As we begin our time in the Holy Land, I know this is also a place where people have sought to encounter God. The Bible in some ways could be described as the story of humanity's search for God. And, it is the story of God reaching out to his creation. The Bible is the story of the encounter of God and humanity - particularly in God is revealed in Jesus Christ.

I have had a difficult time describing what I felt as we drove to Jerusalem from the airport in Tel Aviv. There were feelings of anticipation, of joy, of excitement, of worry (this is a land and a city of conflict) - and perhaps above all disbelief that I am really here. Virginia and I had been to England 18 years ago (and even in Scotland for 2 days - and Wales for a few hours on that trip). Israel and Jerusalem is a new experience - but deeply connected to my life of faith.

This is a land in which people have encountered God for centuries - or more accurately for over 3,000 years. Jerusalem has been central in the search to encounter God for Jews, Christians and Muslims. It is not the only city or place we encounter God - Columba, Cuthbert and Ninian encountered God in the cold and wet of Britain.

Now, - whether I can really believe it or not - I am here - in the hot, dry middle East - as part of my own pilgrimage and encounter with God.

Peace,  
Bruce .