

NAZARETH

[After fleeing to Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus, Joseph] 'came back to the land of Israel.....[and] guided by a dream, he withdrew to the region of Galilee, where he settled in a town called Nazareth.' Matthew 2:21-22

Nazareth. Nazareth is a real place. Let me tell you how I came to go there in 1960, nearly 60 years ago. I was visiting a kibbutz, a Jewish collective farm, in the valley called Esdraelon, in Northern Israel- in the region of Galilee. An interesting few days. For example, the people who lived on the kibbutz were drawn from many countries, all Jews. Many of them had fled from the horrors of Nazi Europe and taken refuge in the young State of Israel. I remember one meal in the kibbutz dining hall. Sitting across the table from me was a woman, in her forties perhaps, with a very worn face. On her forearm was a tattooed number; she was a survivor from a Nazi concentration camp. With a jolt I realised I was face to face with the Holocaust. Its history became real in that moment.

Now if you stay on a kibbutz, your labour is valued and you can sing for your supper. So one day I found myself piling up root vegetables with a hired Palestinian labourer. He could speak some English, and I learned he was from Nazareth. He wasn't enthusiastic about working for Jews, but a job was a job. But he couldn't understand why I, a Christian, was visiting a kibbutz and working for nothing. He invited me to stay overnight in his home in Nazareth. I said 'yes please' very quickly, and a few days later I found myself there in his very modest home. He was a Muslim, married. His wife was polite and hospitable enough, served the evening meal to her husband and me, but didn't sit with us – she simply disappeared. Next day - a sunny morning - I was shown two things: the main Christian church, and the marketplace, where I was introduced to his friends. There I met 'the carpenter of Nazareth', who happened to be a Muslim.

So that's how I know that Nazareth is a real place, up in the bare hills, north of the Valley of Esdraelon. And know also that the Holocaust was real too. It's one thing to accept something 'in your head', and another to see the real thing.

I've sometimes wondered how different the home which Jesus grew up in would have been to the one I visited in Nazareth almost 2000 years later. And the figure of the woman who served me a meal and then disappeared has stayed with me. How different was her domestic role from that of Mary? Both women were poor, that's for certain. But Joseph had a trade, and I don't think my labourer friend did. Still, his 20th Century Nazareth was larger and more prosperous than the one Jesus knew. That was tiny – something like 150 people, according to some archaeologists.

Let's widen the lens a little. In what ways (if any) were the Nazareth and Galilee of Jesus' time like those of 1960? And yes, there are likenesses. Three in particular.

1. Galilee 2000 years ago was inhabited by the descendants of Jewish exiles who had returned home from captivity in Babylon and found the region resettled by non-Jews. That's why it was sometimes called 'Galilee of the Gentiles'. It was a mixed area. And this also applied to Galilee in 1960, inhabited by Jewish exiles who had returned to the Holy Land during the 20th Century and settled among the Palestinians. Jews and Arabs were living uneasily side by side.

2. Politically Galilee was unstable in both periods. Armed conflict was not far away, in time or in space. Rule and authority over the area were subject to change.
3. Nevertheless, there was a lot of new building going on. The Roman conquerors had carved up Palestine into smaller regions, and ruled mostly through puppet kings – the Herods. These Herods were building big, often in a Greek or Roman style. Tiberias on the Lake of Galilee, and more importantly Sepphoris, only a few kilometres away from Nazareth. Now Joseph's family links were with Bethlehem in the south, in Judea. But as a carpenter, Joseph a little earlier in his life may well have been attracted north to find work. (Rather like my Palestinian host finding work down on the kibbutz.) That's when Joseph could well have first met Mary or her family, in Galilee, lived there, and later returned there when he had to find a safe place to hide his new family, in this obscure village in the hills of the North. Incidentally, the new Israel I saw in 1960 was also building big. Jewish immigrants and their skills, energy (and money when they had it) were changing the face of Palestine. It was vibrant.

Let's stay now with the Holy Family of Joseph and Mary and Jesus. The four Gospels don't give us all that much about the early years. Only Matthew and Luke mention them, and it's not easy to mesh the two completely. But there is what's sometimes called the 'Fifth Gospel', and that's the Holy Land itself. On the ground there, archaeology and other studies come up with further possibilities. Not probabilities, let alone certainties, yet plausible suggestions. One I'm attracted to is that *all* the people of the small village of Nazareth belonged to the 'house of David': a close-knit clan or *hapu* of Jews returning from exile who clung to their identity and their genealogies and kept to themselves. (There's good evidence for another such settlement on the other side of Galilee.) And Joseph himself was also of the house of David, though down in dangerous Judea. So what better place than Nazareth for Joseph to choose for the early years of this special child?

These years are hidden, for whatever reason. Jesus at this time seldom emerges from the silence of history. When he does so, it's in Jerusalem, first for his 'Presentation' as an infant in the Temple, and later, being taken annually by his parents to celebrate the Passover there.

Why this silence in the Gospels? Is it simply a result of Joseph's prudent protection of Jesus? Let's dig a bit deeper, and reflect on the shape of Jesus's life on earth.

We start, or Jesus starts, with the wonderful combination of humility and glory around his conception and birth. Call it Chapter One.

Then come the Hidden Years in Nazareth- Chapter Two.

Then comes the Ministry in Galilee, when Jesus proclaims in word and deed the coming of the Reign of God. Chapter Three.

Then comes the climactic week in Jerusalem, Holy Week: Christ's Passion and Death and Resurrection. Chapter Four.

But the last two chapters together last only two or three years. Jesus dies in his early thirties. For most of his years, his life is a hidden life. And it's short.

So what might all this tell us about our own lives? How might this 'shape' of Jesus' life help you to see yourself differently? Whatever your age now, what do *you* see when you look back on your life?

For myself, I would take these lessons:

- The *length* of my life doesn't determine the *quality* of my life in God's eyes.
- For some of us, we will do our most important work for the Kingdom of God and touch the most people quite early on. This is so whether we then continue to live on longer, or die young as Jesus did. For others of us (like good Pope John 23rd who turned the Catholic Church upside down - or right side up?), the late years of a long life may be our most significant. For others again, any possible period in between may be the significant one, including a whole life lived faithfully at *every* age.
- It's not for us to judge how significant our life is or has been for others. Only God knows. I remember my spiritual director at Theological College saying to me when I parted from him, 'remember, Peter, you will do your best work as a priest without knowing it.' He was kind enough not to mention that that's also when I could do my *worst* work as a priest.
- Public profile and acknowledgement are not necessarily an indication of the quality of our life. I remember another priest saying to us 'you can do an awful lot of good in this world if you don't want to have your own name attached to it.'
- Hidden years, long hidden years, may well be an essential part of God's preparation for our most obviously significant contribution to the Kingdom. They were for Jesus. And central to those hidden years are humility - and the steady learning of wisdom from the faithful living of ordinary life.
- The journey of our lives, however short or long, however hidden or public, however fruitful or apparently unfruitful, however many chapters there are in it, is *one* journey. Ours. Just as Jesus' life is a single whole.
- Finally - the most *enjoyable* period of our lives may be in those hidden 'ordinary' years when lived in that spirit of humility and openness to God's wisdom. I like to think that the hidden years of Jesus were full of the joy of childhood and youth. Those years were not to last – but surely nothing could kill that joy. As the Son of God, he was and is the source of such joy, and of all true joy.

A sermon preached on December 29 2019 in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne by the Revd Canon Peter Stuart