

The Spiritual Gift of Walking the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem

Jouni & Deborah Kraft led a pilgrimage to Turkey & Israel in March 2014



It was the middle of March 2014. It was cold. It was rainy. Several people in our group of 24 were suffering from colds and tummy bugs, and yet we were joyful. We walked with vigour and with enthusiasm.

We had been away from Canada since the beginning of March, and we had travelled from Istanbul to some of the churches in the book of Revelation to the Galilee in Israel and now we were walking the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem.

This walk is one of the most important sites for pilgrimage for Christians from all around the world. The walk is on the “Via Dolorosa”, known as the “Way of Sorrow”, and it is the traditional route that Jesus followed bearing his cross. It begins at Pilate’s Judgement Hall in the Roman Fort of Antonia and goes to Calvary Hill or Golgotha, the site of the crucifixion. Today, the Via Dolorosa winds along the narrow streets of Jerusalem’s Old City and goes from the Ecce Homo Convent to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Along this route are the 14 Stations of the Cross. Each station marks an event of sacred memory, with chapels for reflection and prayer along the way. We took our time and prayed and reflected at each station. Most of the stations are actual events recorded in scripture and the remainder are possible events that have been part of the oral tradition of the church. For example, Jesus’ falling is not recorded in the Bible and yet it makes perfect sense that this is what happened after he was severely scourged. It explains why a man named Simon was asked to carry the cross for Christ on the way to Golgotha.

What touched me on this walk was the reality of secular life co-existing with a deep spiritual experience. While we were walking and singing and praying, people were going about their daily activities. They were drinking coffee, and taking children to school, and buying food.

At one point we joined them, and I bought the most delicious drink of freshly squeezed pomegranate juice. Our spiritual lives and our daily lives can grow together.

During our walk on the Via Dolorosa, we stopped at each station and began with a prayer:

We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you, because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.

We then reflected upon what happened at that particular point. For example at the First Station ~ Jesus is Condemned to Death ~ we read the scripture that describes Jesus’ trial. In our hearts, we heard the crowd shout “Crucify him! Crucify him!” and we watched the soldiers begin to lead Jesus to his death. We then prayed that we would never send Jesus away from our own lives and hearts.

We ended each station by praying together the prayer that Jesus taught us, what we know today as the Lord’s Prayer.

The last 4 Stations (Station 11: Jesus is nailed to the cross. Station 12: Jesus dies on the cross. Station 13: Jesus is taken down from the cross. Station 14: Jesus is laid in the tomb) are found in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Sepulchre means a tomb cut out of stone and Holy refers to Jesus’ burial in the tomb. The church was built by Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, to memorialize the spot of the crucifixion, and the spot of the burial and resurrection of Christ on that first Easter Sunday.

The Stations of the Cross were developed around the 4th century as a pilgrimage for all Christians to do in their home churches and communities. Not many people could travel to Jerusalem to walk the Via Dolorosa. During Holy Week before we celebrate the resurrection of Christ on Easter Sunday, I believe that it is important for Christians to journey with our Lord to the place of crucifixion. We enter into the story, and we understand in a

deeper way what Jesus did for us because he loves us. In the words of the 20th century theologian CS Lewis, It is not enough for Christians to be told about the coastline and to be shown a map. We must journey down to the shores and experience the spray directly on our faces. I celebrate that today, people want an experience of God’s grace and love. It is not enough to be told what to believe. We must experience the power and the goodness of God for ourselves.

I have been blessed to walk the Via Dolorosa 3 times in the past 8 years. However, I have been equally blessed to enter into the story through praying the Stations of the Cross right here in Thunder Bay. When we invite Jesus into our hearts, we are transformed and receive the gift of new life. Although it is powerful and inspirational, we do not need to journey to Israel to experience the gift of the wind of the Holy Spirit.

The 14 Stations of the Cross is a wonderful way to experience God’s peace in the midst of our own struggles ~ our own fear, worries, and anxieties. If you have an opportunity to pray the Stations of the Cross this year, I encourage you to do so.

You are most welcome to join us at St. Paul’s Anglican Church (across from McKellar Place) on Wednesday evening April 16th at 7pm during Holy Week as we walk together the Stations of the Cross.

“Let us remember that as we die with Christ, we are raised with him.”

Alleluia! Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Easter Blessings,

Archdeacon Deborah Kraft
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Archdeacon of Thunder Bay-North Shore Anglicans