

Lent 4 2021- Mothering Sunday – 14th March

9.30 Holy Communion Cuxton	Numbers 21 vv 4-9 p158 Ephesians 2 vv 1-10 p1174
11.00 Holy Communion Halling	John 3 vv 14-21 p1066

GRANT, we beseech thee, Almighty God, that we, who for our evil deeds do worthily deserve to be punished, by the comfort of thy grace may mercifully be relieved; through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

ALMIGHTY and everlasting God, who hatest nothing that thou hast made and dost forgive the sins of all them that are penitent; Create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we, worthily lamenting our sins, and acknowledging our wretchedness, may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

It was Helen, the mother of the first Christian Roman Emperor Constantine, who in the years 326-328 travelled in the Holy Land identifying many of the sites at which some of the most significant incidents recorded in the Bible took place and encouraging pilgrimage. Helen came from a humble background and, when her husband Constantius rose to high rank, he divorced her and married the step-daughter of an emperor. Constantine, however, was a devoted son. He honoured his mother in many ways and it is probably at least partly as a result of his efforts that she became a Christian.

Nearly 2,000 years later, we had a parish pilgrimage to the Holy Land. This was after I had taken part in two charity bike rides in the same part of the world. Given that God is everywhere and that we can read the Bible and pray anywhere, I have some reservations about the popularity of pilgrimage to reputedly holy places. It is certainly not something which we have to do. What is vital is that we do what we pray for the grace to do in the Ascension Day collect: *that like as we do believe thy only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens; so we may also in heart and mind thither ascend, and with him continually dwell.* It is not so much seeing where He lived and taught and performed His miracles on earth that matters; it is in knowing Him here and now, and in our knowledge of Him & of His Father here & now, possessing eternal life. As S Paul says in today's epistle, *But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus:*

There is value in pilgrimage, however, and I can think of three things which make me pleased that I have been. The first thing is that I think it does us good to go on a journey. We get out of the pattern of doing the same things in the same places with the same people everyday and our minds are set free to explore other avenues metaphorical as well as literal. I think this is especially true if you can travel under your own steam – walking or cycling – but it can also be true in a coach or a train or on a 'plane travelling with other people on the same journey, and perhaps too in a car, though I haven't tried that. I was going to say that the pilgrimage journey has to be a special trip, but I am not so sure that that is the case. When I'm in a receptive frame of mind, my daily walks and runs with Tommy take on this first characteristic of pilgrimage.

The second thing about travelling to somewhere like the Holy Land is that seeing the landscape in which the events recounted in the Bible took place helps you to understand better what was going on. You can stand at Jericho, for example, and look across the plain and the River Jordan to the distant mountains from which Joshua and the hosts of Israel descended to encircle and capture the city. You can see why David and his men camped at En Gedi. It is an oasis on the shores of the Dead Sea, a leafy refuge in a harsh wilderness. It can also be good to be reminded that the Holy Land is an ordinary land. These wonderful events took place in a landscape which would otherwise be no more remarkable than any other location on earth. I was once reading Morning Prayer in a kibbutz. When I got to Psalm 78⁵⁴ about God bringing the people of Israel into the land and to His mountain, it occurred to me that it was talking about the very hills I was looking at behind our very ordinary chalets.

The third point about going on pilgrimage is the spiritual impression it makes on you to be actually in the places where these things are supposed to have occurred. I'm not convinced that, after 2 or even 3 thousand years, the guides always get it right. Maybe they do, maybe they don't, but there is something special about many of these sites. Some, to be frank, I was disappointed in. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built in the place which St Helen identified as the site of the Crucifixion and Burial of Jesus, was so very crowded and there was very little reverence on either of the occasions I went there. Tourists with cameras were falling over pilgrims kneeling to pray. I think we were all more moved by much quieter places. We went to the Sea of Galilee and stopped at the place where it is claimed that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount. We read some of His words, the words of the beatitudes, from our own Bible. *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* We crossed over the Sea of Galilee in a fishing boat like the vessels the first apostles probably owned. We witnessed baptisms in the River Jordan where John might have baptised. We spent time in an ancient, but roofless, church on the Mount of Olives from which Jesus ascended into Heaven. The Lord's Prayer was inscribed on its walls in many of the world's languages. One of our party originally came from Nigeria and met a group of people from the country of her birth at the place where the Lord's words were recorded in their native language. I was horrified by Nazareth and my chief memory of it is of being chased down the street by the proprietor of a gift shop from which I was trying to escape without buying what I considered to be rubbish. Crowds didn't necessarily destroy the atmosphere, however. There was a very long queue at Bethlehem for the place where Jesus was born and we were not allowed to linger long when we reached it. But there I did feel something numinous. That spot on the earth's surface was special - at least to me.

The other place which really meant a lot to me – on both occasions I have visited it – is Mount Nebo, actually in the modern Kingdom of Jordan. You can look down from there at the whole Land of Israel, which Moses was permitted to do just prior to his death. It is not far from there that Herod had John the Baptist beheaded in his fortress Machaerus. There was a peace about that mountain peak. There is there a modern sculpture of a snake on a pole. It is a reference to the event described in today's OT lesson which possibly took place not too far from that spot. It is the story Jesus applies to Himself in today's Gospel. The penalty for rebellion against God is death. The remedy is to turn to the One Who was lifted up on the Cross, *that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.*