

## Where the Word became flesh

'See that window? That was my bedroom. And that big tree? Dad planted that when I was six!' My friend is like an excited child showing me the old family home. To my eyes it is a simple cottage with a garden badly in need of weeding. To him it is a castle of childhood memories and familial love. A holy place.

We all have holy places like this: indoor and outdoor spaces that are sanctified not by their architecture or favourable climate, but by the people who walked there and the experiences they shared.

Last year I visited a holy place; in fact, 'the' Holy Land as we call it. The homeland of Jesus. That tiny strip of dry, stony, conflicted land on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, where Jesus was born, raised and lived out the mission that led to his crucifixion; the land where belief in his resurrection gave rise to the embryonic Christian church. Off I went, like so many students and pilgrims before me... up to Jerusalem!

I expected to be impressed. What I didn't expect was for my life to be so fundamentally changed as to lead me to rethink my whole Catholic faith.

I try to understand how this happened. Better simply to acknowledge the mysterious process of grace at work during the month I spent at the Bat Kol Institute\* in Jerusalem. There we were: 19 students from 11

nations, studying the Hebrew Scriptures under the guidance of Jewish rabbis as well as Christian professors, praying in synagogues as well as churches, star-gazing in the Negev desert and trudging about archeological sites as well as sitting in a classroom. Not that all the experiences were pleasant ones: staring at graffiti-covered walls snaking around Bethlehem, witnessing troubled lives in a Palestinian village, tasting the memory of evil at the Yad Vashem holocaust memorial, enduring suffocating heat at Qumran.

Through this kaleidoscopic window I caught a fresh glimpse of the person of Jesus the Jew - his land, his people, the Hebrew Scriptures and their language. And with it came a heightened sense of sacramentality. To hear the land whisper, to ponder biblical texts in the company of rabbis, to catch a glimpse of those human, religious and environmental factors that shaped the person of Jesus, is to wonder anew at the Word become flesh.

And with this came shocking realizations: Christian piety over the centuries has often isolated Jesus from his historical context, placed him in opposition to his own people, and painted the Jewish people in terms of messianic rejection rather than the womb that gave life to Jesus and the Church. Vatican II faced into this tragic situation, calling the faithful to rediscover the importance of their relationship with the Jews and of the

scriptures we share. In fact, we cannot understand ourselves as Christians apart from Judaism.

Since my return from Israel, life is different. I am attentive to scripture like never before; I study Hebrew and join in synagogue worship and feel 'anchored' to a sacred past. I delight in the thought that I too 'crossed the Red Sea' and was 'there' at Sinai. And I know I can welcome the Sabbath on Friday evening, even as I prepare to celebrate Sunday, the 'Day of the Lord', as the highpoint of Christian worship.

So, no, I haven't 'gone all Jewish'. I am a Catholic in search of a way of living her religious tradition in its fullest embrace and from its most ancient depths.

\* At the Bat Kol Institute, based in Jerusalem, Christians study the Word of God [Torah] within its Jewish milieu, using Jewish sources and methods.  
[www.batkol.info](http://www.batkol.info) •

