



## Reflection #12

Capernaum is a small town on the way to the sea. There was a time when Capernaum almost became a place of prominence. But the people of the town divided (Jews and Christians) and things fell apart. In the end it was an earthquake that left Capernaum a place that used to be.

Of all the places of pilgrimage you will encounter, Capernaum is, for me, the most intriguing. It is the place Jesus called home. He grew up in Nazareth, but folks there didn't like him much. He stayed in Bethany with the poor, but he was a visitor, a Galilean in Judea. Capernaum was home for Jesus and as such it is a puzzle.

There is a church/shrine in Capernaum. A modern Catholic church was built over a house church built in the fourth century. The house church was built over the place where people believe Peter's mother-in-law lived. Jesus performed a miracle there, but it was a small moment, a kindness offered without fanfare or controversy.

Jesus didn't feed five thousand here or four thousand. But he did heal many in Capernaum. The big confrontation with the Pharisees would come in Jerusalem when the wheels came off, but in Capernaum he argued with them, even dined with them. Capernaum is the epitome of mundane, earthy, real, the day to day.

So when you travel there and walk the excavation site, it might appear less than impressive. This is not the library at Ephesus or the Colosseum in Rome. Capernaum is a small town on the "via maris" where Jesus lived for a time. Jesus taught in the synagogue in Capernaum and you can stand in the place where he might have stood, or the place built over the place where he might have stood. You can't really tell. And that is the mystery of Capernaum.

They should have cashed in. Capernaum should be the center of pilgrimage and devotion. "This is Jesus' house." This should be the message on the highway. Instead there is a small shrine to a place where Jesus did a miracle. Bethlehem is a mecca of pilgrimage; Jerusalem is rife with places attributed to Jesus and the week he spent there. Capernaum has none of this. Even the Crusaders, who were not subtle in their work, couldn't make anything of Capernaum. It was too "exposed" was their assessment.

As you prepare for your trip, I would encourage you to buy one book. *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archeological Guide*, by Jerome Murphy-O'Connor. Here you will find all the things the tour guides of Israel have memorized. In this book is every note you might feel led to take from plaques and boards describing the places of Palestine. I have read it and enjoyed it for years. If you bring one book with you on your pilgrimage, bring this one.

Each day, as you travel, you can take this book out before you leave the hotel and read the day's travel. Each site on the itinerary will have a wonderful description and exquisite detail of the strata. If you read the section on Capernaum you will find the reference to the Crusaders, the catholic shrine, the via maris, and the development of the synagogue, and more. Yet, what you won't find is the most important level of the walk.

In the *Oxford Guide* you won't find the question, why did Jesus live in such a mundane town? You won't find the strange truth of why Jesus would live in such vulnerability. You won't find it in the *Guide* but you can find it in your heart. The *Guide* won't give you the question and certainly not the answer, but it does prepare you; you can ponder the mystery with its mundane facts.

And this is why Capernaum seems to me to be the least exciting, but then the most powerful of all the places where we will visit. Big moments in life happen. Great tragedy, great victory can mark our lives. The marks are deep and permanent. But most of life is not such. Most of life is Capernaum. Here Jesus chose to live. He lived in the everyday. This is the great gift the gospels offer. Matthew, Mark, and Luke record Jesus as spending his days in Capernaum. What if you find the beauty of God in the everyday if you walk about Capernaum?

The pictures above are all from the synagogue in Capernaum. I have many dramatic pictures of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Jericho. Capernaum is not dramatic. But maybe that is the beauty to find there.