

Reflection #17

Masada and the Dead Sea



At the end of our tour, when the pilgrimage is winding to a close, there is a moment when you can stay in Jerusalem or take a day trip.

There are not enough days in a lifetime to spend in Jerusalem so the offer of a day to wander and explore is of great value. But the day trip to Masada and the Dead Sea is a unique experience not to be missed. The day trip to Masada and the Dead Sea is not a “religious”

journey. The Dead Sea is a natural phenomenon with amazing powers and wonders. Masada is a winter palace of Herod the Great where a tragedy occurred in the first century.

If you are wondering what to do, go to Masada; go to the Dead Sea.

I have been to each numerous times. And I can tell you that floating in the Dead was a moment of healing. I walked from the waters feeling as if every toxin in my body was left in the thick, salty water. I can remember watching my legs lift in the water. You float without effort or attempt. If you are able to overcome the strangeness of rubbing mud over your body, you will be happy for it. To prepare for this pack a swimsuit and water shoes. The sharp salt is not forgiving on your feet. And the last thing you want to do is cut your feet in salt water.

Once you have committed to the trip and drive out to the desert, there is a strange moment. Up to this point each site is laden with spiritual meaning; each church has its connection to Jesus and his life. Heretofore every moment of the trip is about history and archeological digs and miracles of divine power. But the day at the Dead Sea is not about this. It is not about spiritual things; it is about the body.

I could try to tell you that this is the moment where you see and understand the connection between the body and soul. But that would be a terrible suggestion. This is about healing a weary body after many days of walking and sitting, getting up and down, being jostled and pushed in the crush of ancient cities and pilgrims not always behaving with decorum and respect. The Dead Sea is a place of healing the body. Let it be that.

Masada is not healing at all.

Masada is a palace that was taken by Jewish zealots, people unwilling to accept Roman rule. Masada was a fortress taken by rebels in the first century decades after Jesus lived. Masada was a place where the people of Palestine resisted Rome. Rome won.

The victory though was long in coming. When you walk the remnants of Masada and see the siege works still in place 2000 years later you should have a moment of pause. There is a long ramp built with the blood and sweat of many, many lives. The Roman forces Jews to build a ramp to bring down their own rebellion.

Walking Masada is a moment of seeing and wondering about power and empire. You should be struck by the idea that rebels took a palace that was built to be safe from all dangers except a group of peasants who defied an empire.

Here you will not find the teachings of Jesus or the covenant of Abraham. There were no Davidic psalms composed upon Masada. Yet, there is a moment of pause. Two thousand years ago Jesus walked Galilee; three thousand years ago David was a shepherd. So and so on and so on. As a pilgrim you will enter the places of Jesus' life and the "promise land." And then you

will re-enter the realpolitik of our time. Masada is powerful testimony to a persistent struggle: there are conquerors and there are the conquered.

The other element to the day in the desert is to understand the value of salt. This is what ties Masada and the Dead Sea together. Salt was gold in the ancient times. Having a sea of salt is like having a sea of gold. Herod built his winter palace next to the Dead Sea not only to escape the brisk winds of winter but also to overlook his vast treasury.

Salt in ancient times was currency. We hear this in the phrase: not worth his salt (the word "salary" comes from the Latin "salus" or salt). This saying was born of the practice of paying soldiers in salt. If you didn't work enough, you were not worth your salt.

Salt does many things. Jesus declared it to be a singular description of what is good in life: "you are the salt of the earth."

When you venture to Masada you will look down upon the Dead Sea. Here you will gaze upon an evaporating ancient natural phenomenon. This is a place of riches. Riches, though, come and go.

At Masada you will also look upon an eternal truth: there are things that sustain us. We have salt in us. We are salt. Love keeps us whole; hope keeps us going; faith is a strength enduring all hardships. This is our salt. Jesus said, you are this salt, "the salt of the earth."