

John Docherty, 13 July 2014

“A tourist’s visit to Jerusalem, with James as our guide”

It’s summer, and a time for vacations; holidays; visiting places that are exotic and different.

A time to get out of our daily routine and experience new things. Many of us like to use our vacation time to “get away” from it all – leave behind the drudgery or stress of work, and relax a little; enjoy ourselves.

We’re not particularly looking for anything heavy, difficult or challenging. We’re looking for diversion, change, and maybe a little bit of fun.

Our choice of reading material might reflect that as well. We don’t usually drag along textbooks or work-related material on our holidays. We’re more likely to bring along “escape” literature : maybe an old, and well-loved classic; or a mystery novel; or a science fiction adventure. We want to give ourselves permission to let our hair down and engage in our reading for the sheer pleasure of it – not for anything we might learn or improve ourselves by.

At least, that’s what I look for in a holiday, with one exception. I like at least part of our vacation time to include something physically challenging like a canoe trip. But I’m not looking for a permanent change so much as a temporary reprieve from the responsibilities of life. I love canoe camping, but I’m not really looking to spend the rest of my life in backwoods isolation, as appealing as that might sometimes seem. I’m just looking for a chance to do things I enjoy doing for the sheer pleasure of doing them.

When I get a chance to visit an exotic locale (mind you, anything east of Québec city, west of Toronto, north of Ottawa and south of the US border feels exotic to me ...) I’m not generally expecting to learn everything there is to know about the place.

I’m enough of a history buff that I’d like to be able to put places into some kind of meaningful historical context, but I’m not enough of a history buff to care much where so-and-so slept, or where such-and-such a one is buried.

I enjoy architectural spots enough to want to visit them, but not enough to necessarily care how long they took to build, or how much they cost, or how many

people died during the construction. I'm happy enough just to wander about and soak in the atmosphere of the place.

I'm usually a little more interested in the people and culture of a place than in its economy and politics, although I'm aware that such things are interrelated.

I don't even go in much for tour buses. You know, the ones that take you around and explain a bit of the history and importance of a town; showing you the sites of interest and giving you a taste of what's available.

These tour buses don't give you exhaustive information, but they give you enough so that you can then decide where you would like to spend a little more time, according to your tastes. They give you a hint of what's there, and you are then free to return and dig further into the areas that matter to you.

On a tour bus you're not a local, or a student, or even an explorer. You're sitting on the roof of an open double-decker, or you're ensconced behind huge windows that give you a largely unobstructed view of things.

You're an observer. An interested observer, to be sure, but you're there to watch from a safe distance, not to engage. At least not for the moment. As I said, you can always return later to delve more deeply into the things that are of particular interest to you personally.

But for now, on the bus, you're sitting back and letting the tour guide give you a picture of his or her town. He or she will point out the sites that every tourist "must see"; the points of interest that have put this place on the map.

He or she will speak with more or less passion about the importance of this place and try to give you a sense of why this place matters, but when you're a tourist it's not *your* place. It's not *your* history, so you can be intrigued, perhaps even moved, but you're still an observer, a visitor, *a tourist*.

When you've done your trip, you'll go home.

You'll talk to your friends about the trip; you'll show your pictures or videos; you'll return to your job or your studies, and life will take on, once again, its usual rhythms.

Mind you, if it's been a particularly good trip, to a particularly interesting place, you may find that you simply *have* to take the time to learn more about the place.

You may even entertain dreams of one day returning for another visit, or retiring there, or even emigrating permanently.

Today we're going to take a tour of Jerusalem. We're going to try to get a glimpse of what the church here thinks is important. We're going to try to get some sense of what it is that makes this place special, from a Christian point of view, and we'll hope to catch a whiff of the scent of life in this place.

Mind you, for today, this visit is on a tour bus. We're not on an archeological dig. It's more of a relaxed wander through the streets. We're not really going to engage with the place beyond seeing and hearing some of the "sights" in a superficial kind of way.

Of course, one of the points of taking a tour bus is to instil a little curiosity that might lead to a more thorough exploration later on.

Like every tour bus, the quality of the experience depends a little bit on the quality of the tour guide. Granted, every tour guide filters the information along their own lines of what they think is important.

And our tour guide for Jerusalem is no different in that respect – he has his own filters, and sees things his own way. And, if truth be told, the tour organizer (me) has imposed his own filters as well.

We're going to visit the city, and its church, with the help of James.

James Chapter 1

v.1 "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings."

This is very much a Jewish church. James' letter is addressed to the 12 tribes. We're not entirely sure who James is. The most common understanding is that he is the James referred to as Jesus' brother in other texts. The Roman Catholic church insists that the identification of "brother" here should more properly be rendered "cousin" (he can't be Jesus' brother, because, of course, Mary remained a virgin her entire life). Protestants, on the other hand, have no real problem with the possibility that Mary could have had other children after Jesus' birth, so "brother" is quite acceptable. In any case, he would seem to be a close and intimate family member of Jesus.

We're also given to understand throughout the book of the Acts of the Apostles that James is clearly an important leader in the Jerusalem church.

So his credentials as a tour guide to the "must see" components of the Jerusalem church are impeccable.

Ch. 1 v.19 "You must understand this, my beloved: let everyone be quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger; ²⁰for your anger does not produce God's righteousness."

This is clearly not Peter speaking. There is nothing here of the volatile fisherman who, by all accounts, is impetuous, quick to declare his loyalty and equally quick to deny Jesus; nothing of the man who is quick to anger and action.

Maybe it's just me, but it seems to me that there are echoes here of the kind of thing we expect to hear from Jesus. A family resemblance maybe?

Ch. 1 v. 22 "... be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves."

But notwithstanding James' encouragement to be slow to speak and slow to anger, he is not calling for passive inaction. On the contrary, this church in Jerusalem is called to be a church that takes seriously its faith. They're not sponges that get fat on the living water that's offered to them, they're conduits that channel that water into their lives in positive and direct action.

Ch. 1 v.27 "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Can you hear echoes of Isaiah here? These Jewish roots are deep in the Jerusalem church, and James seems deliberate in his emphasis on concrete acts of faith. This is not an abstract belief system.

Chapter 2

v.1 "My brothers and sisters, do you with your acts of favouritism really believe in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ? ²For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, ³and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please', while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there', or, 'Sit at my feet',

⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts? ... you have dishonoured the poor. Is it not the rich who oppress you? Is it not they who drag you into court? ⁷Is it not they who blaspheme the excellent name that was invoked over you? ⁸You do well if you really fulfil the royal law according to the scripture, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' ⁹But if you show partiality, you commit sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."

On the left, you'll notice a decidedly strong focus on the poor and less socially acceptable parts of the population. More echoes of the family of Mary and Joseph? More echoes of a strongly Jewish prophetic stream in the Jerusalem church? We'll see more of this later as the bus continues its tour.

Ch. 2 v. 14 "What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith save you? ¹⁵If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, ¹⁶and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? ¹⁷So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead."

It has to be pointed out that these verses, perhaps more than any other in James' epistle, get him into trouble with later reformers like Luther. Luther would have gladly scrapped this letter altogether, and described it as "... an epistle full of straw, because it contains nothing evangelical (i.e. – nothing of the gospel)." Luther sees it as being inconsistent with his doctrine of justification by faith.

But, that said, even Luther admits that it was likely written by "... some good, pious man who had taken some sayings from the apostles' disciples." And he even goes so far as to say "... I therefore refuse him a place among the writers of the true canon of my Bible; but I would not prevent anyone else placing him or raising him where he likes, for the epistle contains many excellent passages."

Chapter 3

v. 1 "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. ²For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle."

Ummmm ... I don't think I'll hazard any comment on this verse.

Ch. 3 v. 9 “With (our tongue) we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. ¹⁰From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so.”

Talk about high standards!

Ch. 3 v. 13 “Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom.”

I can't help but think that if the church in Jerusalem, and the church through the ages, had been able to exemplify this verse, that the history of the western world would have been very different. If only “wise gentleness” or “gentle wisdom” was the hallmark of the typical Christian. We get a bit of the same in the next verse.

Ch. 3 v. 17 “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy.”

Hypocrisy. How much did Jesus hate *that* trait?

Chapter 4

v. 1 “Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? ²You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.”

Again, what would the history of the western world, and perhaps the planet, have looked like if verses like this had been taken seriously and applied?

Ch. 4 v. 8 “Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”

This is, I think, one of my favourite verses in scripture. Draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. What more reassuring picture can there be of a creator who seeks the closeness of the created? It's a bit of a parallel to other scriptures that promise “seek and you will find”, and the prophet Zechariah's statement “... Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you ...” More evidence of the depth of the Jewish roots of this church in Jerusalem.

Ch. 4 v. 17 “Anyone, then, who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, commits sin.”

This is perhaps one of the more intimidating verses of the New Testament. It's not enough not to behave in hurtful ways, we're actually called to be proactive in our relationships and our actions.

Chapter 5

v. 1 "Come now, you rich people, weep and wail for the miseries that are coming to you ... ⁴Listen! The wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts."

Once again, on the left, we have a cry for justice and right relationships. Along with "gentle wisdom", and a controlled tongue, this church in Jerusalem sees the need for wholesome acknowledgement of our obligations to each other; of our responsibility to behave in ways that are fair, and honest.

Ch. 5 v. 12 "Above all, my beloved, do not swear, either by heaven or by earth or by any other oath, but let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no, so that you may not fall under condemnation."

... let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no ...

Along with the earlier verse about drawing near to God, this is another of my favourite verses of the New Testament.

... let your 'Yes' be yes and your 'No' be no ...

More echoes from Jesus in Matthew's gospel. More hints of disdain of hypocrisy.

A simple, clear, uncomplicated, and unambiguous call to honest living with integrity.

I love this letter of James'. Of all the epistles, it's the one I find most consistently inspiring; most down-to-earth; most intriguing. Yes, the standards set are high, but they also feel like they should be attainable.

I know that our tour bus has driven far too rapidly through this Jerusalem as seen by James.

I know that we haven't even scratched the surface of the church in this city.

But I hope we've seen and heard enough to make it clear that this place, this letter, deserve to be revisited. But next time with a shovel. Like any good archeological dig, maybe we'll find time at some point to lay out a grid, and explore its separate parts.

And maybe next time we won't be on a tour bus roaming the streets. We'll home in on those things of most interest, and dig until we feel like we understand what this man and his message was all about.