

dungeons, but otherwise, as in the case of the Lithostrotos, every effort has been made to leave this place, so closely associated with the early stages of the Passion, in its original state.

The words of the Gospels are vividly alive when one visits the *Dominus Flevit* on the Mount of Olives. Here, in a little modern church built over the remains of an early shrine, the celebrant sees through the wide framework of a window behind the altar a view not so very dissimilar from that which our Lord saw when he gazed, weeping, on Jerusalem. One could, indeed, spend a lifetime here and still have much to learn. The past is all around one, and even the most modest agricultural or building project is likely to uncover a page of history.

Pilgrims and tourists, who are the very life blood of this country so poor in natural resources, are coming in ever-increasing numbers, and I am sometimes asked which is the best time to visit the Holy Land. Undoubtedly, spring and autumn are the most attractive seasons, for this country knows all the climatic extremes, which are far better avoided by those who must see and do so much in a strictly limited time. In spring the harsh countryside sees an almost miraculous transformation, and green fields are starred with myriads of wild flowers—among them the scarlet anemones which are believed to have been the ‘lilies of the field’. But although in autumn the land is bare of vegetation after the long months of drought, and one almost seems to see the very bones of creation, its contours are softened by the mellow sunshine, and it is then that Jerusalem becomes in very truth a golden city.

A Middle Eastern Diary

BEIRUT. To arrive in the Middle East by sea is nowadays a rare, not say an eccentric, experience. It has its advantages. The oil executive's appointments can't wait, and the visiting lecturer has only a day or two to spare, and so the neurotic haste of travel by air communicates itself to these ancient lands, where patience still remains a principal need for understanding.

After the idyllic, empty days, sailing in and out of the islands of Greece—with the reminder which Crete at least supplies of hidden worlds beyond the prepared categories of a Western imagination—Beirut asserts itself in a flashy

pastiche of Riviera extravagance. The Lebanon has its cedars, and Baalbek as well, but it has become the super air-stop, the traveller's whiff of the East—and a synthetic whiff it seems. You are glad to leave the boulevards and the bathers for the splendid road to Damascus, perilously manoeuvred by bus-drivers who manage their gear-boxes like orchestras. To pause at Baalbek is to be reminded of what Rose Macaulay meant by 'the pleasure of ruins'. How vulgar it must have seemed when it was all roofed and intact. So much late Roman ostentation: the decoration too contrived and the dimensions too huge. But how fine in its fallen state, with a hint of how the human spirit must have been bruised by those columns when they stood all aloft in their arrogance. In any case the snow-rimmed mountains still confer a proper proportion on the things that man has made.

DAMASCUS. The latest revolution was hardly over, and the military guards were wary. But the souks were as busy as imagination could make them to be. The Omayyad mosque, cool and splendid with its Corinthian columns and the glittering islands of the old mosaics that remain, is an oasis of silence in the screaming city. Here, where the head of St John the Baptist is a precious relic under its blue dome, the blind old men are murmuring away in a pew, the young men are at their lustrations and the occasional woman skirts furtively by the outer walls. The prayer of Islam is a punctuation mark throughout these lands: shrill and (nowadays) amplified from minarets. But here, in the noblest of mosques, it is a river of unaggressive sound, as soft as the carpets, with never a moment, it seems, without men moving to their knees with private needs to express or praises to attribute. And the courtesy, gracious and grave, of Arab tradition, already grows into an environment you are going to learn to love.

To trace St Paul in the street they still call straight is scarcely easy, but the chapel that marks his escape over the wall is modest and plain. Here, and very often later on, the accurate query of the archaeologist will emerge, but once and for all you must admit that time itself endows a sanctity to a place so long marked out for prayer.

JORDAN. This frontier at least is not difficult, but the change is a real one, if only because of the Jordanian military uniforms that still evoke Catterick rather than Cairo. In the near-desert it is the landscape that compels, infinite and empty, with the black tents or the occasional shepherd as points of human reference in a lunar waste. There is no word 'Palestine' any more. It is 'The Holy Land' you are entering, an ironical label for two terribly sundered lands, which share the sacred places you have come to see and venerate. Best, then, to arrive in Jordan first, for as you come through the wilderness, with the Dead Sea sinister and asleep below you, and at last the holy city comes alive on the landscape, you can't be too far separated from the sight that met our Lord's eyes, alone on the mountain of temptation or recalling the road to Jericho in a parable. Only the refugees seem new, and how old they are in their sadness, and

how poignant a reminder of hard hearts and of pity denied. They are, in a sense, the most authentic of all the Gospel stories you will find.

JERUSALEM. It has all been said before, and the scheduled visits trace the story. 'I would give my head for the Holy Sepulchre, but not a finger-nail for any of the secondary sites'. It was a biblical archaeologist of international fame who was speaking. And the occasion was some speculating about the Garden Tomb—'much visited by Anglo-Saxons', as the French guide-book explains. It is absurd, of course: but how easy to understand that the Victorian Protestants should want a tomb to match the mood of their hymns. Perhaps this is a much more important place than we guess, for its implications touch the centre of faith. You *need* no faith in this lovely garden; the tomb looks like a tomb, and it's shaped like a skull. But in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre you'll need all the faith you can find, however sound the arguments about the Emperor Hadrian's desecration of the site and St Helena's intuitive searching there, below the pagan temple, for the sacred places of death and resurrection. The building is as muddled and as sad as a bomb-site, and there are even evacuees (the Abyssinians) on the roof. But nowhere in the world can the sacredness of what tradition can confer seem so compelling. And, oddly, the stale stuff about Muslim guards to keep the Christians from actually fighting has a reverse effect. Divided they certainly are, but they are at least under a single roof, and they represent the ancient Christian allegiances: a symbol, somehow, of how precarious unity must be until charity cements the fissures that pride has created. For Catholics from the West, the sacred sites are a reminder that so much ecumenical action must be wasted unless it is all the time aware of the Eastern Christians, so much closer to us in doctrine, discipline and a sense of the sacred than the Protestant world we know so well. The visits of bishops and dignitaries of Reformed traditions to the Pope are welcome indeed, but how much more wonderful it would be if the Ecumenical Patriarch could greet the Patriarch of the West! And this the present Patriarch (Athenagoras) has frequently said to be his great desire. The Holy Sepulchre is above all places the setting for prayer for this primary reconciliation of the historic Churches of the East with that of the West.

At a reception the Governor of Jerusalem spoke movingly of the divided city. 'Pray for the peace of Jerusalem'. The words were never so tragically true as now. You are not wholly aware of what the division means until the time comes to leave Jordan for Israel, and you walk the few paces in silence through the no-man's-land of the Mandelbaum Gate. Your new Arab friends are already as remote as New Zealanders, though you can still see them standing enigmatically by the ruined houses on the other side.

ISRAEL. The accents of Brooklyn are your greeting. And there are some Hassidic boys with flat hats and long curls, gathered about the check-point in chattering curiosity. There is a Dominican as well: he works here, and never

has a hope of seeing his brethren who live a few minutes' walk away. The buildings in the new city are stupendous, and soon there will be revelations much more remarkable. As you leave Israeli Jerusalem for the north and the Sea of Galilee, the landscape tells the story: green swathes, cultivated and awake, are a more accurate frontier than any on a map. Pride in achievement, the sense of a destiny conferred by the centuries of rejection and persecution: they are all implied in everything you are told.

Propaganda has prepared you, but, then, the Arabs have nothing but charm it sometimes seems, and the Israelis have everything *but* charm—so insistent is the grievance, so unyielding the case. How can it end? It might begin afresh—the argument from justice, at least—by a large act of British contrition. The machinations of political advantage were a poor ground on which to base high ideals, to be achieved (since 1948 at least) only through the dispossession of hundreds of thousands of Arabs from their homes. The bitter arguments buzz to and fro, and the United Nations cross the armistice line in their snow-white jeeps. 'How far is it to Bethlehem?' the carol asks. Much further than it used to be, for a new road had had to be built, a loop round the Israeli land that crosses the old. It is a figure, as accurate as any, of what has happened.

TIBERIAS. The lido is inevitable, and there was vulgarity enough here in Roman times, we know. But you can soon leave the restaurants behind and begin to encircle the magical lake (as far, that is to say, as the Syrian frontier on the other side—and how lonely and unattainable it seems). Here the sacred places are all in Catholic hands, and there is a gaiety almost in these Italian churches, matching the brilliant air. Capharnaum has the majesty of ruins: it is not indeed the synagogue our Lord knew that stands, with its Roman magnificence still revealed, though a column has been excavated recently of the earlier place. But buildings give way everywhere to the shape of the land and the stir of the sea. These remain to give concrete reality to parable and incident, domestic and familiar and discernible still.

HAIFA. The Sabbath has already begun, and the shops are closed and the buses have stopped running. Haifa is a seaport that is snatching a moment of sleep. The lovely range of Mount Carmel fills the lower sky, and all that sacred history speaks.

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