Study time at the Tantur Ecumenical study centre in Jerusalem.

The Beginning: One, Holy, catholic, Apostolic

In 1964 (the year before I was born), Pope Paul VI officially embraced the Eastern Catholic Churches in Israel, which today include (among others) the Greek Orthodox, Armenian, Syriac, Melkite (Byzantine), Maronite and Syro-Malabar churches, each of which have Patriarchs based in Jerusalem and who now exercise their authority with the blessing of the Latin Church. Paul's vision was one of unity for all Catholic churches.

In the mid 1960's the Pope appointed a priest named Father Theodore Hesburgh to build an institute in Jerusalem with a vision of promoting the unity he sought. Hesburgh may not be a household name. Hesburgh is a native of Syracuse, NY, was ordained in the Roman Catholic order of the Holy Cross and was president of the University of Notre Dame from 1952-1987. While a devout Roman Catholic, Hesburgh's vision was characterized by "unity, but not by uniformity." He was a social activist priest, and while his activism was less radical than the likes of the Jesuit Berrigan brothers, he publicly spoke against the Vietnam war, and protested Nixon's sending troops to Cambodia in a speech at Notre Dame that eventually took the form of a letter he sent to Nixon that became known as the "Hesburgh Declaration." Hesburgh served on both the US Civil Rights Commission and the National Science Board, was an advocate for immigration reform and is pictured below, arm in arm with Martin Luther King while singing "We Shall Overcome" after he delivered an impromptu speech at a civil rights rally in Chicago

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The land that Hesburgh found for the Tantur institute envisioned by Paul VI is located on a humble but majestic hill (in Arabic Tantura means hill/peak) between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. The parcel was purchased by the Vatican from what was then Jordan and then leased to the University of Notre Dame for the development of what would become The Tantur Institute for Ecumenical Studies. Groundbreaking for the institute began on June 4, 1967, literally one day before the outbreak of the Six-Day War. Within a week, the land on which the institute resides was under Israeli sovereignty.

Tantur officially opened as a centre for ecumenical studies in 1972 and amidst its development (and among two lengthy interruptions caused by the first and second Intifada's), Tantur has remained a centre for scholars, clergy, university students, and doctoral fellows working to discover, within the truth claims of their own faith, Hesburgh's vision: "Unity, not uniformity," for all people of faith.

While the impetus for Tantur was ecumenical, today its mission is not only the promotion of dialogue among members of Christian churches but is also a centre for relationship building between the Abrahamic faiths of Jews, Christians and Muslims, and an institute for promoting peace amidst the incredibly complicated conflicts between Arabs and Israeli's and between Israeli's and Palestinians.

It is ironic that while sitting in the lecture theatre at Tantur you can see (or walk to in a matter of minutes) the wall: the border crossing between "Jerusalem" and Bethlehem (in the West Bank). Idyllic as the olive-tree covered hill is, I spent 2 weeks, in what many consider to be the occupied land of Palestine. Pictured below is the tower that is the entrance to Tantur today, looking East, toward the Dead Sea.

Pictured above along with the course director and a Maronite priest are the 22 of us that are participating in the sabbatical program at Tantur. 16 of us are ordained and 6 of us are members of the laity who have dedicated themselves to the work of the church in various significant ways: Sr Genna, CJ (Jesuit), is a senior lecturer in pastoral theology at Cambridge; Anita has spent her life working with the L'Arche community and tells wonderful stories of all of the time she has spent with Jean Vanier, L'Arche's founder; Stephen is a lay reader in the Greek Orthodox church and a carpenter by trade who has come to Tantur to develop a deeper discipline of personal prayer.

Among those of us who are ordained, only five of us are members of the Anglican Communion. Two of my Anglican colleagues are retired parish priests and the other is from the Episcopal church of the United States of America (liberal theology). Two of us were not enrolled in the whole of the 6 week programme – An anglo-Catholic and myself currently serve congregations in the Church of England as parish priests but represent different perspectives among the three most dominant ideologies in the C of E today.

The group represents a very wide range of beliefs both Anglican and Roman Catholic and I found myself representing the Evangelical or reformed tradition.

Given the background of Tantur it is not surprising that the vast majority of those of us who are ordained and enrolled in the sabbatical program (13 out of 16) represent the Roman Catholic Church. Two are parish priests from the United States and the rest represent a diversity that is as broad geographically as it is vocationally: Jobe, from Canada, is a Franciscan Friar whose specialty was Canon Law; Wulstan, a Benedictine monk, spent most of his ordained life as a teacher and University headmaster; Paddy, from Laragh, County Cavan, in Ireland, and who recently returned from many years of missionary work in Tanzania, began his vocation as a missionary in Liberia until the civil war made it impossible for him to remain there. JD is a parish priest from Scotland and Mark oversees multiple parishes in Australia spanning huge distances. John, while ordained in Dublin, spent his life living in South Africa both before and after the Apartheid. Against the advice of his superiors, while in South Africa John repeatedly chose to live in the racially segregated townships where the members of those communities, in his words, taught him more than anyone ever has, "about the real meaning of love, forgiveness, compassion and generosity

Along with the new colleagues, both lay and ordained, the largely Palestinian staff and other residents at Tantur (Notre Dame students, volunteers and scholars in residence) are a joy to interact with and know. Each day Issa (one of three with that name on staff here) and his staff prepare amazing Palestinian food for us. Peter and Emily, here to serve as volunteers for one year, have come from the Bruderhof community in New York. One doctoral fellow in residence is finishing a dissertation on the Samaritan woman at the well in *The Gospel According to John*, a project he's been working on for nearly a decade; in it he's comparing three verses of Holy Scripture, one verse from the New Testament with two verses from the Hebrew Scriptures. At a social gathering last Sunday evening I met a young family of four. Hannah (originally from New Orleans) is finishing her doctoral work on the meaning of sacrifice and her husband Brian is completing his study, which focuses on the exegetical methods of Origen.

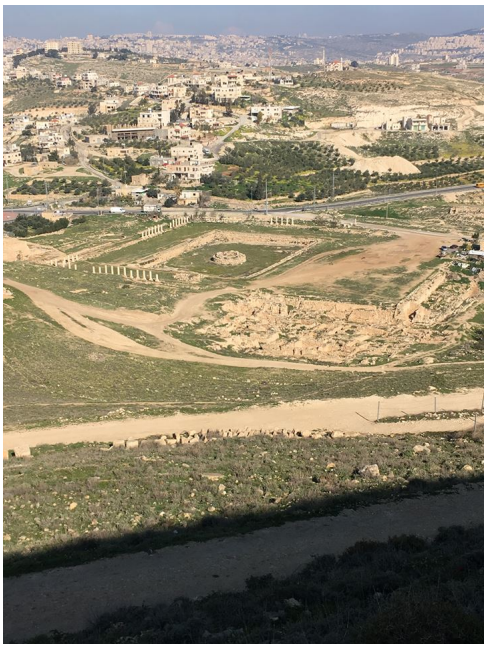
Tantur is as close to living a "monastic" life, as I would imagine it to be. Although we represent more than one prevailing tradition and the students are a little older, and as such more tied to one tradition or another. In the first week together we had to engage in conversations about things like Eucharistic hospitality, about the role of the laity versus the priesthood, etc. In some ways those conversations are resonant with the work we are all engaged in at Tantur: How do multiple traditions with firmly held beliefs dwell together? To whom does this sacred and Holy Land belong? Despite our differences we all belong together, one might say, but living with one another for the short while means deeper discussions as we get to know one another. Acceptance of deeply held beliefs different from your own even among your Anglican counterparts and sometimes being a lone voice as the only Evangelical has meant a time of challenge, a broadening of my view of God and a sharpening of my theology.

There seems to be a growing acceptance in the wider church for Universalism – The Nostra Aetate published in 1965 a document on Jewish - Catholic relations states:
The fifth chapter emphasises that through Jesus Christ – and through his death and resurrection – all people have a part in salvation, all are saved. Although Jews cannot believe in Jesus Christ as the universal redeemer, they with this understanding have a part in salvation, because the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

Here in the heart of this is the issue highlighting the difference between the catholic and protestant beliefs. Universalism vs – personal salvation through Jesus Christ. I was struck by the continual referring of Muslims and Jews as brothers and sisters in many of the presentations and lectures. I was also struck by the way in which place and geography is so important to many both inside and outside the Christian faith.

The pictures have been easy to take and post via Facebook and I know from the comments that people have expressed their thanks at being able to share in my journey. There are beautiful images of this Holy Land; landscapes and ancient churches, biblical sites and sacred shrines that are the work of human and divine hands. The truth is that I have found the divisions and the tensions this time palpable and heightened. I have found a growing confusion as each time I have heard someone's story I have felt compelled to agree with some if not all and yet these stories are totally at odds with one another.

In the two weeks at Tantur I have heard talks, lectures and presentations from people who are residents of this place called the Holy Land: We have heard from Yohanna Katanacho, an evangelical Palestinian Christian who converted from Atheism, Jean-Jacques Pérennés, director of the École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, came and spoke to us about the Trappist monks of Tibhirine and the many faithful (Muslim and Christian) who were with them. Stephanie Saldaña presented us with research for her upcoming book about the lives of asylum seekers and refugees from Syria and Iraq, among other places; she recounted stories and showed us pictures of love, and loss; loss of home and livelihood, the loss of everything… but hope, and skill. Monks from the Armenian, Coptic, Maronite and Syrian Orthodox churches in the Old City have told us the stories of their churches and about how at one time or another in their history, their people have been oppressed – or cleansed from their land and heritage and as such, from their identities.

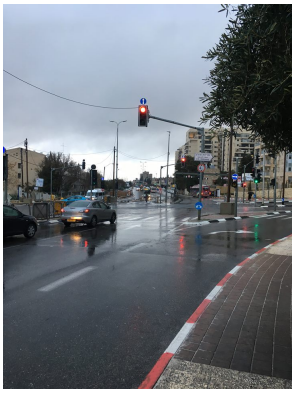


At the beginning of my time we were shown Herodian and then Bethlehem by a Christian Palestinian Kamal. We were as a group welcomed to lunch at his mothers home. A Palestinian Christian woman whose parents had moved to Germany where she was brought up and then had returned to Bethlehem so that she could marry and bring up her family there. She told stories about the wall being built and the Olive trees in her garden being up rooted, the arguments with the soldier but to no avail. Her son Kamal spoke about the illegal Israeli settlements which we viewed from the Shepherds fields and the way in which water is limited to those behind the wall and yet not for those in the Israeli settlements. Bethlehem, 'The house of bread', Bethany the 'House of the poor', places today of struggle and poverty.

Early in my second week, two citizens of Israel, David, a biblical scholar who is Christian and Deborah who is an Orthodox Jew, spoke openly to us about their growing hopelessness in regard to any resolution of "the conflict" here in Jerusalem and this Holy land.

Regardless of where they begin, all of the stories, in the end, carry with them a similar refrain, a refrain always characterized by (hi)stories of displacement, persecution, genocide, and war, and a refrain that is driven by deep complexity; by strongly held convictions, both religious and political; by lust for power, by right and by righteousness; by the need to retain and maintain particular identity, and by holy contradictions and competing megaphones, despite the volume of which all sound a similar note of the longing of the poor and the oppressed – a longing for Salam and Shalom; for peace, for prosperity. "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever (Psalm 13)?"

None of these stories have been easy to hear, and two weeks in Tantur was meant to be a period of study leave designed for rest and renewal.



I have run from Tantur towards the Old town of Jerusalem on three occasions. The first and second time I found myself stopping to take pictures.
The sign that says 'US Embassy', The apartments for sale – but only to those who carry an Israeli passport, the uncovered ruins of an octagonal church – built originally to remember Mary and Josephs journey and a resting place on their way to Bethlehem and seeing the Old city centre of Jerusalem.
All landmarks as you journey from Tantur to Jerusalem, each telling the (hi)story.

Matthew 23:37-38 New International Version (NIV)

37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. 38 Look, your house is left to you desolate.

Luke 19:41-44 New International Version (NIV)

As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city**, he wept over it** 42 and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace—but now it is hidden from your eyes. 43 The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. 44 They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."

I first came to Israel in 2014 on a pilgrimage to learn about conducting other such trips. That experience, was wonderful. Perhaps I was more tourist than pilgrim? In returning here, just 5 years later, I had expected some of the same kinds of experience. I came to learn, yes, but found myself humbled by those who live here and worship in this complex place almost with the refrain 'the more I know the less I understand' ringing in my ears and a sense of Jesus still weeping over the city of Jerusalem.

However, having left and reflected especially on conversations I am more convinced than ever to a resounding 'yes' for dialogue to breakdown barriers of fear and suspicion, to build relationships but a resounding 'no' to compromising the truth found in scripture. How can this be balanced – how can we become people of the way? How can we be people who love with our minds (understand), our hearts (Compassion) and our hands (Serving) the Lord Jesus.

The conversation with a Benedictine monk at the last lunchtime meal together is an interesting place to end this brief reflection.

I asked, 'So do you think we needed the reformation?'
The reply came back, 'absolutely otherwise we would never have had Vatican II.' Unfortunately, the churches seem to have slipped back into their old ways'

I started by describing the representatives in the group from the various traditions and also looked at the current dominant ideologies within the Anglican tradition: Liberal, Anglo-Catholic and Evangelical. The Church of England is a part of the Reformed church and yet here in this simple statement from my friend the Benedictine monk we see how church history seems to show how the church is in danger of 'slipping back into old ways'.

We need to guard against differences being a cause of violence as happens so often – we need to continue to speak and deepen relationships and yet to have an answer for the hope that we have within us.

Within all of this I hear my heart cry out that all is well with my soul. In Jesus we find our peace and security. In heaven we place our hearts and direct our love, on earth we hear the call to love our enemy, as church we are the body of Christ. We are not fixed to place or geography, our security is in our relationship with Jesus and the outworking of that is through our discipleship – following Jesus and accepting his priorities in our lives as we seek to become more Jesus shaped.

Visiting the Holy land has been important as I have learnt more about the complexities and yet we are reminded that Jesus was an itinerant preacher whose security was in his relationship with his Father. We too have that security as adopted children through the blood of Jesus who gave us the right to become children of God, co-heirs with Christ.

This is the message of hope we carry, but not just a message, we carry and are Jesus, to those we meet on the way.

Reverend Peter Lillicrap
21st February – 7th March 2019
Tantur Reflection.