

THE THIRD STATION

Phil Roberts, Ormskirk Circle, experiences grace in the Holy Land



Jesus falls under the cross

Thank you to Paul Jackson, parishioner at Our Lady & All Saints, Parbold, Lancs, for the photograph

I think sometimes that my journey of faith is like managing a chronic medical condition. It starts with diagnosis on the one hand and baptism on the other.

Then starts a lifelong process of learning, listening to advice, reading, discussions, and the words of professionals – medics, nurses, dietitians; priests, theologians, philosophers and exegetists – and ordinary good people with similar experiences. Much of the advice received is useful but much also consists of ‘counsels of perfection’ – good advice no doubt, but almost impossible to live up to all the time, human nature being what it is. More and more as the years go by, the greatest influence on the decisions needed in daily life is one’s own lived experience.

There is one big difference though. Every now and again on the journey of faith, lived experience includes grace, if the traveller is open to it. Moments of grace, spiritual experience, promptings of the Holy Spirit, discernment, prickings of conscience. Call them what you will; they affect the direction and the speed of travel. This is the story of one such moment of grace.

It was in April 2010. After Mass at the Church of St Anne, a few yards away from the Pool of Bethesda where Jesus cured the man paralysed for 38 years, I walked to a nearby convent for lunch. The convent was on a street too narrow for motor traffic, and on a wall nearby a nameplate read ‘Via Crucis’, the Way of the Cross.

After lunch, I was invited up to the roof terrace to take in the view.

The terrace faced south into the early afternoon sun. The first thing that caught my eye was the Dome of the Rock, just left of centre, the large golden dome over the mosque on the site of ancient temples. It looked huge and seemed almost close enough to touch. Temple Mount is known in the Old Testament as Mount Moriah, traditionally the place where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac – the birthplace, so to speak, of the Abrahamic religions.

Straight ahead, the top of a wall could be seen running north to south. The Western Wall is the only part of the temple remaining and is a place of pilgrimage and prayer for the Jewish people.

The land drops from Temple Mount to the base of the wall, then rises to my right. The highest point is in the far corner, about 100ft higher than Temple Mount. The name of the hill is Sion.

The street below my feet goes to the left and right. To the right, the street rises gently, winding out of sight. Later that day, we would follow The Way of the Cross up that road to Calvary.

To the left, the road slopes gently downwards. This view can also be seen in the background of the Third Station of the Cross in my home parish church, though I did not make the connection until I was home.

The large stone building with a high wall and tall watchtower is the Antonia Fortress, built about 50 years before the birth of Jesus. It is considered the only plausible place for Pontius Pilate’s headquarters in Jerusalem and so too for the Praetorium and the courtyard outside where Jesus was condemned to death.

This end of the street curves out of sight towards the East Gate in the city wall. Outside the wall is the Kidron Valley and on the other side of the valley is the Garden of Gethsemane, at the foot of that hill in the distance. The hill is called the Mount of Olives. Beyond the Mount of Olives, about two miles east of the city, lies the village of Bethany, the home of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and the starting point for Jesus' last journey to Jerusalem.

All these names were buzzing around my head! Sion, Calvary, Kidron, Gethsemane and the rest; they were so familiar, after a lifetime of listening to readings at Mass and in later years reading the Bible. Familiar and as moving as the story of Christ's Passion is, these places have been unconnected, just words on a page. Now, I was seeing the story in 3D.

The prophet Baruch wrote: "Go up on the mountain and look east." The mountain was surely Sion. There is a Jewish tradition that the Messiah would enter Jerusalem through the East Gate. I became deep in thought.

Six days before the Passover, two of Jesus' disciples were sent to requisition a colt and they lifted Him onto it. He rode from Bethany among His cheering, palm-carrying supporters over the Mount of Olives, that hill I could see in the distance. He rode down the hill – along the path I had walked the other day? Then through the Garden of Gethsemane, which I had visited too. Jesus would then ride across the Kidron Valley (a suicidal thing to do nowadays with a busy road to cross and fast-moving traffic). He would have passed through the East Gate, the crowds still with Him, and up the street towards my vantage point.

Where would Jesus go then? It seemed obvious. "All the day long He would be in the temple teaching, but would spend the night in the open on the hill called the Mount of Olives. And from the early morning the people would throng to Him in the temple to listen to Him." (Luke 21.37)

He would come past the fortress towards where I am standing then turn left towards the temple, where He would dismount and go in. He would teach all day, then slip away across the valley to sleep rough.

Why would He do that? Jesus had been to Jerusalem several times before, preaching and upsetting the authorities. Perhaps it was because, though He felt safe from arrest in the temple surrounded by His supporters, He did not feel it was safe to sleep in the city.

He did this for three or four nights, anxious nights perhaps, then it was the day of the Passover, the Last Supper. I imagine Jesus and His disciples going as inconspicuously as possible to the room prepared for them, somewhere up the hill away to my right, Sion.

The Last Supper had some difficult moments, the acceptance of the betrayal by Judas, the prediction of the denials by Peter, and a discussion about selling cloaks to buy swords. According to Luke, Jesus "then left to make His way as usual to the Mount of Olives with the disciples following".

Jesus did not make it to the Mount of Olives that night. He was taken prisoner and brought back, along the road I am now looking down, and up to the house of Caiaphas on Sion, then back down past where I am standing, to the Praetorium and condemnation to death. Then the final walk past where I am standing to pain, humiliation and death by torture. It is a terrible, upsetting story of betrayal and injustice.

Lost in thought, there came a sense of calm and of peace. I did not feel alone, and recognised it as a moment of grace. There was discernment too, and words formed in my understanding.

"It is all true."

It was a bit underwhelming at first, to be honest. Then I realised that I was not looking at the whole story. I was thinking only of Jesus as a man; His humanity culminating in the cry of desperation: "Why have you forsaken me?" Apart from a slight glimmer at the Last Supper ("Do this in memory of me"), there is no sense in this piece of scripture of the divinity of Christ and the Glory of God. The story of the Passion is not the whole story.

Go forward to the third day, only 36 hours if you think about it – Friday before sunset to Sunday before dawn – and He is risen from the dead.

"It is all true."

The resurrection is the most difficult part of the Catholic faith to believe. It does not accord with anything in our experience; we cannot explain how it happened. St Paul wrote that to pagans it is madness. St Jerome wrote that "Divine revelation and human knowledge are two aspects of the same truth." St Anselm wrote of "faith seeking understanding". Pope Benedict XVI wrote: "the heart is the organ for seeing God; the intellect is not enough." The Lutheran theologian Kierkegaard wrote about a "leap to faith" (but he seems to have been going in the wrong direction).

It is good to doubt sometimes. It means we are thinking about our faith. But we cannot cherry pick, just accepting the bits we find easy.

For a brief moment in time, my own faith went and was replaced by cast iron 100% certain knowledge. I did not believe, I knew.

There is no need to make a "leap to faith" or a "leap of faith", as it is often misquoted. Grace is the bridge that takes you across the gap between faith and understanding.

Now, each time I go into my own church, at some point my eye is drawn to the third Station of the Cross. Christ is on his hands and knees with the heavy cross weighing down on his back. I see the scene behind Him and think: "Now you only believe, but remember when you knew," and any doubts recede.

"It is all true."