

As many of you might know I and 48 others returned Wednesday from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. We literally walked (and drove) in the footsteps of Jesus. I realize that he went virtually everywhere in his three years of ministry. Driving, it was unreal to realize all that he accomplished at great cost and sacrifices. It was also awesome to celebrate Mass at the many places he visited.

The real starting point of our pilgrimage began at the Sea of Galilee with Mary Magdalene being our first encounter. John's gospel begins with Jesus turning toward two figures following him and said to them, "What are you looking for?" He will ask the same of Mary Magdalene at the end of the gospel. A theme for all of us as we gather here, "What are you looking for?"

Prior to heading out, some of you said kindly, "Enjoy your vacation." This is a teachable moment because there is a vast difference between a vacation and a pilgrimage.

At the heart of a vacation is something like "to unwind" or "to relax and catch up on sleep" where the heart of a pilgrimage is to seek God in a whole new way. That is what we were looking for.

If it is cold and rainy on a vacation, we complain, but not so on a pilgrimage. You accept it, you endure it and offer a sacrifice. If we eat late because of our excursions, no complaining. A pilgrimage means waking at 5:30 or so in the morning, heading out no later than 7:30 in the morning (during one we departed at 6:15!) And I am not a morning person!

Pilgrims can patiently wait for hours on their feet to visit a holy site, such as the place of Jesus' birth and crucifixion. You stand before cold winds or drizzling rain in 40-degree weather. All because we want to deepen our relationship with the Christ. Oh, that we could live our lives as pilgrims!

On a pilgrimage I take people's intentions, such as one's suffering from an illness or addiction. I offered my pilgrimage for my family, my staff and that of our parishioners. I placed all of that on a sheet of paper into the stones of the western wall of the temple, praying against the cold stone surrounded by others doing the same thing.

Do you know what I wall I am referring to? There was once a huge temple for the Jewish people, but they rebelled against the romans. The romans then destroyed the temple and all that was left was the western wall, which is revered as one of the holists sights in Israel.

+ I did read about a journalist assigned to the Jerusalem bureau taking an apartment overlooking the Wailing Wall. Every day when she looked out, she saw an old Jewish man praying vigorously. So, the journalist decided to go down and introduce herself to the old man. She asks, "You come every day to the wall. How long have you done that, and what are you praying for?"

The old man replies, "I have come here to pray every day for 25 years. In the morning I pray for world peace and then for the brotherhood of man. I go home, have a cup of tea, and I come back and pray for the eradication of illness and disease from the earth."

The journalist was amazed. "How does it make you feel to come here every day for 25 years and pray for these things?" the journalist asks. The old man looks at her with a smile. "Like I'm talking to a wall."

During our pilgrimage, we were taken to the mountainside, Matthew's version, where Jesus gives us the eight Beatitudes.

However, if Luke were leading our pilgrimage, he would take us to a level plain, in which he delivers his four blessings and four woes. He blesses those who are poor, hungry, weeping and persecuted. Then he changes direction in his woe to the rich, the satisfied, those who look for joy in possessions and those who are vainly popular.

However, when the Lord says "Blessed" are you poor, hungry and so forth, he is not saying to those who are burdened by life that their life is ideal, far from it.

The Lord is teaching that there is a truth within their circumstances, a strength they don't realize. Within the tragedy of their lives is a hidden grace. The grace of the poor and the hungry realize their dependence on God in a way that the rich and comfortable can seldom do.

Again, it is not their hardship, in and of that is blessed, but only when it better disposes us to trust in God. Just go to a third world country and you will find that the Church is often the center of their lives.

When the Lord says, "Woe to you who are rich, popular, healthy," he is saying that there is a hidden danger in their lives, as they may be seldom aware of a need for God. The rich are in danger if their wealth estranges them from God, as it can isolate one from seeing the needy (i.e. our politicians)

Perhaps some of you have experienced events that have changed the circumstances of your lives very quickly, which revealed to you what is really important in life.

Such trials can be a hidden blessing if through them we come to know better our dependence on God and in our love for one another. When people lose their homes, for example, in natural disasters, their grieving over the loss is helped by the realization that they still have their family and their faith in God.

Sometimes difficult things happen to us that remind us what is really important and what is passing. That is what one learns if we can see our lives as a pilgrimage. We discover we always have Jesus. That is all that really matters in the end.

And so, my journey back here was one in which I was at peace, like Mary Magdalene at the tomb, I came to hear Christ call me by name, that I am loved by God. We have all we need to be happy if we have love.

Shortly before arriving in the States, someone thrust a smart phone at me with the headlines that the Diocese of Richmond had published names of clergy that had abused minors.

Most I knew, but one surprised me, knowing the hurt such knowledge would bring to those who loved him, but also for those who were abused by him or remained quiet.

What are we looking for? Justice? A bit too late for that. Though some want more than names, but context.

Like, the parishes they served. Were they moved around despite knowing they had abused minors?

What am I looking for? What are you looking for? That we clean up his Church.