

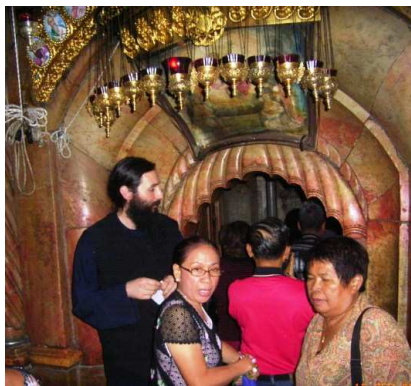
7 TRAVELOGUE - HOLY LAND

We did the Stations of the Cross but not in the sequential order, as it would have been impossible since many other tour groups were doing the same thing, and the gawking throngs of the regular tourists were in the way. Exie got hold of a wooden cross, which thankfully was light, and each of



us took turns carrying it. Fortunately, there was no flagellation. We'd position ourselves at whatever nearby station was free and do the usual prayers, but stopped at 9th station which was just outside the church, where we left the cross. There was an official photographer who took snapshots and sold us copies later. And the route was very commercial, as it must have been during Jesus' time, with sellers of goods and stalls all along the way. This time there were internet cafes, and record shops I would have loved to drop in.

Soon, we were inside the church and there was a long queue waiting to enter Christendom's holiest site, the Holy Sepulcher. Exie soon signaled us that she had arranged for use of one of the private chapels for mass by Fr Robin. In it, there was a replica of the Shroud of Turin. We had mass, then back we went for the queue. It took over an hour. The tour groups are herded by their guides to line up 4 abreast, and keep tight, as the administration of the areas is very uncoordinated because there are 7 Christian denominations running the show: Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Egyptian Coptic, Ethiopian Orthodox, and two more I fail to remember from Exie's explanation. Well, soon a group of Indians started "singit" in front of us, and Exie and the other guide up front tried to tell them they should go to the start of the line, but they were belligerent, so Exie called the cops. Ironically, they spoke Hebrew, so Exie said they must have been Indian "T&Ts", I suppose from Goa. Informatively, no visas are required for Filipinos when entering Israel, so there are many T&Ts, but a crackdown is now actively in progress. Later, some English tourists tried to do the same thing singit trick, but we wouldn't let them.



And finally, we got to the entrance to the Holy Sepulcher. There, you are herded in one by one, allowed to make a quick prayer, snap a picture, and swipe such things as rosaries on the tomb, then out you go. Picture at left shows the entrance, with the Orthodox monk managing the show. He reminded me of a young Rasputin. Above is the Holy Sepulcher.



Exie had another funny tale to tell: on Easter, the crowds are much worse, and a few years back, during a televised ceremony where the Armenian Orthodox priest was to light the lamp above the entrance, another monk pulled him down and they had a fistfight.



The other sites at the Holy Sepulcher Church were the hole in the rock wherein Jesus' cross was believed to have been mounted (see left), and we did have to climb upwards to what must have been Golgotha before; and the rock where Joseph of Arimathea had placed Jesus' body for wrapping prior to burial in the cave. That's the picture at right with Lisa paying respects.



After we left the walled city, Exie bought some bread from the itinerant vendor shown on left, and the purchase included a packet of "hyssop" a powdery herb that is served with the bread to give it flavor. It is best mixed with extra virgin olive oil, as a dip. I recall the biblical passage "Thou shalt sprinkle me with hyssop, O Lord, and I shall be made clean". We bought a whole lot of hyssop at a nearby grocery, so to remain clean.

There are four quarters in the Walled City of Jerusalem: Armenian, Christian, Moslem and Jewish. The Moslem Holy sites are off limits to non-believers. When we entered through one of the 7 gates (there are eight - one is always closed, and there are intriguing historical and biblical reasons), we passed through the Moslem quarter, and one could really see the contrast as we traversed to the other quarters. The picture below is taken from out of the Walled City, at the Mount of Olives across a narrow valley. One wall to the City is at the background behind the row of heads. The structure looming behind is the gold-plated Dome of the Rock, now Moslem.



And this is where it all started, all the beginnings of three religions, that is. Abraham built the first temple on that spot. And from him came forth his sons whose tribes eventually branched off to form three religions. Mohammed is merely a later day prophet, and they believe Jesus as also another prophet. The Jews are non-believers of Jesus.

And history and wars and conquests marched on: the first temple fell, was rebuilt, enlarged, destroyed by the Romans, made Christian by the Crusaders, conquered by Saladin the

Magnificent, etc, etc. I'm not too sure of the chronology, but the Jews believe that their third temple will prevail on that spot before resurrection and judgment day. Since it now is Moslem, then there will have to be another catastrophe for it to become again a Jewish temple, be it an earthquake or war. So they still consider their Holy of Holies as buried underneath that mound, and the closest they can get to it is at the western wall, the Wailing Wall, where they weep and pray and sway. Exie was very dramatic about all these, and she cited the Old Testament (which I suppose had equivalents in the Torah) that had numerous passages of the Temple being rebuilt again.

... to be continued.....