

COMMENT

VERBUM caro hic factum est.' These words are written on the altar in the little Chapel of the Annunciation at Nazareth.

It is the significance of the 'hic' inserted into the otherwise familiar phrase which jolts the pilgrim into a sudden realization and awe. 'Here'—here where he kneels, the Word was made Flesh. The two great columns representing the relevant positions of our Lady and the Angel Gabriel, even the remains of Mary's house itself, which can be seen through a grille in the wall, cannot deflect the attention from that marvellous mystery which here overwhelms the mind with special awe.

We are faced with the same 'hic' in the Grotto of the Nativity at Bethlehem, where the Latin inscription round the silver star reads, 'Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary'. A simple statement that sets the mind reeling.

Yet somehow the 'here' does not have the same impact as it does at Nazareth. Perhaps it is the fact that the shrine has Greek Orthodox trappings; perhaps it is the constant stream of chattering tourists who crowd into the Grotto; perhaps it is that we are in a sense prepared for it by Nazareth; whatever it is, few pilgrims pause very long before this place where our Lord and Saviour was born. Rather will they stay to pray nearby at the simple Franciscan Manger Shrine where the Infant Child was laid.

It is I think necessary to go out into the environs of Bethlehem before the scene of the first Christmas can be mentally reconstructed below the Church of the Nativity. For outside Bethlehem people still live in cave-homes with their animals close beside them; not far from Bethlehem the shepherds still keep watch in the fields; on the road to Bethlehem camels are still ridden today.

The main streets of both Bethlehem and Nazareth swarm with hawkers of the most virulent variety, but in Nazareth the vital places are peacefully enclosed within the Franciscan compound. It is here, under the church of St Joseph, that the third 'hic' confronts us, with shattering effect only secondary to the first. 'Hic erat subditus illis.' 'Here he was subject to them.' This sentence, so often read from St Luke's Gospel, springs alive with a strangely compelling force when seen written in St Joseph's

workshop, which lies beside the home of the Holy Family itself.

The synagogue where they worshipped, and where our Lord later taught, has long since disappeared but a Greek Orthodox church which has been built on the site incorporates a replica of the Jewish place of worship. This too is a quiet corner of Nazareth and it is easy to imagine how 'the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him'. The sharp silhouette of the Mount of Precipitation also remains as a clear reminder of how they then wished to destroy the Preacher at whom they had looked with such concentration.

Long before our Lord had quietly evaded this mountain, there had been a higher and harder one to be faced—the Mount of Temptation near Jericho. It is a cruel, rocky hill burnt bare with the scorching sun. One's first reactions on seeing it are that no one could survive for more than a few days in such a place.

Yet it is in fact the only height in the vicinity which has a water supply and there are caves for shelter. By the biggest of these, monks have for long been established; living their lives in constant memory that here the Word which had been made Flesh was tempted to forgo the path of man's redemption.

'And Jesus returned in the power of the spirit into Galilee; and the fame of him went through the whole country. And he taught in their synagogues and was magnified by all.'

Galilee remains delightfully unspoilt today and we can read what he taught in the very places where he preached. What priceless privilege to wander at will on the Mount of Beatitudes; to stroll from there down through the fields to Capharnaum, plucking the corn as we go! Then the synagogue at Capharnaum: although the ruins are of a later era than our Lord's, much material from the previous buildings would have been re-used. Who knows on which of these massive stones the Master's feet once trod?

From Capharnaum we can cross the Sea of Galilee following the same route as that taken by Jesus. Sudden frightening storms are still liable to occur and as the boat battles its way through the choppy water it is easy to understand the disciples' awe when they witnessed the immediate obedience of the elements to our Lord's voice. 'Who is this', they said, 'that he commandeth both the winds and the sea; and they obey him?'

The answer was given on Thabor, the Mount of the Transfiguration that rises 'apart' from the flat Jezrahel plain. Today a

tortuous winding road crawls its way up Thabor and leads to the two churches which stand on the peak where the Word shone so wondrously through the Flesh.

It was with the same three apostles in attendance but on the slopes of another hill that our Lord commenced his Passion. The Rock of Agony at Gethsemani now forms the Sanctuary of the Church of all Nations. By the use of purple stained-glass windows, the light of the building is kept perpetually as the light of evening. It is a moving experience both to assist at Mass here and to gaze on the ancient olive trees in the garden just outside.

The Mount of Olives is as pleasingly unspoilt as Galilee and we can clamber on its rough paths or sit in peace among its fields and trees. A little way above Gethsemani stands the small domed church of Dominus Fleuit, whose plain glass windows give a clear view across to the city over which Jesus here wept.

The overall appearance of old Jerusalem remains surprisingly similar. The big mosque known as the Dome of the Rock admittedly takes the place of the Temple, but the vast space with which it is surrounded enables us to make a reasonable reconstruction of the Temple Area as it would have been.

Here in the Temple, God as a baby had allowed himself to be presented according to the Law. Here he was found as a boy and here as a man he taught the multitude—but 'they understood not that he called God his Father'.

When the Pharisees did understand, his earthly end was near. Soldiers were sent by the officials of the Temple to Gethsemani and for the last time our Lord left Olivet and crossed the Cedron Valley to the city of his sufferings.

We too can follow in his steps up the weary way of the Via Dolorosa to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and Calvary itself. Somehow it doesn't matter here about the abundance of Greek Orthodox ornaments that hang on and above the altar. It is the hole below it on which all eyes are fixed; that hole in which the Cross of Our Saviour once stood.

Close beside it is the small shrine of the Mater Dolorosa, so that it is possible to kneel as it were at the foot of the Cross while Mass is being said. 'Hoc est enim Corpus meum.' With what profound emotion does the pilgrim here adore the Sacred Host!

Then as he stands for the Last Gospel, with the knowledge of the empty sepulchre below, he understands that cry of completion

which was made from the Cross: 'It is consummated'. Man's redemption is achieved and by the God of Love himself. For Calvary alone, perpetuated in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, did the Holy Ghost overshadow our Lady at Nazareth so that the Word was made Flesh and dwelt among us.

G.P.