

GALILEE

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IT is a common mistake to visualize Galilee as a small area of country bordering on a lake. In fact it is one of the largest regions of Israel. For travellers who have arrived at Haifa by boat, the first introduction to Galilee will probably be Nazareth. This is a pity because Nazareth is the one black spot in the whole district. Commercialism has reached such heights there that the street vendors have degenerated from nuisance to menace.

Inside the Franciscan enclosure, however, all is well, and the pilgrim kneeling in the grotto of the annunciation forgets any rabble outside. Two pillars mark the places where our Lady and the angel Gabriel stood, and beside the altar of the tiny chapel is a grille through which the rest of the primitive house can be seen.

Not very far away, under the church of St Joseph, is another house—the home of the holy family. This is reached by a subterranean passage and is formed from a limestone cave. The cellars that would have been used for a storehouse and the place for a rope to pass through are still evident, and there is a niche nearby where plainly a lamp could stand.

Near this house is another cave, said to have been St Joseph's workshop, and over the altar there is written: *Hic erat subditus illis.*

With thoughts thus freshly filled with the wonder of our Lord's humble years in Nazareth, the visitor should go across into the markets—away from the main streets and the hawkers—for here all is much as it was in the days of the holy family.

Watch the women fingering the grain in the open sacks before committing themselves to purchase; the men with their staves guiding laden donkeys through the throng; the barefoot children dodging expertly through the grooved alley-ways—and you will be seeing something of the background of those hidden years.

In order to preserve the site of the old synagogue the Greek Orthodox have built a church, but it is not in regular use. The main body of the building is as it would have been when our Lord worshipped there as a child and when he later returned to teach. How easy it is in the quietness there to picture how 'all

those who were in the synagogue fixed their eyes on him'. But the sharp silhouette of the mount of precipitation outside Nazareth is a constant reminder of their ensuing attitude towards him.

Also outside the present town of Nazareth is the old well; now known as Mary's well, forasmuch as being the only available water supply, it must have been to it that our Lady came for her family's needs.

Only nine kilometres away the curiously rounded summit of Mt Thabor rises suddenly above the plain. In this sense it is certainly a 'mountain apart' and at 1,843 ft it is high by Galilean standards. With its wooded lower slopes it was also surely a hill that an erstwhile carpenter would have known.

At all events, tradition is strong that Thabor is the mount of the transfiguration and on its heights two churches claim to mark the actual site. The long Franciscan church is one of the most impressive in the Holy Land. Under a wooden covering is the peak of the rock itself, while above the altar is a mosaic of the transfiguration. Although the Greek church is usually locked, a knock at the door produces an old crone to unbolt it—but it is not really worth disturbing her!

At Cana too, now known as Kafr Kanna, both Franciscans and Greeks claim to have built their churches where the wedding feast took place. However that may be, the well at Cana with its background of cypress trees remains unmoved. From it the water that filled the stone pots must certainly have come, and today the village girls continue to draw from its depths—they use old petrol-cans for the purpose.

Penetrating further inland from Cana, the traveller finds himself increasingly surrounded by the famous Galilean hills, until at last he drops down to the Sea of Galilee itself. English seems to be the only language in which the word sea is used instead of lake, and further confusion is caused by interchanging Galilee with Tiberias and Genesareth. The latter is the nearest to the Israeli name for the lake, Kinneret, which came from *Kinnor*, the Hebrew word for an instrument shaped rather like a lyre; the shape, in effect, of the lake.

It is St John who refers to 'the sea of Tiberias', but he does take care to explain that the sea of Galilee 'is that of Tiberias'. By the time St John was writing his gospel, the town of Tiberias, founded by Herod Antipas near the beginning of the first century, would

have been firmly established as the most important place on the lake. Today Tiberias is the only town of any size in the area. Parts of the old walls still stand, contrasting oddly with the modern hotels and lido. But the two most interesting things about Tiberias are the hot springs, which first attracted Herod to the place, and the Crusader church of St Peter which is shaped like a ship.

Before the advent of Tiberias, Magdala was one of the most flourishing towns in the vicinity. Only a few scattered ruins now remain of old Magdala, but a little further along the water-side lies the new agricultural and fishing settlement of Migdal. It is thought that it was somewhere in this area that Corozain and Bethsaida once stood, but the 'woe' which our Lord foretold would fall on them has obliterated all remains.

Capharnaum by the same prophecy was to be 'thrust down to hell'. And of Capharnaum, which in St Matthew's gospel was entitled 'his own city', very little else but the ruined synagogue remains. Most probably this is all that is left of a second-century building, but many of the stones used were those of the original structure; and certainly it is the same site from which our Lord taught.

The little harbour, too, remains substantially unchanged and arrangements can be made for a boat to cross the lake from here, as our Lord and the disciples did, to 'the country of the Gerasenes'. This is today occupied by a *kibbutz*—one of the communal agricultural settlements that are proving so successful in modern Israel.

The feeding of the five thousand almost definitely took place on this far side of the lake, where the countryside throughout the course of history has always been more sparsely populated. During the fourth century, however, a church in commemoration of the miracle was built back on the Capharnaum shore and this later gave rise to some perplexity.

Many of the mosaics of this early church have of recent years been cleaned and another small building placed over them for preservation purposes. This is at Tabgha, and while nearly everyone travelling from Tiberias to Capharnaum will stop to see the Tabgha mosaics, it is surprising how few find their way to the old church of St Peter the Primate which lies on the shore hardly any distance away.

Natural rock forms the greater part of the floor and the lower parts of the walls, while above the sanctuary arch are written our Lord's words to St Peter: 'Feed my sheep'. For this shore was the one on which the risen Lord appeared to the disciples as they were fishing; and this rock, now known as *mensa Christi*, is without doubt the most likely place on which he had prepared the charcoal fire.

Behind and above this beach rises a hill, and it will be remembered how after the resurrection 'the eleven disciples went into Galilee, unto the mountain where Jesus had appointed them'. This is the traditional mount of beatitudes and there is no reason to believe otherwise, since it is the only real hill between Tabgha and Capharnaum—and it is in that small stretch that a very large proportion of the events recorded as happening in Galilee took place.

On the slopes there is a hospice run by Italian nuns, and also a most pleasing modern church with plain glass windows giving an uninterrupted background of Galilean lake and hills. Here are still cornfields like those through which the disciples walked—rough fields full of stony places. The flocks of sheep and goats still mingle down by the water's edge below and the fishermen cast their nets as they did two thousand years ago.

There is yet more to Galilee than all this. So far we have been in Lower Galilee, but there is also a sizeable stretch of land known as Upper Galilee. This is very hilly country and the big town of Safed has for long years been identified with the 'city seated on a mountain'. One wonders if our Lord ever made the long, wearying journey up to this city and whether he turned, like all who pass that way today, to look across to Lake Merom, now called Huleh and in process of being drained, where the Canaanites were defeated by the tribes of Israel.

Galilee may be a larger area than one is wont to imagine, but we know that 'he travelled through the cities and towns, preaching and evangelizing the kingdom of God'. Therefore there must be few corners of this region that were not known to him and it is a cause of great thanksgiving that so much of it remains unspoilt today.

