

IN THE STEPS OF JESUS



AS I BEGIN THIS ESSAY, I am in Israel to film a new documentary on the Messiah. I always enjoy visiting the Holy Land. Yet invariably the experience leads me to reflect on the importance of such travel to my testimony of the Savior. Without a doubt, my understanding of Jesus' life has been deepened and made more concrete by firsthand knowledge of the land he walked. But my testimony is grounded in knowledge gained not from the Holy Land but from the Holy Ghost. My witness preceded any pilgrimage here and hopefully will endure long after I leave these places thronging with tourists who yearn to walk where Jesus walked.

One of my favorite spots in Jerusalem is also one generally less crowded with tourists than many sites. It is an ancient stairway leading from Mount Zion down to the Kidron Valley. The stairs descend from a church called St. Peter in Gallicantu, associated with Peter's betrayal. (*Gallicantu* means "rooster crow.") In Jesus' day, the stairs probably led to the palace of Caiaphas, where Jesus was taken after his ordeal in Gethsemane. Unlike many sites, which have disappeared under the accretion of two millennia, these stairs appear to date back to the first century. If so, they may mark the very steps Jesus walked down after the Last Supper and walked up again on his return from Gethsemane to Jerusalem, to be tried before the high priest and then Pilate. Jesus descended the stairs in the company of his disciples, not

fully appreciating what excruciating pain he would endure in Gethsemane. He returned alone, surrounded by cruel captors who no doubt mocked him and beat him. They could not know that he was already spent beyond imagination from suffering for their sins—and ours. After such an ordeal, how did he manage to stumble back up these steep steps?

As I sit on the steps reviewing these scenes in my mind, I try to imaginatively walk with Jesus, but I find it difficult to imagine myself in the place of Jesus, whose agony I cannot begin to plumb. Nor can I identify with his tormentors, whose cruelty is repellent to me. However, I can imagine myself walking with Peter. Peter follows Jesus “afar off” (Mark 14:54), presumably just out of sight. Formerly ready to defend the Master with the sword, Peter does not now dare reach for a weapon to rescue his Lord. But he also does not abandon his beloved Master either, as do most of the others. He stands nearby Jesus. Yet, to his shame, he does not stand publicly with Jesus. His conduct recalls the anguished cry of the man in Mark, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Mark 9:24). Peter wants to be true to his testimony, but on that dark, cold night, warming himself by a fire, he denies the Savior three times. I sympathize with Peter, a disciple whose conduct is not always perfectly commensurate with his love.

By another fire, on the shores of Galilee, Jesus would graciously grant Peter the chance to unsay his triple denial. “Lovest thou me?” Jesus asks Peter three times. With increasing urgency and gravity, Peter thrice reaffirms his love and devotion just as he had thrice denied it (see John 21:17). Previously, his Galilean accent had betrayed him as one of Jesus’ disciples. Now, in that same Galilean accent and near the place where the Master first called him to leave his nets, greathearted Peter recommits himself to following the Good Shepherd.

As we do each week in the sacrament. This ordinance seems precisely fitted for disciples in process of perfection, like Peter—and me. Weekly we witness our willingness—even our eagerness—to faithfully follow Jesus. Yet weekly we find

ourselves at the sacrament table needing to renew vows imperfectly kept in a world of temptation, where confessing Christ on Sunday proves easier than following Christ on weekdays.

As I sit on these ancient steps, hallowed by the feet of the Master during the climatic moments of his ministry, I am reminded of a lesson I relearn every time I come to Israel. I remember that it is not enough, nor is it even essential, to walk where Jesus walked—whether on these steps or the Via Dolorosa or the shores of Galilee. Many Christians have lived and died without making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and yet have entered into the heavenly Jerusalem to dwell with God forever. More important than walking *where* Jesus walked is walking *as* Jesus walked. This can be done anywhere. Indeed it must be done everywhere. Every disciple must heed the same call Peter heeded, which echoes still from the ancient shores of Galilee across the miles and down the centuries to each of us: “Come, follow me.”