

*Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her.* The first words uttered in Mass this Sunday.

Pilgrimage. According to Islam, every Muslim is required to go on a pilgrimage to the city of Mecca at least once in their lifetime. According to Judaism, Jerusalem must be visited frequently – we know that Jesus and his parents went there annually to celebrate Passover. What about Christians? Well, there is no rule in Christianity that says you have to visit a specific city like Mecca or Jerusalem. Both places have connections to Christianity, because Abraham spent time in Mecca – and all three religions revere the prophet Abraham – if not the Lord Jesus. Though not obligatory, many Christians do indeed choose to go on pilgrimage to various places to find spiritual meaning and enrichment. The two most highly recommended destinations from this pulpit are Rome and Jerusalem.

The first of those destinations of Christian pilgrimage, Rome, also known as *Caput Mundi*, the capital city of the world. Rome is the eternal city, where St Peter and St Paul lived and died, where the Pope lives and rules ok. And as it happens there's a school trip to Rome in October, that any student who will be in 3rd Form up to Upper Sixth in the autumn can join. A plug for the Rome trip, it promises to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience; there are some spaces left for you to sign up, if you're quick. Five days of experiencing everything Rome has to offer: faith, history, culture, architecture, real pizza and sunshine. A blessing from the Pope; and a free ice cream by the Trevi fountain for every pilgrim, on the chaplain of course; ice cream on me.

Commercial break over, let's get back to our life's pilgrimage with Jesus, *ad-free* from now on. The one and only city that all Muslims, Jews and Christians of every kind, consider to be a holy place, is Jerusalem. Jerusalem was mentioned at the start of Mass, in the psalm, in the first reading. And in our gospel today we overheard Jesus chatting to Nicodemus at night, you guessed it, in the city of Jerusalem. I think we can take it as a not-so-subtle hint that some reflection is needed about this place. We're over half way through Lent already, and yes, our destination is Jerusalem. This Good Friday and Easter, we are going up to Jerusalem, where everything that was written about the Son of Man would come true.

I promised *ad-free* preaching, but here's the good news from our generous heavenly sponsor. We are all going to Jerusalem already. Yes, you and I are already on a free trip to the Holy City of Jerusalem! I say free, because your heavenly Father has already paid the price for you. Your ticket to paradise is printed on your Mass leaflet, near the beginning. John 3:16 – *For God so*

*loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* The heart of our gospel message this Sunday, a verse to keep close to your heart, John 3:16. After Mass cut out or rip out this verse from the Mass leaflet, because these prophetic words of Christ are both the ticket and map for our pilgrimage. This pilgrimage of Lent, to Jerusalem, is not all fun and games. Before we travel to the eternal Jerusalem, our first destination must be with Jesus to the city of his death on a cross. In Jerusalem, we pray the stations of the cross, walking along the *Via dolorosa*, the way of pain, singing: *We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.* Maybe our initial response to God's generosity in bringing us to Jerusalem is one of joy and excitement, as our cantor sang; *I rejoiced when I heard them say: 'Let us go to God's house.'* *And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.* As Good Friday approaches perhaps our broken hearts lament with the prophet Jeremiah, who mourned following the destruction of Jerusalem and her Temple; a devastating ground zero spoken of in our first reading this morning, with a glimmer of redemption as rebuilding commences.

Jesus said: *The Son of Man must be lifted up as Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert.* A prophecy that he would die on the cross. An epoch before, in the book of numbers, Moses had placed a bronze serpent on a pole, so that when Israelites saw it they would be healed. Likewise, we are healed when our eyes are opened to the crucified Jesus on the cross. Our sins wounded him. *Yet by his wounds we have been healed.* Gazing upon a crucifix helps us to contemplate Jerusalem. By contemplating Jesus there, we are healed spiritually by the love of Jesus for us. It was by gazing at Jesus on the cross that one of the thieves crucified there believed in Jesus. Remember: *God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* Every sin has been dealt with by Jesus, who knew you and me and our sins as he suffered for us. Looking at the cross gives us hope and a fresh start no matter what we have done. Having journeyed up 38 steps to church this morning, from the school, our feet do indeed stand in Jerusalem. At every Mass, we stand at the Lord's cross as he saves us. We are transported there when Christ is lifted up in his body and blood. It all happened in Jerusalem, the city of peace and reconciliation.

Dear Brothers and Sisters the season of Lent places us on the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, to the city of the cross. Never forget what Jesus did for you there. This Lent, make your pilgrimage. He leads you to Jerusalem out of love for you and for your salvation. *We adore you, O Christ, and we bless you. Because by your holy cross, you have redeemed the world.*