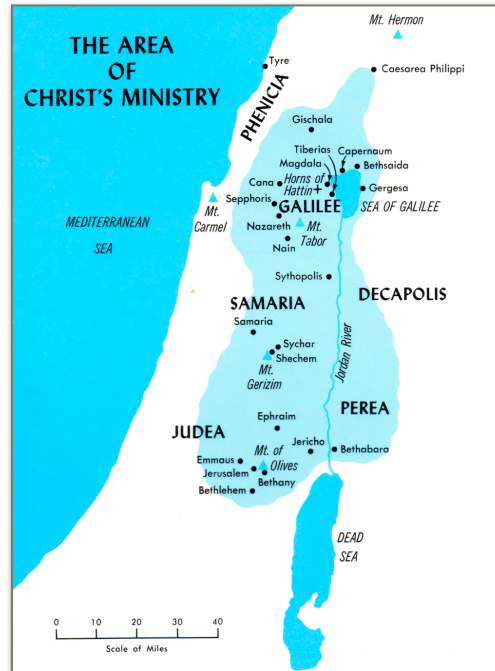


- Think of Mary and her journey to Elizabeth. She said 'yes' to God and became pregnant with the Holy Spirit. It could easily have cost her her life, for this would have brought great shame on Joseph and both their families. Think of what happens in some Middle Eastern societies today. No wonder she made a rapid exit and visited Elizabeth and Zechariah for several months in Ein Karem. Her 'yes' to God was not a throwaway answer; it was deep and costly.
- Think about your own 'yes' to God and its quality. Use this opportunity to dialogue with Him about your 'yes' What does He wish to say to you? What do you want to say to Him? Make it a deep and powerful conversation. What is the next thing in your life that He asks of you?
- Think about Elizabeth. In this meeting between these two women, Elizabeth was an older woman who had longed for a child. Now, she was expecting one, and she now finds Mary, in one sense, usurping her place, peace and joy. She, too, was expecting! Moreover, Elizabeth, as the wife of a priest, was an important local and could have been very judgmental towards Mary: her child was out of wedlock! However, notice her response: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb ...'
- Think about your tongue and how you use it. Do you use it for blessing, gossip, or both? Do you look for the good, the positive, in others, or do you seek an advantage over them? Are you a blessing or a curse to your neighbour?
- The shepherds were outsiders, misfits, and probably brigands. However, the good news was given to them first. God has no favourites. Who do you need to reach out to? Who is the outcast in your community, the person on the edge? How could your church be a welcoming church and a blessing to all?
- God's Word came and dwelt in our midst. Think about how He could be born anew in your heart. Use the opportunity of this talk to offer your heart and life to Him anew.



The Palestine of Jesus: Letting the geography of the land speak to us today First Presentation



The Middle East from Space

1. This series uses a PowerPoint presentation to explore Jesus' life through the land. The notes below complement the visuals.
2. In this presentation, we examine the land, noticing the coastal plain rising to the mountainous spine (actually hills) and then dropping down into the Jordan Valley.
3. The distance from Jerusalem to the coast is 54 km (in a direct line), from Jerusalem to Jericho is 36 km, and from Jerusalem to Nazareth is 105 km.
4. Jerusalem is 762m above sea level (Mt. Lofty is 700m), and Jericho is 260m below – a drop of 1 km in 36 km.
5. **Ein Karem** (En Kerem), 8 km west of Jerusalem (and now joined to), is the traditional site (a tradition that developed in the 6th century) of John the Baptist's home, where Mary came to visit Elizabeth. (Read Luke chapter 1 – 2)
6. Why would Mary visit Elizabeth for about three months? So she would not be stoned to death at home?
7. Church of St. John the Baptist (birthplace of John) and Church of the Visitation (tradition has it that Elizabeth hid John here when Herod was seeking the infants to be killed).
8. **Bethlehem** is 9 km south of Jerusalem. No second historical site emerges today as a place of pilgrimage.
9. The **Shepherds Field** is about two km from Bethlehem. To these outsiders, possible misfits and brigands, the angels came first. God has no favourites. The sheep and goats were kept in these limestone caves for protection at night. (Read Luke 2.8 – 18)
10. **Church of the Nativity**: The first church was built on this site in 339 AD, and the current church dates back to the 6th century. The Persians did not destroy it when they invaded in 614 AD, as a mosaic of magi in familiar dress was embedded in the floor. (Read Matthew 2.1 – 12)
11. The low entrance door, 'The Door of Humility', today says something about how we should approach Jesus, but the historical reason was to prevent Muslims from riding their horses inside.
12. **Birth Cave**: Jerome also lived in a cave connected to this one and died here. His bones are now in Rome (Maggiore). He translated the Vulgate from Greek into Latin. He wanted to be where the Word was made flesh. Spiritually, we should want the same, and a key way to achieve this is through attentive reading of the Scriptures. They reveal God to us.
13. The **star** marks the traditional place of birth, and just above it, beneath the altar, hang 15 lamps representing the different Christian communities. The star has 14-pointers to it. Matthew's genealogy has three sets of 14 generations to its genealogy. David was also born in Bethlehem; his name has three Hebrew letters, which add up to 14. Hence, the 14-pointers of the star on the floor.
14. **Nazareth**: The distance from Tiberius to Nazareth was 24 km. From Tiberius to Haifa was 50 kms. Walking from Nazareth to the lake would have taken 4 hours using the shortcuts. Nazareth was built between two springs.

15. There is disagreement about where Mary and Joseph lived before the birth of Jesus. Matthew implies it was Bethlehem (Chapter 2), while Luke says it was Nazareth (2.4-5). Why did Luke think it was Nazareth? Jerome Murphy-O'Connor believes that Luke had the impression that they had always lived there because of their long residence in Galilee. Thus, he had to find a reason to place them in Bethlehem for the birth, and he mistakenly invoked the census of Quirinius, but this took place in 6 AD.
16. Jerome Murphy-O'Connor thinks Matthew is correct, as Joseph belonged to a Judaeen family. If Nazareth had been their home, it would have been more natural for them to return there when Herod menaced them than to go to Egypt. On the other hand, Judaeans automatically thought of Egypt as a place of refuge (1 Kings 11.40; 2 Kings 25.26; Jeremiah 26.21).
17. Archelaus (4 BC—6 AD) inherited his father, Herod the Great's, murderous unpredictability, so Joseph moved his family to the north.
18. Just then, Herod Antipas, who had become the tetrarch of Galilee, was recruiting artisans to construct his capital, Sepphoris. Joseph settled in Nazareth, 6 km to the SE on the Roman road from Sepphoris to Samaria and Jerusalem. Did he work there? Later, did Jesus as well?
19. **Nazareth; St. Gabriel's**: Looked after by the Greek Orthodox. Near the road to Tiberius. In the apocryphal gospels, the angel Gabriel came to Mary whilst she was on her way to the spring to get water. Nazareth is built between 2 springs. (Read Luke 1. 26–38)
20. **Basilica of the Annunciation**: Built over a crypt enclosing a grotto where the archangel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear a child. Completed in 1969. There was a Crusader Church here in the 12th Century and a Byzantine Church before that dating to the 5th Century.

Reflection

- In this first Session, we looked at the places connected with Jesus' birth and early years. Much has changed in the intervening 2,000 years, but I think Jesus would still recognise the landscape without the buildings.
- We cannot demonstrate beyond doubt that this was 'the site' for a particular event. In some cases, we can have a pretty good indication, though I do not think we can do that with the stories surrounding Jesus' birth. However, Bethlehem and Nazareth, in a general sense, do have strong claims on Jesus.
- None of this matters for our purpose in these talks. Through these photos, we are making our own pilgrimage to the Holy Land, visiting sites connected with Jesus and His life. We can enter the particular event there and see what it might say to us.