

PONDERING IN PEREA



Introduction

A great deal of mystery surrounds the story of Jesus, his life, the communities and individuals among whom he lived and worked, the villages, towns and cities where he travelled Twenty centuries forward our knowledge about his life may often be like a set of out-of-focus images accompanied by files of tattered pages recording his teaching. Those same pages which have long been argued over, discussed and debated, until the original text is barely discernible, and once important themes are now dismissed and disregarded by our contemporaries. Galleries, libraries, halls of art, books, drama, music have together expressed a multitude of varied interpretations of the many texts.

Even more mists hang over the vibrant experiences of the post-Pentecost Jesus-followers in Judaea and Jordan. Deeper in the shadows lie, for us, the inter-racial communities among whom the good news spread like a flame of divine fire. Their existential life involved their turbulent history, their employment, their religious beliefs and customs, their hopes, their often-fearful despair about failed harvests and the ever-looming dread of cruel oppression, persecution and war.

The lands of Perea had not escaped the cruel ravages of Roman occupation under king Herod the Great who bequeathed this part of his territory as a quarter inheritance to king Herod Antipas about the time of Jesus had his fourth birthday as a refugee in Egypt. Known as '*The Country Beyond*', Perea consisted of the lands east of the river Jordan between the Sea of Galilee and the Salt Sea.

'*Pondering in Perea*' relates how three of Jesus' first followers recalled and shared together all that he had said and done throughout his short teaching ministry and his even briefer passion. In a series of meditations, I have listened to those three and recorded their '*ponderings*'. Most of these personal recollections and stories will be the product of my own meditation and research gathered up with well-established facts from scripture, all waiting to be dipped into quiet, imaginative moments. I have learned so much by listening to those three sharing their memories, thoughts, and dreams about Christ, the Son of God!

With the Spirit's guidance, these '*ponderings*' ask us to wonder what might have been, what could have happened, what memories, hopes, visions, romance, fired the minds of real Jesus-people, inspiring them to love the world with him at unimaginable cost. I hope I may help the reader step into the times and events of Jesus' first disciples and friends to share their new-born faith in God and their excited prophetic visions of a strange new world in which love permeates its whole life, as in the beginning when the Word breathed it all into being.

After much enquiry and even more meditative prayer around words and memories recorded by the apostle John, together with his later letters and visionary thinking, I am ready to share a few of my discoveries. With considerable trepidation, quickened heart rate and trembling keyboard, I begin to set down some of my '*ponderings*'. Heart-pondering was a glorious, though tragically painful vocation of Jesus' mother from before his birth. '*Pondering*' is therefore, an appropriate word because these thoughts in Perea are in one way, hers. I imagine the memories, the joys, sorrows, and agonies of the three people I believe loved Jesus most – his mother, Mary, his disciple Magdalene and his apostle, John.

Through these prayerful exercises I long to make Jesus and his story more vibrant for today's reader, especially a younger one. In everything my aim has been to identify real Gospel characters, and above all to offer a picture of Jesus in his time without detracting from his glorious nature as the Son of God filled with the Spirit in glorious Trinity. I trust, reader, you will share my desire and have many personal experiences of Jesus breaking into daily life, our and our world's as he did physically once in human time and will again when his work is

complete. My sure hope, with John, is that *'we shall be like him, because we have seen him as he really is.'*

I have no doubt there will be critics of my thoughts and imaginative writing. I will understand and I shall regret it. I have too often stood among the critics myself! My only response here is my personal testimony to over eight decades of life with Jesus, whom I have met variously as brother, friend, saviour, healer, Lord I have written with a longing to fulfil the great commandments - to love him totally, to love his world with him and above all, to know what it means to be loved by him. To be loved by *'God with us'* at both the joyous and cross-like moments of life - when dark days come and when new resurrection mornings break through the gloom with even more touches of his glorious grace.

PEREA - A PLACE TO PONDER

In Jerusalem the first Christian community soon accepted the leadership of apostles James, Peter, and John. Peter and other apostles were now planning to move out from Judaea into Samaria with one or two of the newly appointed Jerusalem deacons together with several of *'The Seventy-Two'* missionary group whom Jesus himself had trained. All who remained in the city lived with the continuing excitement of Pentecost. Even in the face of opposition and imprisonment by fervent Jewish leaders that amazing experience of God's gracious love was being renewed daily. The enthusiastic faith of the Jesus People was sustained by prayers and apostles' teaching both in secret in their homes and more publicly in the Temple. They saw the number of followers growing daily. Numerous lives and relationships were changed for the good and bodies healed as people found faith in the words of Jesus whose Spirit was alive among

them. People coming to the city for worship and for sight-seeing tours of Herod's new Temple, heard the facts of Jesus' short life and ministry, shared the apostles' teaching, and then carried it home to places near and far. The word of God's exciting, good news was like a seedhead carried in the wind, spreading in the goods and flaxen sacking of carriers' carts. Those seeds were being spread along vital trade routes, south towards Egypt, north to Damascus, east into Arabia, west to the Mediterranean lands. Citizens travelling from the cosmopolitan cities in Galilee and the Decapolis took the words of Jesus into Greek and Roman lands. His words were already touching other lives with his own world vision of God's life-changing love which he entrusted to his first disciples. *'Go into all the world'* was his final commission and now the same vision was firmly in their sights and pounding in their hearts. Within the city the people who followed the Jesus Way were soon busy continuing the master's work, directed, and guided by his Spirit. They were gripped by Jesus' direct call to share his fundamental message of God's grace, calling people everywhere to repent and renew their faith in Him by pledging obedience to his ancient commandments. There were many instances of physical and spiritual healing. Changed lives were obvious everywhere.

The word from God was surely spoken and cast onto the wind of the Spirit. Groups of believers were gathering regularly, especially on the first day of the week – Jesus' resurrection day – and Pentecost day. Together, they would recall and share the teaching of the Lord. For many of them that meant gathering early or late on a working day. They would meet early, or sometimes late, in the women's' Court of the Temple before moving on the share meals in each other's homes, especially when James, Peter and John or other apostles were present.

As numbers grew, those meetings involved a choice of home venues and in some places, sadly, gave rise to competition and division among them involving religion and race. Wherever they met, their time was given to reading and listening to the scriptures, and to breaking bread together to remember Jesus in the way he suggested to the apostles when on the night before the cross, he shared the Passover meal with them. Of course, much time was given to praying together. On many of those occasions they were personally conscious of the presence of the Lord among them speaking through their thoughts.

This was just at the beginning. The Christ community lived with memory of the final words of their Lord when he left them to ascend to heaven – *going home to God, his Father and theirs*. On the Galilean hillside overlooking the sun-lit waters of the lake rippling with shadows of the sail- dropped boats, they were leaving to be *fishers for his people*. *It was their willing and eager response to his challenge to carry the message of repentance and forgiveness far from there and from Jerusalem*. With him they believed his words would spread outward in all directions like the ripples on a baptism pool. Out into the whole of Judaea and Galilee, into Samaria and beyond the spaces between the waves would grow wider and wider as they spread across the whole world! In places, some of John the Baptist's early penitents were waiting, ready to catch up with the long-awaited, promised words of the Christ and experience a more wonderful and powerful baptism in God's Spirit.

After their experience at Pentecost 'baptism' had taken on a new, deeper, and richer meaning. It was clearly evidenced as lives became immersed in the Spirit of God like it had for his prophets of the past. Many ordinary folks were obviously changed in character and lifestyle, empowered to speak openly the message of Jesus and to reach out to each other with encouragement and

healing. It was not difficult to see why they were being spoken of as *Jesus People*.

The apostles were eager to play their part in the master's wishes. 'Go throughout the whole world and preach the good news to all people.' Even now, pilgrims from the Pentecost festival were travelling home to share their personal experiences, fanning out to create more groups of witnessing disciples. Already Peter and Philip were making plans to travel through Samaria to reach Joppa and Caesarea, and the whole coastal plain. The Spirit missed no opportunity to knock on the doors of minds and hearts wherever their words were heard.

It was soon realised that the twelve had to be on the move far beyond Jerusalem and working among followers of different races following different practices of the Mosaic laws. They agreed to appoint seven helpers called *deacons* to work on the practical everyday issues of the community, while themselves having freedom to travel and concentrate on Jesus' mission plans. Gathering and meeting of their rapidly growing numbers needed a measure of disciplined organisation. Peter and John for instance, were appointed to visit the recent converts in Samaria, to baptise them in Jesus' name and share with them the gift of his Spirit. The flame of divine love lit by Jesus was now burning fiercely in their hearts. It was no easy task to which they had been called, but their Lord had sent them out with his authority. In the gracious power of his Spirit, he was actively with them.

Meanwhile, excitement, fear and distant rumbles of threatening danger embraced the life of believers in the city. James, John, and others had already suffered at the hands of The Sanhedrin and Temple guards. They had been placed under guard, imprisoned, tried by the Temple courts, and severely

beaten. Jesus' words to James and John when their mother, Salome asked for them to be given foremost positions in his new Kingdom were already being fulfilled – they would share his 'cup' of authority but there would be wine of suffering and sacrifice in that cup. Since Stephen's death new threats of imprisonment, trials, beatings and more severe punishments were the dominant talk of the *Jesus Way* followers. Meetings in the Women's Court of the Temple continued with less trouble and were by comparison, safer, thanks to intervention from people like Nicodemus and John Mark's uncle Barnabas, all of whom were deeply moved by the Spirit as to the truth of the good news. Encouragement came too, from Gamaliel, the renowned teacher of the Law at the Temple, who persuaded the Grand Sanhedrin Council that Jesus and his disciples were not engaged in non-scriptural teaching but were presenting the sacred truths in a newly presentable way. He argued that it would be fairer to let God be the judge of their words. The apostles shared a concern at the way teachers and preachers of the Law so bitterly turned themselves against the new teaching. Jesus had always desired to gate to the heart of religious practices and of the Law. As Nicodemus had bravely pointed out at one Sanhedrin Council meeting, *it was not new truth but a different and more popular way of teaching and living the Law of God.* Nothing Jesus taught was a contradiction of the Shema which they sang or recited at every time of worship and daily prayer - *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength, and love your neighbour with the same honour and justice as you would expect from others.* Jesus' words, actions and life all stemmed from the knowledge that God, the Father, IS love. Nicodemus concluded, *'The Law is given to show us the real life in which love reaches beyond all legal demands whatever that may cost.'* He had been jeered at by a few young militant Pharisees whose love for the Temple

could only see Jesus' words as blasphemy. They included one scholar from Gamaliel's Temple School. He had come from Tarsus in Asia. He was not so demonstrative as others on account of his disability and a certain superior attitude, knowing he was respected as a favourite of his tutor. When deacon Stephen was so brutally murdered, this young scholar did not soil his hands or his reputation. He stood, head raised high, holding the coats of the younger '*righteous*' while they threw the lethal stones. Stephen had been brought before the Temple Court, charged as Jesus had been, with speaking against the Temple and its controlling practices. He was a brilliant preacher and defended himself on grounds of scripture. He recalled how God had given Moses the Tent of Meeting as a sign of his presence with his people on their journey to the Promised Land. Reminding his roused opponents how King Solomon had built the first Temple as a continued reminder of 'the divine presence', he retold the story of God creating a people for his special purpose. Beginning with Abraham, Stephen spoke of how The Lord God was not to be found first in buildings but in his people's lives. Like Jesus, he was grossly misunderstood and condemned by priests and people alike. Death by stoning was the prescribed punishment. Stephen's courageous witness was not wasted though. By the grace of God, in coming days it led to a wider expansion of Jesus' words through the young man, Saul, who had 'held the coats.'

Everywhere, people observed how songs of praise and acts of faith-filled love were ever more deeply entwined in believers' lives, thoughts, and everyday living. They were practicing the ways of Jesus and learning to love even their opponents whose attitude often amounted to raw hatred. When the apostles were in town, they were tirelessly exhausting themselves teaching and explaining thoughts of Jesus in the homes of other followers of The Way. Large

numbers of enquirers and people anticipating healing still gathered close to the Beautiful Gate in the smaller courts around the Women's Court and the treasury.

James continued to head Jesus' followers in Jerusalem and for while John spent as much time as he could preaching at various places in the Jordan valley, especially Galilee where gatherings of Jesus' people drew large numbers away from dangers in Judean towns and villages. His presence at Bethsaida pleased his parents Zebedee and Salome because, fearfully, they heard of the tragic events in Jerusalem. They knew how reckless their sons, James and John could be, attracting danger to themselves as cousins of Jesus. They were proud of how their sons, like all the apostles, were gripped by Jesus' vision of the Gospel. They saw it as a flame of love reaching the wider world and were ever more conscious of their responsibility to obey the master's wishes.

The fishing business continued to do well with 'the boys' away. A demanding but very fair man, Zebedee was never in need wanting for more workers. He determined with Salome that the Gospel was priority even if that meant the family was temporarily divided. John had remained for a while in Jordan close to Jericho. He was part of a much bigger family now, and was often staying in Jerusalem with his aunt, *Mother Mary* as the Jesus followers knew her, and with Mary, called Magdalene after her home city of Magdala. Magdala was one of the ten cities making up the Decapolis territory east of Galilee Sea. Magdalene and her close women friends had become devoted followers of Jesus and given important financial help to provide for the disciples' needs – their own and their families - while they were travelling the roads of Galilee. Her family maintained a profitable fish- salting and exporting business which involved transporting a wide selection of other commodities too. At the more dangerous times in Jerusalem John had taken Mother Mary to stay more safely at Magdalene's villa on the edge

of Bethabara, better known as *Bethany beyond Jordan*. John and Magdalene had a long-standing friendship from early years. Like other fishers in Galilee, when Zebedee had a surplus of catches for the markets, he would send John sailing across to Magdala with fish for salting. Magdalene, like John had been very close to Jesus. He had been partly instrumental in Jesus' gift of life-changing healing for Magdalene. They both had a deeper understanding of the master's teaching and would sometimes discuss parts of it together with other enquirers. This could irk Peter at times. Feeding the apostles was readily acceptable to him but publicly teaching the law, especially as Jesus interpreted it, was not accepted by him as women's work! From the time of Magdalene's serious illness her family had thought it best for her to live at Bethabara and be responsible for that part of the family business. From Bethabara she now managed the transporting of goods on to the major trade routes close by and to individual local destinations like Herod's luxurious summer palaces near Jericho and the great fortress palace of Machaerus closer to the Salt Sea. The comparatively new Greek and Roman populated cities in the Decapolis were also developing as centres for trade. Business for Magdalene's family had profited from Herod's new Galilee Capital city of Sepphoris which had been destroyed and completely re-built to become an upper-class community of expensive villas. Even now it was an important trading centre for that part of the Jordan valley. Less than four miles from Nazareth, much of its rebuilding took place in Jesus' early years. He would have known it well and maybe helped Joseph and his stepbrothers with joinery and general building works there.

Magdalene's Villa was quite sumptuous by many standards. Not that she set store by great wealth and riches anymore. Jesus had taught her the way of true spiritual poverty which keeps wealth in its place with joy of loving the poor by

returning possessions to God and using them with him. The entrance to the property was through a winter windshield of young cedars and an olive grove, reminiscent of Gethsemane on the mount of Olives. The main building had many rooms surrounding a central hall open to the sky above an olive-green tiled central pool. The pool was a welcome, cool respite through long hot summers. The outer courtyard was well protected and had its own steward and doorkeeper. Robbers from the Judaeian hills were constantly watching mule trains and wagons as they came and went. This larger courtyard was formed by a ring of accommodation for workers and carriers and had a variety of store houses for the family business. Some of the rooms were now set aside for people who came seeking cures for a variety of illnesses. John, like some of the other disciples had the Spirit's gift of healing. Magdalene had many willing helpers from the town close by if temporary nursing was required. Bethabara town gate and market square were nearby and local businesses, especially bakers welcomed the extra visitor trade. The Villa now welcomed all who came to visit for prayers and to learn more of Jesus' teaching.

The town people found it amusing that Magdalene and her family traded salt and bitumen out from the Great Sea whilst storing imported salt for the fish preserving in Galilee. The best customers said the Dead Sea salt which contained numerous different minerals, gave the fish a bitter taste, so the family depended on Joseph of Arimathea's imports from the shores of the Great Sea. He travelled far to the west in his trading, providing luxuries for Romans and Greeks alike. He and Barnabas had been very generous to the Jesus' people, especially during these days of near famine after last year's poor wheat and barley harvests. Joseph, Barnabas, and Magdalene, with the help of Barnabas' nephew John Mark had formed a relief group, supplying grain and bread to the

needy followers and others in Jerusalem where the deacons were responsible for distributing it fairly. Gifts from supporters throughout the north-west of the Jordan valley were gathered by Magdalene's friends Joanna, Susanna, and John's mother Salome in Capernaum. Salome arranged for them to be transported on regular supply trains, some right into the city. A host of willing workers and helpers made their witness to the Lord in amazing and often sacrificial acts of love. Apostle Matthew was a welcome helper too! His knowledge of both Roman and local tax regulations - and of frequent corruption - had been a great help to Magdalene in the past and even more as now. He had spent many dark days under burning oil lamps labouring over scrolls of her accounts. Many examples of loving service were helping people to draw closer to the memories of Jesus' teaching and caring activities.

John spent many days journeying among the groups of believers teaching and encouraging them. The Jordan valley had become a refuge for followers from Jerusalem. Believers who had followed Jesus in the years of his ministry were now meeting regularly to pray and recount memories of him in their own homes. Numbers continued to grow daily.

Following the death of deacon Stephen, persecution organised by the Sanhedrin council became more subdued but there remained a constant threat of spontaneous violence. All who followed the Jesus Way lived in an uneasy environment. Men and women were being subjected to the scorn of unbelievers at the instigation of Temple officers. Homes were being searched by Temple police, following information from neighbours about gatherings for prayer. James, at one of their trials had noted how strange that was when the Pharisee leaders stressed the practice of family worship in homes as well as in synagogue

and the Temple. Local shopkeepers among the believers who sold basic items of daily life were being intimidated and shunned. *Jesus People* in Jerusalem were increasingly aware of the danger of being known as his followers. Amid all this disturbance and uncertainty John was concerned for Mother Mary's safety while she was resident in the city, though she felt she should be there at the heart of things when possible. John was acutely conscious of the responsibility Jesus had given him during the last horrific hours on Skull Hill - *'Mother, he is your son.'* *John my mother is now your mother.'*

Religious opposition was often caused by bitter jealousy of the popularity of Jesus' teaching among the people. This was especially true of the Sadducees who were desperate to put down the idea that Jesus was alive from the dead. They did not believe in a bodily resurrection. Interpretations of Jesus' words and their relation to prophetic scriptures were still causing differences between the various cosmopolitan synagogues in the city. For some little while, following that shameful act against Stephen there had been a period of quiet in the city and many followers of Jesus continued to meet openly in the women's court of the Temple and with less secrecy in their homes. However, the sure threat of danger erupting again and racial divisions between Jerusalem Jews and those of the Greek-speaking synagogues, demanded an atmosphere of watchfulness.

John was concerned that Mother Mary would be a target for persecution. Preaching about Jesus as *'Son of God'* had raised some difficult questions about her by a few well-meaning believers. If her son was divine, who was she? Should they show her special respect? Would she too be questioned and charged with blasphemy? He and Magdalene had discussed it with her late one evening. Early next morning, John arrived in Jerusalem with one of the food relief wagons.

He met with James at the house of Barnabas which Mary had made her home for the time. Barnabas had already spoken with them and Philip, about Mother Mary's safety and they had discussed alternative houses where John and Mary could be together. Guided by the Holy Spirit, it soon became obvious to them, that Magdalene's Villa at Bethany beyond Jordan would be the obvious refuge for them.

There had been a suggestion of Mary returning to Nazareth. Her stepsons and step- daughters were scattered now with homes and families of their own and John was not sure that Mary would be especially safe in the village despite being so well known and loved there. Attitudes had changed recently. There were many Jesus followers in Nazareth, inspired by Joseph's sons, *James and Joses* who both professed faith in Jesus later in his ministry. However, there were bad memories left among some senior citizens of Nazareth. Joseph was no longer there for one thing, and Jesus had not always been popular at the synagogue in his hometown. John recalled the Sabbath when Jesus did the difficult thing of preaching in his home synagogue. His words were not well received. He read and preached from the prophecy of the prophet Isaiah, implying that God had called himself to be the promised Messiah. *'He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, to announce release to prisoners, to give sight to the blind, to deliver all who are oppressed, downtrodden, abused, crushed, and broken by life's circumstances and to proclaim the time of the Lord's salvation.* His hearers were captivated by his preaching, stunned, and excited when he claimed himself to be that anointed one Isaiah had spoken about. Then that Sabbath, everything changed. While he rolled away the Scroll of the prophet's words and sat down ready to preach, people had time to reflect about military Messiahs and armies. Two faithful older Pharisees sitting at the front of the synagogue voiced their

thoughts aloud, *'This is Joseph the joiner's son! How can he know these things?'* Older attenders were obliged to listen, while other younger friends of Jesus supported him, thrilled by the power of his words and knowing the generous kindness of his ways. Jesus responded to the teachers' criticism by reminding them of how in the past, prophets like Elijah and Elisha had been rejected as unworthy because they did not fulfil 'religious expectations. *'No prophet,'* he quoted to them, *'is seen as acceptable and worthy in his own town or country.'* His words were not well received, and barbarous action followed. John reminded the friends how he and Philip had been helpless to restrain the embittered crowd of worshippers from dragging Jesus out of the holy building and forcing him to a high place where the road turned onto a rocky outcrop. From there they intended to throw him on to rocks in the rushing waters of a ravine below. More impressive was what followed. The same spirit power which embraced him in the synagogue, was like an aura around Jesus. Rather than attempt to run away or seek help from his disciples, he turned to face his opponents and walked straight past them! Mother Mary and her family were held in too much loving esteem for it to lead to physical abuse. Since then, Jesus had experienced far worse criticism and mixed welcomes. James and Joses were not happy for Mary to stay in the village without their protection at present. *Bethany beyond Jordan* was by far the better choice.

Bethany appealed to all three, Mother Mary, John, and Magdalene. Mary could be safe while receiving many loved visitors and sharing in the care and teaching of the numerous converts who came for help and guidance – many of whom were brought by John. She could share in the charity work as well as the home meetings and care of sick people. John would still travel through Judaea and Galilee to encourage and teach the believers gathering there, but people sought

him out here, as they had done the Master. The religious authorities would not trouble them in Bethabara. That was partly because of the growing numbers of Jesus' people in the town but also because they were discouraged by the presence and influence of people from several nations, from Greece, Rome, and Arabia east of Petra. They despised those ancient pagan influences, forgetting how Abraham's descendants originated from those lands and people. Their older beliefs had derived particularly from Zoroastrian teaching on themes of fire and light. John, son of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the baptiser and Jesus' second cousin had often discussed thoughts on those ideas with Jesus, Philip and James. Philip was a deep thinker with knowledge of Greek and Persian religions. A keen student of the law, his main concern was how it should be carried out simply in everyday practice. Another deterrent to Jewish leaders' opposition to '*The Way people*', as they were becoming known, was having to travel to Bethabara through the Judaeen hills. Northeast of Jerusalem, hill caves were populated by rebellious factions like The Zealots who were militant against both organised religion and the Roman occupation. However, in a converse way, there could be some protection from the presence of the Roman military passing across the Jordan ford regularly, on their travels between cities on taxation and legal matters. The ford was a focal point for travellers journeying to the wider world of the Empire and to and from the Palace and fortress at Machaerus, close to the Salt Sea, where the Baptist had been tragically beheaded.

Apart from all the obvious arguments for John, Mother Mary and Magdalene sharing together at Bethany beyond Jordan, Magdalene loved the place. It was her home now more than Magdala. She had once dreamed of living here with a family of her own. She said, '*The place is full of Jesus.*' It really was! *Bethany beyond Jordan* was a place of memories to which followers of the Way would

make pilgrimages from near and far to and meet with first believers – affirming the facts about Jesus and hearing his words from the witness of his own disciples. Residents in Bethabara and surrounding villages gathered for prayer and worship here where they felt peculiarly close to the Lord close to God. Mary's outer courtyard was sometimes used for much larger gatherings.

Bethabara really was a sacred place. The surrounding area was a pilgrimage destination for Pharisee and Sadducee alike. It was one of those *thin places* – *between earth and heaven* - where God feels close! Clear against the northern sky was the Mount Pisgah range with the Nebo ridge where Moses climbed to survey the Promised Land spread out around him and where he died, being denied the moment of crossing the Jordan to set foot in those long-sought lands of milk and honey. That same range overlooks the fertile plain where the prophet Elijah ascended to heaven without the pain, indignity and ceremony of death and burial.

From his early days these had been special places for Jesus. He and John the Baptist met here after family gatherings for festival days, in the Temple. They climbed in the desert hills to share the teaching of the prophets, talk of the true Kingdom of God, and realise the amazing, exciting, yet unsure, divine purposes for which their parents had been preparing them. It was at the Bethabara ford John had baptised many of his own followers who in turn would become disciples of Jesus. Jesus too had baptised here when John moved further north to where the river Aenon ran lazily into the Jordan, creating more convenient deep baptism pools. The waters there assisted the growing of crops with palm and olive groves in land that was parched scrub in long hot summers and vibrantly alive after winter rains. Both Jesus and John had seen this as an illustration of the new life God was about to bring to his world and all people.

East of Jordan had been a training area for Jesus' disciples and other followers. Crowds came from Jerusalem, all over Judaea and Galilee, the new cities of the Decapolis and even further east in Perea around the ancient rose city of Petra. These were difficult and changing times. Hopes were high in expectancy of this being a suitable time for the advent of God's *Messiah*.

The Spirit of God was truly with John. The Baptist's powerful preaching reminded his hearers of the prophet Isaiah's messianic visions which demanded personal repentance and commitment to *go with God*. Though inspired and challenged by his preaching, those who responded were aware that, as in the days of the prophet, what followed could mean further times of discord, warfare and national destruction. As a result, few would be ready to receive Jesus' further thoughts of *neighbour-love – especially for enemies!*

Jesus continued John's themes, preparing their hearers for the Messiah and the excitement of God's new world-wide Kingdom. Bethabara was a pivotal point for Jesus' early mission and was to become a place of spiritual energy pulsing into the highways of the world. Joseph of Arimathea's traveller tales had further prompted Jesus' world vision. On at least one occasion he had travelled with Joseph along the highway to the Great Sea. Now, news of his Rabbinic ministry of teaching and healing had inspired visitors to come to him from far away. Soldiers would call by and travellers breaking their journey along the *King's Highway* were interested to hear Jesus and speak with him. He was always pleased to share their lives and to hear of their religious philosophies and beliefs, some of which he incorporated as illustrations into his popular story-preaching.

Pisgah was to become a special place for Jesus throughout his ministry. Here, he could know his creator Father's presence among rugged cave-festooned hills stretching east to Moab and south to the Salt Sea. Here, where winds howled down ravines to stir dry, whispering desert sands watched over by ever present birds of prey and within sound of desert wolves. Spring rains brought a resurrection, changing the scenery with new beauty and spiritual challenge as the desert blossomed in glorious wildflower carpets. Sheep grazed the numerous grasses, watched over by shepherds employed by local householders who each kept a sheep or goat and entrusted them as shared flocks to the shepherds' care.

Pisgah was where Jesus communed with the Spirit of Elijah as he made ready for critical moments in his ministry. In these hills he had prepared for a special revelation, with Elijah and Moses, when three of his disciples. James, Peter, and John had been overshadowed by heaven's glory on Mount Tabor. They could not imagine his experiences here alone towards the end, just before he went to raise Lazarus from the grave. Then on to Jerusalem to the events of his *Passion* and his '*Going Home*' This had become one of his shared *thin-places* – close to his father and to all the people '*back home*.'

NOW TO PONDERINGS

I have no desire to join a party of tourists in the Jordan valley today. I have been building a picture in my own mind of what Bethany beyond Jordan was like in New Testament years and have come to know and love the place with Jesus and his friends.

Here, in meditation I have shared Mother Mary's 'ponderings' with John and Magdalene. I have come to see them as probably the three people who loved Jesus more than all others and believe they have welcomed me to listen as they recalled incidents and teaching from Jesus' life and ministry. With them I have sought a greater and deeper understanding of him, of all he did, said, and is still doing.

I have been privileged even further by being allowed to add a few of my own thoughts and imaginations to those which John added years later in letters he sent to other Christian communities. That was when the three were still together in Ephesus before Mother Mary and Magdalene 'went home'. It has been my joy to listen to them as millions of others have, and even more to share with you, reader, these thoughts. My prayer is that reading, you too may be inspired with the flame of Christ-Love which is still lighting up the world in preparation for his gracious Kingdom of love and His Day of Trinitarian Glory.