

# The Vintage Voice

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## Holy Week on Holy Ground

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I had the privilege of serving as the chaplain for the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) in Baghdad, Iraq, from April 2003 until May 2004. Iraq is the place of the Garden of Eden and Adam and Eve. It is the land of Abraham, Ezekiel and Jonah, of Daniel and the lions' den; the location of Ur, Nineveh and the Babylonian Captivity. Iraq is the country between the rivers, Mesopotamia. To work in Baghdad and live on the Tigris River was both a challenging and rewarding ministry. Frankly, it was the most interesting and exciting job I have experienced in my life as an Episcopal priest. The events of Holy Week 2004 capture the dynamism of my time in Baghdad.

The CPA was headquartered in Saddam's former presidential palace in the "Green Zone." The worship area in the palace was situated at the north end of the building. It had a high vaulted ceiling with three sets of ornately decorated blocks. Ninety-nine of these blocks were inscribed with the names for Allah found in the Qu'ran. The floor and walls were marble. It was a wonderful place for worship and the acoustics were perfect for liturgy. Each week, more than seven hundred Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Buddhists worshipped or prayed there. There would be even more people attending services during Holy Week. On Palm Sunday, the Christian congregations arrived with palm branches they had cut from the date palms growing behind the palace. Having served congregations in the northeastern United States, it was a treat to cut palm fronds from the trees and join the apostolic entourage commemorating Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. It was even more meaningful for me to be able to decorate the altar with palms I'd gathered myself, rather than receiving a mail order shipment of palms a week or so before Holy Week.

On Maundy Thursday, Rabbi Ackerson, a Jewish chaplain and lieutenant colonel, arrived for the Passover celebration. Our worship area had been transformed and tables set up to accommodate eighty people for dinner. Because the rabbi was an Orthodox Jew, the seder lasted more than three hours. The rabbi asked questions to prod our thinking about the Passover event and the Scriptures of Israel. We responded as best we could. Rabbi Ackerson then used our responses as an opportunity to teach and to illuminate the Exodus narrative. It was a thrilling evening. Moreover, I found it fascinating to share this Passover meal with Jews, other Christians, and a number of Muslims. This truly was a freedom from bondage, the bondage of ignorance and division that often separates our major faith groups.

The Good Friday service began at noon as is customary, but very soon after we began, the service took an extraordinary twist. Midway through the prayer of consecration, a number of

Muslims arrived in that part of the room set aside for daily Muslim prayer. Soon their voices could be heard offering praises to Allah. One might immediately get the impression that the Christians and Muslims in the worship area were dueling voices, competing congregations. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. Neither group was in competition with the other. It was more a cacophony of holy voices, a symphony of languages and tongues giving praise and thanksgiving to God. It was an incredibly moving and deeply spiritual experience.

Easter morning was to begin with a sunrise service at 0600 hours across the street from the palace. Therefore, I went to my office in the palace at 0530 hours to prepare for the early service. I had just arrived when, no more than fifty meters away, a mortar landed, ripping through a storage trailer. The loud explosion woke everyone and the concussion shook the end of the palace in which my office was located. My immediate thought was, "So this is the sound a stone makes when it is blown off the tomb!" A warning alarm quickly sounded and the entire compound was locked down for the next forty-five minutes. The sunrise service would begin late this Easter morning, after the Marines guarding the palace gave the "all clear" signal.

There would be five other worship services throughout the day in the palace. There was our regular Anglican/Episcopal/Lutheran service at 0730 hours and a general Protestant service at 1000 hours. The Protestant congregation was composed of military and civilian personnel from the coalition nations along with a number of Iraqi nationals. I invited the Iraqi members of the congregation to read the lessons each week in their native language. Not only would this day and every Sunday be an Easter celebration, every Sunday would also be a celebration of Pentecost.

That Easter morning, the Iraqi lector shared the story of the resurrection in Arabic. I could have requested that she read it in Aramaic, of course. Aramaic was her first language, Arabic her second, and many Iraqi members of our congregation spoke Aramaic. Another member of our congregation had converted to Christianity from Mandeism. The Mandaeans are the descendents of the disciples of John the Baptist.

Living in Baghdad was like stepping back into the first century with Jesus. I was living on holy ground during Holy Week. I was cutting branches from the trees with his disciples. I was eating the Last Supper with him in the upper room on Maundy Thursday. I was celebrating his resurrection with those who spoke his language. Most importantly, I heard the stone being blown from his tomb shortly before sunrise on Easter Day.



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