

Marco the Merchant goes to Jerusalem

When Marco's father Ephraim first came to Nazareth, people were very suspicious of him. Samaritans, we had always been told by our Rabbis, are the enemies of the Israelites. They believe that they are also Jews, like us, but many generations ago, while our ancestors were in exile in Babylon, their ancestors managed to remain in Israel, living on Mount Gerazim. They



believe their place of worship on Mount Gerazim should be the centre of Jewish worship, while we believe that the Temple in Jerusalem should be the centre of the worship of Yahweh. The way Samaritans were talked about they might have had two heads or a little devil's tail and all over a place of worship.

Ephraim rode in on a donkey, with a servant on a second, leading a third loaded with panniers of merchandise to sell. It was always an event when a travelling merchant arrived, and many of the locals came down to the market place, to see what he had for sale. Their curiosity about the wares he had for sale far outweighed any suspicions they might have had about him. He must have done well out of the people of Nazareth, for he paid handsomely to stay in the house of Joseph the Carpenter, and to stable his animals with Joseph's. When Joseph was asked about him the next day, all he would say was that he was very polite, and that he hadn't seen a horn or a tail. He looked just like anyone else. Joseph seemed to like him, and if Joseph liked him, then he was probably alright. Ephraim made himself popular by going around all of the craftsmen in the village, and examining their wares. He bought quite a bit, and commissioned more, on which he put down a deposit. He said that he would be back in a few weeks to collect his goods. When he set off again, many of the villagers were sad to see him go.

Over the next few years he would regularly come to Nazareth, and stay increasingly long periods of time, as he roamed far and wide around the countryside looking for new artisans from whom he could buy and commission goods. He continued to stay with Joseph, until he eventually asked the village elders whether he could buy some land and build himself a house. When they agreed, he bought a plot of land on the edge of the market place, and set about hiring labourers to build him a stone house. He commissioned a wooden door with metal hinges from Joseph the carpenter and Simeon the smith. When the house was ready he moved in. A little while later a young man came riding into Nazareth. He looked rather familiar, and when he asked for the house of Ephraim, the village gossips went into overdrive, speculating who he

might be. That evening Ephraim opened the doors of his house, and invited the village in to eat and drink, and to meet his son Marco. Ephraim's house was thoroughly inspected, and provided a wonderful source of gossip for many days. Eventually some other scandal overtook the subject of Ephraim's house, and he and his son were able to get on with their lives in peace.

One thing that he hadn't explained was his son's name. Marco is not a Samaritan name it is Roman. Marco's mother was not in evidence, so maybe, the village gossips thought, she was Roman. Eventually one evening sitting on the roof of Joseph's house, with a small group of his friends around him Ephraim told them the story of how, when he was an impetuous youth, he had set out along the Silk Road determined to make his fortune. He only got a few miles from home when he was set upon by robbers who beat him and stripped him and left him to die beside the road. Just as he was giving up all hope of being rescued, a couple of Roman soldiers spotted him, picked him up and carried him to the nearest inn. The innkeeper recognised him, and sent for his family who came and collected him, and took him home to nurse him back to health. In gratitude for saving his life, Ephraim promised to name his first two sons after his rescuers. His wife had died giving birth to Marco, so he had been spared having to call a second son Vicus. His family had been furious about the name, but his wife had understood, and so Marco was named. As it turned out, having a Roman name when you trade a lot with the Romans was no handicap.

Marco of course had heard the story many times in his life. He was the living embodiment of the fulfilment of a vow. Many young men might have found it a burden. To Marco it was an inspiration. Ephraim died while on a trip to Rome trying to sell Galilean linen to members of the senate – he always did aim high. Marco was left with the house and business to run. At the time of his father's death, his wife was expecting their first child, so Marco wasn't travelling far from home. He decided to make a trip to Jerusalem going via the Jordan valley to Jericho to pick up some fruit for the markets in Jerusalem.

When he came back he was very quiet. I knew that his wife was well, so it must have been something on the journey which bothered him. One evening he was sat on the roof of Joseph's house, with Mary, Jesus, Nathan, Jonathan and I, eating and drinking and telling stories. He became quiet for a few minutes, then he began to tell us about his last trip to Jerusalem. He had left Nazareth with his pack animals panniers full of items which had been made in the villages around Nazareth. He regularly went from here to Jerusalem via Jericho as many of the Temple priests, members of the Sanhedrin and other officials had summer houses there, where they could relax in their shady groves of trees listening to the water of the streams flowing down into the Jordan valley. They were the men with money, and it was always profitable to make a trip there with the latest 'must have' items. Beyond Jericho the road down to Jerusalem becomes more rocky and difficult, so the going is a lot slower.

The journey down to Jerusalem was uneventful, and so after selling his wares to

shopkeepers in the city, he loaded up with items from the city shopkeepers to bring back to sell around Nazareth. He sent his servant to the ports on the coast to see what the boats had been bringing in for sale, so he was travelling the road from Jerusalem to Jericho on his own. As he was travelling, he noticed birds of prey circling overhead in the distance. He thought that perhaps an exhausted animal had been left by the roadside to die. A Priest and a rabbi on their way to Jerusalem, presumably to perform their duties in the Temple had passed him by, and had not made a comment about what was ahead. When he got to the spot where the birds were circling, he idly looked around, as his donkey carried him onwards. What he saw caused him to haul on his poor animal's reins, so that it nearly sat down on its haunches. There just off the road, rolled down the hillside was the naked, bloody, fly covered body of a man.

Marco told his donkey to stay, and scrambled his way down to the man. He had to shoo off a rather brave vulture, hopping over to the body in hope. When he turned the man over and saw the bruised and bloody face, and that the man was still alive, just, he was filled with such anger that it gave him the strength to lift the man up and carry him back up the slope. He pulled a water flask off the donkey and dropped some water through the swollen and cracked lips. He then took some of the wine he had bought to sell, and used it to clean the wounds. He used some oil to soak the strips of material torn from his own clothes, and then he wrapped him in his own cloak and put him on his own donkey and walked beside him, holding him on, until he reached the next village Inn. He spent the night sponging the man's forehead and keeping him cool, as the fever raged over him. By the morning the fever had left him, and he was in a deep healing sleep, so he left him in the charge of the Innkeeper. He put down a deposit on the rest of his stay, and promised when he came again he would settle the rest of the bill.

When Marco had finished his tale we were all silent. Of course we all knew Ephraim's story, so this had many parallels, but there was a particular poignancy in this happening so close to the death of Ephraim himself, so far from home, so far from his family. We all hoped that Ephraim had received the same care that Marco had given the stranger. When Marco spoke again, it was with a note of wonder in his voice,

“What I can't quite get my head around is that the Priest and the Levite must have seen the man, they cannot have missed the circling birds, so why did they ignore him? Did they think he was already dead, and so an honourable burial didn't matter? Were they so taken up with having to be ritually clean for their work in the Temple that they wouldn't touch him? What I really can't get over is the idea that they were so lacking in compassion that they couldn't even be bothered to find out whether the man was dead or not. It didn't take much to pick him up and carry him to the nearest Inn. They had more than enough money to pay for his care if it was too much for them, but it makes me almost sick to think of that man lying there another while waiting and hoping that someone would rescue him before he died. There are times I am glad to be a Samaritan. I hope my rabbi's and teachers are more compassionate than yours.”

We had no answer for him.