

Holy Places

2.12.97 After a rather sleepless Kodusema night 5.30 am came the dream where I had something to do with a university examiner, a very busy man. I waited in the space near his room, soon others were waiting too. He came out and up to me and we went off together. Then reclining on his back he gave me various slips of paper where bird names were written here and there. He would quote the name and I would have to find it on the list. Someone else was there. He quoted the names, or the letters, which were not easy to find, the papers were various small sizes, then I lost some. I said I wanted to know the Finnish names of birds, but the English names were very different, which he understood.

Then he set me a task to write on the subject that there are no longer any Holy places in our world these days. Then I saw an image of a wide four-lane highway into a city, with different city names on each lane: Berlin, Paris, etc.. Looking down, I thought the examiner must know that wherever in any city there was a cathedral or a church, or any place with the Holy Sacrament, there was a Holy Place. I said I would be glad to write on that. He asked: 'Catholic'? I said 'Yes', and burst into deep prolonged tears.

So indeed as Catholics know, wherever there is the Holy Sacrament, the blessed and consecrated bread, in a cathedral, in a church, in a chapel, in a tabernacle, in a pyx, there is a Holy Place. We kneel in the presence of the risen Christ when we enter our church. When Christ threw the traders out of the temple in Jerusalem, the ark of the covenant must have been there, so the traders were desecrating a Holy Place.

A sacred place is usually delimited by an enclosure, to protect the sacred element and its mystery. Like a mandala. A tabernacle is an enclosure. The Orthodox artoforion is like unto a tabernacle. Catholic altars are sacred places, with sepulchrum where relics are kept. Likewise the Orthodox holy table with its antimension. The term Holy Places can have a very deep meaning, as in the dream, and also other levels of meaning. Our church is a particular Holy Place during Adoration.

A sacred place is a place of worship. It is a place where the divine or sacred is especially present, and a point of juncture between the transcendent and the earthly. Another description says that the sacred is always sacred in relation to the past, and though present in time, it is outside time.

A Holy Place for all Christians is of course the Holy Land, where Jesus was born, and dwelt among us, where events of the Old and New Testament took place. The veneration of Holy Places is the oldest expression of Christian devotion, especially Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity, Nazareth, and Jerusalem where the holiest shrine of Christendom is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, which is on the traditional site of the burial and resurrection of our Lord. Elsewhere shrines to our Blessed Virgin Mary such as Lourdes, Fatima, Santa Maria Maggiore, are Holy Places.

Jerusalem is claimed as an especially Holy Place by the three main monotheistic religions: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.

The outer chamber of the Jewish Second Temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed in 70 AD was a Holy Place. The inner sanctuary was called the Holiest of Holies, which compares with the Catholic or Orthodox tabernacle. The Jewish synagogue that may have originated as long ago as the Babylonian exile is not a holy place as such, though it is the focal point of Jewish religious and community life. The holiest place for Jews is the Western Wall in the old city of Jerusalem, a sacred place of prayer and pilgrimage. The rabbinic belief is that 'the divine Presence never departs from the Western Wall'.

Muslims have their holy places, such as the Ka'bah, Mecca, and Medina. The first mosques were simply plots of ground marked out as sacred. Buddhists have their holy places, their stupas, reliquary places built to house relics of the Buddha or his disciples.

Hindus have many holy places in India, some on the banks of holy rivers, others associated with legendary figures, or with specific gods. The Ganges has been revered from earliest times, and is still today regarded as the holiest of rivers by over 800 million Hindus.

The Sikhs of India have their sacred places: gurdwaras or temples of worship to the one creator God. A gurdwara can be a room set aside in a home, like a private chapel.

Shinto in Japan has its sacred places, in shrines devoted to Kami deities, the source of human life and existence. The sacred space of a shrine is the inner sanctuary, to which only the chief priest has access.

Aborigines in Australia have their traditional ritual and sacred grounds.

In other times people venerated high mountains, trees, stones, water. Mountains being close to the sky were believed to bring heaven and earth into close relationship. They were mythological homes or sacred precincts of the gods. Fujiyama is still sacred to thousands of pilgrims, who climb its slopes every summer. Some Himalayas summits are still considered holy. One can understand why a holy place has also been described as a place of peace, and space for oneself. Being alone with one's God.

Then it is important to reflect that there is a Holy Place within each one of us, whether we know it or not, or whether we acknowledge it or not. St. Paul asked: 'know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you'? Elisabeth Kübler-Ross wrote: 'All of us, when we were born from the Source, from God, were endowed with a facet of divinity. This means in a very literal sense that we have part of that source within us'. Sikhs say that God's light is contained in every heart.

God is the origin of life, and at Christmas especially, at the birth of our Lord, it is well to remember that the beginning of life in a mother's womb is a holy thing, happening in a Holy Place.

Perhaps what the examiner set in the dream points also to our modern western civilisation, where we sometimes hear: 'nothing is sacred any more'. Fortunately Holy Places and the sacred do exist in our world, and will continue to exist, everywhere. Their recognition and acknowledgement, and reverence, veneration and adoration occur through our religion. If you know you are at a Holy Place, you act accordingly. If you do not know, then you are poor. Beauty is said to lie in the eye of the beholder, so perhaps it can be said that the sacred lies in the heart of the believer.

As an epilogue: in some circumstances our dreams too are Holy Ground. If we take notice of our dreams, and follow them, they will respond. Rather it is we who should respond, but this requires much patience, complete honesty, deep respect, and love.