

Sacred Spaces

Exodus 3:1-12a

Genesis 28:10-19a, to "...Bethel, which means house of God."

The two bible readings this morning are linked in my mind, because in both situations someone meets with God unexpectedly, and in both cases there are two consequences. The first is that the place becomes for them a holy place, a sacred place. And the second is that they are changed by the enormity of the experience.

Holy places, sacred spaces, are important. As people of faith, it's probably quite easy for us to agree with that. But I think even people with no faith would still acknowledge the concept of a sacred space.

I read a book over the summer, "Sacred Land" by Martin Palmer. And right at the beginning he explains what he means by a sacred place. He describes four kinds of sacred place, capturing four kinds of sacred experience.

Most people are familiar with the first type. Communities decide on a site and then they build their church, chapel, synagogue or whatever on that piece of ground. Whenever that site is chosen, marked out, blessed and therefore made special, it becomes a holy place. Of course it does, because holy means set apart, dedicated, for a special purpose, for a religious purpose. Such places over time become saturated with prayer, worship, the cycle of the religious year. It might be as old as St Martin's church in Canterbury, which is believed to go back to the 4th century, or it might be a new church on a housing estate. And what about Llandudno? St Tudno (Tidno) came here in the 6th century to bring Christianity to the people of the Orme, and is the reason for the name of the town. And the church that bears his name is up there on the rock, still a place of active worship today. Surely that is a sacred space. And what about this place, this church? This is a sacred space, isn't it? Not only for those who live here and come week after week, but also for visitors, who come back year after year to worship here. This is a sacred space, where we encounter God himself.

The second type of sacred place that Martin Palmer describes might be a raging sea viewed from a cliff top or a giant redwood forest that stretches to the horizon or a stream that reflects the flash of a kingfisher's wings or a peaceful grove where the sunlight seems to dance through the branches. That's what Martin Palmer wrote, and immediately of course, we realise how blessed we are right here to have the raging sea, the towering cliff top, the mountain ranges, the glorious streams and rivers and woods. Such places are sacred because they overwhelm us with the sheer beauty and magnificence of nature. That sensation might last for only a moment or for hours, but it allows us to understand that we are part of something much greater and grander than ourselves. What's more, these places generate a sense of gratitude to whatever or whoever we understand to be the origin of all this beauty – what we, and many others beside us, call God. It always amuses me when I hear atheist scientists refer to Eden or creation – how can they fail to understand that in their very words they are acknowledging our creator God?!

The third type of sacred place that Martin Palmer refers to is the type of place that has been made holy by history or legend. As examples, he refers to Stonehenge, and also to a cave in the cliffs in Dumfries and Galloway visited by St Ninian in the 4th century to be alone with God and nature. Well, we have our own caves on the Orme, one of which was used by St Tudno as his base for bringing Christianity to the area. And there are plenty of other places round and about with their own stories and legends. Millions of years of nature and the stories that are handed down, together contribute to the holiness of the place. When we visit somewhere like Stonehenge or an ancient Christian site, we get the feeling that we are at a meeting place

between the past and the present, and even between heaven and earth. That's what happened to Jacob as he slept. That's what happened to Moses as saw the burning bush. Maybe it's happened to you somewhere. Certainly, it's happened to me, and sometimes in the most unexpected places.

The last type of sacred space Martin Palmer refers to is the type of place that means something special to individuals. They might be places that you go to think; or you might have experienced great happiness there with friends and family; or perhaps you made a decision there that shaped the course of your life. For me, this place, this town, is a sacred place. I used to come here as a child with my family, and so did my father before me. He came here the other week to see me settled in and he was reminiscing about the sights and the sounds and the smells – he was so excited and so happy to see me living here now. Places are important to us, they are part of who we are, who we have become. They have helped make us who we are. They are sacred to us.

All four of these types of sacred place tell us something about ourselves, but not something about ourselves in isolation, they tell us something about ourselves in relation to something bigger, a greater story than our own, a greater purpose than merely our individual lives. They are sacred because they link us to the divine, to God, and they give meaning to our lives. They add significance to what lies around us, to our daily work our families, our community and our history. Believing that some places are sacred means that we do not see ourselves only as individuals, as a set of selfish genes or random acts of evolution, but as parts of a greater story within which we can play a part. And not a bit part or passive part either – we are called to be active participants in the on-going sacred story.

Why did Jacob set up that pillar and name the place where he had his dream Bethel? Because he realised that he was on holy ground, in a sacred place where he was fully conscious of the presence of God, *and* that God had spoken to him and asked him to take an active part in the story.

Why did Moses take off his shoes and hide his face? Because he knew he was on holy ground, he knew he was in the presence of God, *and* that God wanted to speak to him and ask him to take an active part in the great story.

So I ask you today, do you realise that you are in a sacred place, that you are on holy ground, that God is here? Do you realise not only that God is here but that he wants to be intimate with you? Do you realise that he not only wants to be intimate with you but that he wants to ask you something? God wants you to join with him in the on-going story of his creation, he wants you to take an active part with him in the on-going task of bringing his love to the world. Because we're not only talking here about holy places, but holy people, set apart for God. God wants our churches to be sacred spaces, but he also wants you to be his holy ground. As it says in the first letter of Peter, "Therefore, prepare yourselves for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace given you when Christ is revealed. Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do, for it is written; 'Be holy, because I, the Lord, am holy.' And as you come to Christ, you, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house, a holy priesthood. You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, belonging to God." May our churches *and* our lives become holy places, sacred spaces, where God can be known and God can be shown, today and always.