

SACRED PLACE - 1
The Jerusalem of the heart
Lent 4
11 March 2018

Fr. Nicholas and I are following our series of sermons on the Temptations of Jesus, of holiness in the face of temptation with some reflections, in the next two weeks on holiness of place, and specifically on the place of Jerusalem – the city where Jesus died – in the hearts and minds of Christians.

Are particular places holy? Billions believe they are. I remember when my wife and I went to visit our daughter in Australia last year, we went via Malaysian Airlines – they'd thankfully stopped overflying the Ukraine by then. On one of the screens in the cabin, visible to everyone, was a constant representation of the direction of Mecca in relation to the aircraft's current position – so that prayer could be made by Muslims in the prescribed way. Once we arrived in Australia, place after place was pointed out to us in our travels that was in some way 'holy' to indigenous Australians.

To the Jews of Jesus time, there was no doubt. Jerusalem was a holy place; the place where God's name dwelt; the place where, God's 'Shekinah' God's visible presence had descended on Solomon's Temple at its dedication. Psalm after Psalm extolled it; the one place where acceptable sacrifice could be made; the centre of the people's sacred life. For millions of Jews, it is sacred still, even if the sacrifice is today one of tears, beside a ruined Temple Wall; now that the Temple Mount is dominated by a shrine to another faith.

But for Christians, Jerusalem is a more complex and conflicted symbol. It is the place over which Jesus wept in disappointment – 'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you as a hen gathers her chicks, but you would not'. It is where he ended his earthly ministry; where he was arrested, tried, flogged, and put to death. It was the place from which he ordered his followers to flee when they finally saw, as they did 70 years' later, the Roman siege works beginning to surround it. On the one hand it was a centre of support for Paul's ministry to us Gentiles, On the other and later, it sent missionaries to the infant Gentile churches trying to persuade them that to be a Christian you had to take the full weight of the Jewish Law upon your shoulders – source of the people against whom Paul struggled in his letters.

Centuries later, it became a centre of devout pilgrimage to thousands, as Christians from those Gentile lands sought to tread the land that Jesus trod, breath the air he breathed, and so give new life to their faith. But, when the Muslim hospitality that had enabled that to happen became more straitened, the threat to Jerusalem that represented also triggered the Crusades, leading to the death of countless thousands of Jews, Muslims and Byzantine Christians as the armoured men from the Northlands hacked their way through to its holy places once again.

And today, the City is again a symbol of holiness – this time to millions of fundamentalist – mostly American – Christians, who believe that it is only when the Temple is rebuilt once again on the holy mount that the Second coming of our Lord will take place, and who therefore rejoice that their president has decreed their country's embassy be relocated there, in spite of the fact that in so doing, he has trashed hopes of peace in the Holy Land for years to come.

Light and darkness, woven around each other, across the centuries; most sacred of places, source of contention, conflict and violence.

Given this, can no place can be sacred, no place give us a sense of the presence of the God whom we seek, whom we love? For me, the answer is both yes and no. For me it is 'yes' when I open up this Church on a dark evening, and see the two lights burning in the Lady Chapel, and feel a sense of power and peace that is almost palpable. It is when I stand on a moor or headland, and feel the blessed wildness of God all around me, and these moments are some of the most precious I have ever known. They are free gift from the God who loves us; who knows that we do not have the grace or the maturity to feel him equally everywhere, and so blesses us with a place to love.

It is when we attempt to capture those moments in those places; are determined to pin them down and own them for ourselves that it goes bad on us; when we abandon the dependence that comes with accepting 'gift', and demand the certainty of 'possession' – a possession that becomes an idol that we are prepared to fight over. But accept God's gift of presence when and where it comes, be open to it, and rejoice in it, and we are clothed in light, and anywhere can become holy for us; can become the Jerusalem of the heart.

May the Jerusalem of the heart be with you this Lent and Eastertide.