

Reflection: A SACRED PLACE

A good Baptist friend of mine served in the Defence Force Chaplaincy at the same time as me.

On formal occasions, he'd often joke that I and those from more traditional churches, wore 'dresses', referring to our robes that we wore.

He, as a Baptist, usually wore his Navy Officer's uniform with the Chaplains insignia, or he wore casual clothing when he preached in a civilian church.

Robes and a set liturgy were not part of his tradition.

The same friend remarked one day that he was a bit disappointed at the appearance of some of the Baptist churches.

He described one chapel (which we both knew), as 'flimsy' and 'built as though it was not expected to last'. If it wasn't for the church sign outside, it could have been mistaken for a Cobb & Company Family Restaurant.

My friend said that he was rather embarrassed by that Baptist chapel. He contrasted that particular Baptist Church with the Presbyterian, Anglican, Methodist and Catholic Churches, in the same town, which were more 'solid' and 'permanent' in appearance. 'Built to last' as he put it. And he should know. He was a former builder.

We got on to the theology of church architecture and church buildings.

At one extreme, there is the belief that a church building was not considered to be that important (on its own). The building was simply a utility. An empty warehouse, or an auditorium, could serve as a church, as long as it had seats, a stage and a screen.

God is everywhere and can't be contained in a church building, however grand. The building is not as important as the worship.

At the other end of the theological spectrum are those who consider that the church building is absolutely important.

To this way of thinking, the church is nothing less than a 'Sacred space'.

It should be a 'dedicated' worship space. Built solely for the purpose of worshipping God. It should include a sanctuary, symbolizing the holiness of God. It should include the finest craftsmanship and materials, where possible. It should display the appropriate religious symbols and 'only' be used as a place of worship and nothing else.

As an ex-builder, my Baptist friend admired the devotion that went into the building of cathedrals he and I had seen in Europe and the mosques and temples in the Middle East

and Asia. He thought they were awesome and captured the sense of 'the Holiness of God'. (Unlike the Baptist Chapel referred to earlier).

I was fortunate enough to study in the UK in 1998. I attended the oldest church in Oxford, which was built by the Normans in 930 AD, even before the Norman conquest 1066. St Michael's At the North Gate was originally a fortress-tower, built to keep the Saxons out. A church developed around the tower.

As I worshipped in that church, I thought of the thousands of people who, over the centuries, had worshipped there. Their prayers and devotion made it a sacred place. I felt honoured to be part of that invisible fellowship.

St Michael's was just one example of churches and buildings that were 'built to last', (for centuries).

These marvellous buildings were built to satisfy the human longing to reach out for the holy and the eternal.

Could we capture that same sense of holiness in an abandoned warehouse, or an auditorium? Maybe.

Sacred spaces come in different shapes and forms. There are different cultural expressions of sacred spaces.

The Celtic traditions speak of 'thin' places where heaven and earth seem to merge. Usually, places where significant events have happened, like the place where a saint has preached the gospel, or where a significant battle has taken place.

The Iona Abbey in Scotland is a good example of a Thin Place. St Columba preached the gospel from the Island of Iona and launched his mission from there.

I often think of Oihi Bay in Northland as a sacred place, because it was the first place in Aotearoa where the gospel was preached, by Samuel Marsden and the Ngapuhi chief Ruatara.

Maori tradition has its sacred spaces which are usually connected with 'death and ancestors'.

A sacred space can be changed through karakia (prayer) and ritual. A 'tapu' or 'noa' can be lifted by prayer and the sprinkling of holy water.

Where someone has drowned, or where kai moana (sea food) is contaminated, a 'rahui' (temporary ban) can be imposed on that part of the river, or beach (for a specific time).

I've quite often been asked to pray over a place/room where someone has died. It's as if the pall of death has been lifted and replaced by new life. Like baptising a place. Like declaring that death has not had the final word.

Kiwis are crazy about the mountains, the sea and the sky. Creation is another sacred space that we are trying to preserve. It still invokes in us a sense of awe.

I love being out at sea or in the mountains. The presence of God is almost tangible. You just feel spiritual. As if it was a holy place.

I can imagine that the African Savannah and the Australian outback might invoke the same awe.

To all ex-service people, and their relatives, old battlefields and Military Cemeteries are considered to be sacred spaces.

Perhaps you have a place which you consider to be a sacred space.

Maybe it was the place where you worked, and devoted hours of your time, for the sake of your family's wellbeing. Or the place where your parents worked, to give you a good life.

Maybe your favourite holiday place, or an old family home is sacred space.

Our first reading today is about Solomons desire to build a Temple.

In his appeal to God, Solomon proposes at least three reasons why he should construct a Temple.

Firstly, it would be a home for the Ark of the Covenant, which housed the Ten Commandments, and other relics. The Ark symbolized the presence of God.

Secondly, building a temple would provide a focus for worship for the Israelites and for the foreigners who hear about the Jewish God.

Interesting that half of Solomon's prayer should be about foreigners being welcomed to the Temple.

Thirdly, Solomon appeals to God to focus attention on the Temple where people pray and worship. The temple would thus become a place where God meets the people and listens to their prayers.

When I think of my discussions with my Baptist friend, I am forced to ask, 'Just how important is a building, when it comes to Christian worship?'

Just recently, the church insurance has markedly increased in the wake of several natural disasters including the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes and Cyclones Bola and Gabrielle.

Our Church Office-bearers have had to make some hard decisions as to what levels of insurance we need and can afford for a church such as ours.

If for some reason the church was destroyed, would we build another church exactly like it is now, or something fit for purpose?

If we had to build a new church, where would we sit on the theological spectrum between the utilitarian auditorium and the dedicated worship space?

If you've been following the news about the Cathedral in Christchurch - they are \$60 million short, and the government will not be helping any further.

I'm sure that this has not stopped the Anglicans in Christchurch from worshipping. They will have found other churches and other places to express their faith. The temporary 'cardboard' Cathedral was built for that purpose

My Baptist friend would rightly say that we are surrounded by the presence of God. The earliest Christians worshipped in house churches before they built churches.

When St Paul wrote to the Ephesian Church about the whole armour of God, he was writing to a group of people who didn't have a dedicated church building. They met in homes and wherever they could gather.

My Baptist colleague might rightly say that The Universe is God's Cathedral and Temple, and that the human heart is all the temple that God needs.

It is for us, the people of God, to give our highest loyalty and our deepest love to God, thus becoming the Temple of the living God.

I'd like to finish with an Easter Story that I think I've told once before in this Church.

In the wake of the Russian Revolution, a certain village church was reduced to rubble by the enthusiastic members of the Red Army.

On Easter Sunday, the village people gathered around the pile of rubble that was once their church.

The priest said the Easter greeting: 'He is Risen'

And the people responded: 'He is risen indeed! Alleluia!'

The church is the people of God.

It is as Jesus said: 'Where two or three are gathered in my name. There am I, in the midst of them.'

PRAYER

O God,
you inspire the hearts of the faithful with a single longing,
grant your people to love what you command
and to desire what you promise,
so that in all the changes and chances
of this uncertain world,
our hearts may surely be fixed
where true joys are to be found;
through Jesus Christ
who is alive with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.