

Incarnation and Holy Places

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What makes a holy place holy? This is the question that soon presents itself to the Christian visiting the 'Holy Land'. Wherever one goes, whether it be among the many sites in and around Jerusalem itself, or whether one travels through the countryside that Jesus must have looked on and walked over, one soon realises that some sites are more 'authentic' than others, and piety assumes many different forms. There is the old lady who caresses the stone on which, ostensibly, Jesus' body was prepared for burial, then transferring whatever power she considers it has by going through the motions of anointing her own body. At the other extreme is the pilgrim, scandalised by the superstition and credulousness of such simple faith and by the unscrupulous behaviour of the clerical custodians in encouraging such behaviour, who seeks refuge in a less earthly spirituality which effectively holds itself aloof from the holy places he visits. If one feels a stranger in both camps then one has to either make excuses for the situation or make sense of it.

One can adopt the theological snobbery of the 'well-informed Christian' who accepts that that sort of demonstrative behaviour is fine and perhaps even a good thing for simple (not to say gullible) people whose only contact with the post-Vatican II Church is that brand of piety. Yet these same critics of the 'simple faithful' can offer their own equally unquestioning and questionable explanation of why they visit the holy places by bringing into play some theological formula. For example, there is the notion that if the blessed sacrament is there in the tabernacle, or if they attend mass in some spot that has extremely tenuous associations with the life of Jesus and even more tenuous archaeological links with the period, then 'that's all right'. Such pilgrims can say, "Well, I don't know for certain if this is where Jesus *was*, but I do know for certain that this is where he *is!*" Then there is the idea that it does not really matter if Jesus was in a particular place or not so long as we all agree to remember in faith the particular event commemorated there. Thus, for example, at the lithostrotos in the Ecce Homo Convent in Jerusalem, thought by many people to be the site of the Antonia Fortress, we remember that Jesus was condemned to death and it does not matter if, as some archaeologists say, the incident really took place at the other side of the Old City in front of the present Citadel. Finally, there is the idea that the sites themselves are unimportant and even a hindrance in the

search for the authentic Jesus because, even if the location of the site is accurate, the sites themselves are so changed since his time. According to this view all we can be certain of is that Palestine is the country in which Jesus lived, and the topography has not changed much, so we are actually seeing the countryside that he saw. The only thing to do is to sit back and tune oneself to the ambience that must still be there.

But if all that matters is whether or not Jesus was physically there, at a specific place or in Palestine in general, or if it is the fact of our remembrance of him when we are there that is important, then the holy places of Christianity are no different from those of Islam, Judaism or even Marxism. If what makes a place holy is simply that a person upon whose philosophy one bases one's life was historically associated with that place, then we must regard every place that has this role in any people's lives as similarly "holy", no matter what the creed of the people who honour the place. There is a great difference, however, between the Christian holy places and the places regarded as holy by the followers of other religions or philosophies. A group of Marxists gathered around Karl Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery, London, is doing something radically different from a group of Christians praying at the site of Jesus's tomb in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem—leaving aside the fact that the Marxists are certain they are at the exact spot where Marx is buried and the Christians are not so sure that the area where they are standing is the site of Jesus's entombment.

What makes this difference is the fact of the incarnation. A central tenet of our faith is that God became man. We believe that the Word of God was made flesh and dwelt among us. What this statement may mean for us today was being explored in the pages of *New Blackfriars* as recently as last November, in Gareth Moore's article "Incarnation and Image of God" (pp. 452—468), and what was said there will not be repeated here. The point I have to make here is that what goes to make a person what he is includes the people with whom he comes into contact, the air he breathes, the places he frequents, the things he does: in fact, everything he has affected and everything that has affected him. "We extend beyond our bodies", said St. Augustine. It does not make sense to think of any person as a being whose limits are determined by his skin. So that idea can have no place in incarnational theology. The very idea of incarnation means to deal in notions of God being expressed in physical terms and physical reality.

Further, we are not simply talking about something that happened a long time ago. Let us reflect for a moment on the Christian understanding of creation. A disturbingly large number of Christians assume that God in effect built a massively complex

machine “in the beginning”, turned it on, and now passively keeps a watchful eye on the way it is running. This is a very different notion of creation from that of, for example, St. Thomas Aquinas, who stressed that God also *sustains* things in being (cf. *Summa Theologiae* Ia. 104, 1). If one accepts St Thomas’s view, then creation is seen as an *on-going process*: creatures may cause other things to begin, but the sustaining power of God is never absent from his creation. To see creation as an on-going process is important in the discussion of incarnation because it will make a great difference to one’s understanding of what the incarnation is.

All too often we are inclined to think that God became man but that after the ascension Christ ceased to be human, or that, if he is still man, his humanity is something he brings out only occasionally, rather as an old soldier might show off his battle-scars as relics of an experience he is proud to have come through but one he wouldn’t like to repeat. It is difficult to see how this idea, or something similar to it, can be avoided if the incarnation is seen as a stage in the life of God. But if we acknowledge the fact that a human being is not defined only by the space enclosed by his skin, that a person extends beyond this limit, we cannot accept the idea of instantaneous incarnation. When the Word became flesh in the person of Jesus he was not merely flesh. To define Jesus one has to look at his theology, his philosophy, what he liked to do, who his friends were and, most important of all, the effect he had and is still having on people. “Jesus grew in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man.” (Luke 2:52) can only have meaning if we accept this definition of what makes a human being, and if we realise that the incarnation took, and is taking, time. The Word was made flesh throughout Jesus’ life and is still being made flesh after his glorification.

To explain this on-going process of incarnation further it is necessary to say something about the Church, and in particular about St. Paul’s theology of the Church as the Body of Christ. Those who are baptized are not merely *like* the body of Christ, a metaphorical substitute for something that is no longer on earth. We *are* Christ’s body (1 Cor. 12:27) and so must be, in a very real sense, the Word made flesh. If Paul were simply using the body-of-Christ language in a metaphorical way, then we could not be expected to do as Jesus did and bring the kingdom of God on earth. The purpose of the incarnation was to make us all sons of God, sharing in his life. As Paul says, “He who is united to the Lord becomes one in spirit with him” (1 Cor. 6:17). This means that God becomes incarnate through us as well as through Jesus. “I have been crucified with Christ;” says Saint Paul, “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). Jesus, God incarnate, the beginning of God’s dwelling in and with his people, is “the first-born from the dead, that in

everything he might be pre-eminent” (Col. 1:18). Earlier we saw that a person is defined in part by the effect he has on others. Jesus is affecting Christians now—he is still being defined. The total picture will not be complete until everything in creation has come into contact with him. We can have no idea of the totality of his being until this happens. As the Word of God he is the Image of God. What the incarnation means is that we can see what God is like by looking at Jesus. But everything is not yet there to see—it is only the whole history of mankind as it responds to his message that will disclose who Jesus is.

Everything touched by Christ helps to define him and, by so doing, becomes part of the incarnation. In this way incarnation becomes identical with the New Creation. Again we turn to Saint Paul, “You have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge *after the image of its creator*” (Col. 3:9–10). Because of our contact with Christ we are part of the new creation and everything we do consonant with his example and informed with his spirit is also brought into the new creation. “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Just as everything Jesus came into contact with helped to define him and became part of him, so everything we come into contact with helps to define us and becomes part of us. It, too, becomes part of the new creation, part of the incarnation, but only insofar as we affect it or it affects us as members of the Church, that is, in the spirit of Christ. If a Christian performs an act against the spirit of Jesus—battering an old lady, for example—that action is not part of the new creation or on-going incarnation because it does not reveal what God is like and defines us as beings of the old order. Our dilemma is that we are an amalgam of the old and new creations. The new creation is continuing and is not complete in anyone except the saints. Saint Paul says as much: “We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, *are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory into another*” (2 Cor. 3:18). If the incarnation had only affected one man in the person of Jesus as limited by his skin, it could not possibly have had any relevance for anyone else. It was for this reason that the Patristic Church had to refute so vigorously so many erroneous ideas concerning the incarnation—not only because they said wrong things about God but also because in so doing they were making the incarnation irrelevant for the rest of us. They were making it impossible for us to be affected by it.

Another central principle of Christian theology which touches our discussion is that the whole of creation needs redemption, “for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God ... because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to

decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Rom. 8:19,21). Everything created must be put into the context of Christ. To become newly created by becoming part of the incarnation, something, someone or some place has to play its part in defining Christ. Arguably, the world which is part of the life of the people who share Christ’s risen life is itself in some sense part of the new creation (see, touching this, the ideas explored by Edward Quinn in his article “Animals in Heaven?” in last month’s *New Blackfriars*). And in a very special sense this could be said to be true of one land in particular, in spite of its long history of hatred and violence: the fact that Jesus, God incarnate, lived in Palestine is sufficient to make that country “the Holy Land”, so large a part did it play in the definition of Jesus’s totality and, conversely, so much did his presence in the country help to give it its own definition.

This brings us back to the purpose of this article. What makes a site holy in the first place is that Jesus actually came into contact with it and transformed it in the way just suggested. In a very real sense the places he visited became part of him. We venerate them first of all for this reason. As we also are defined by Christ, they have a special relationship to us. They also define us and are part of the new creation to which all the followers of Christ belong. But we can never be one hundred per cent sure that a given site is the place where Jesus actually was. Is the rock venerated in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre *the* rock on which Jesus’s cross was fixed? Is the Church of Dominus Flevit on the Mount of Olives the place where Jesus wept over Jerusalem? At which of the three sites claimed to be Emmaus did Jesus’s disciples recognise him in the breaking of bread? It cannot be all three. Does it matter that we can never be sure we have found the actual spot where certain events in Jesus’s life took place?

In Jesus God begins to dwell with and in his people. This is the breaking-in of the new creation. It affected all the places that he frequented and now affects every believer, every person who has declared himself or herself for Christ. It involves a positive decision. Matthew writes in his gospel, “He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters” (Mt. 12:30)—a saying which Luke adapts to the Church, “He that is not against you is for you” (Luke 9:50). At the very beginning of John’s gospel we are told that the element of choice was there during Jesus’ life on earth in that the incarnate Word “came to his own home, and his own people received him not. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (John 1:11–12). Moreover, Jesus promised that wherever his people gathered he would be there too, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. 18:20). In fact, wherever his people are gathered there is his body, and where his body is, the work of

redemption still goes on.

We are now ready to make some suggestions as to how the ideas of on-going creation and on-going incarnation can be used in formulating a theology of the Christian holy places. We have already seen how a location can become holy because Jesus was associated with it during his lifetime. The place becomes part of what it means to be Jesus and therefore part of what it means to be God incarnate. The Church, we have seen also, fulfils the same function as Jesus' own body did during his lifetime because it *is* his body. Therefore, when Christ's body the Church meets, the place where its members come together is affected by it. The Church is, at the same time, affected by the place in as much as it is defined by that place. So when we gather at the site of Calvary in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre it matters little if the place we venerate as the place where the cross stood is not exactly the right place. The very presence of Christ's body the Church makes it into a holy place by encompassing it within the definition of the incarnation and the new creation in the same way that it would have been made holy if Jesus had been there during his lifetime. Thus, by making sites holy by reason of their reference to Jesus, his body the Church is the instrument of on-going incarnation because Jesus, or what it means to say the Word was made flesh, is still being defined. Only when everything in creation contributes to the definition will we be able to say that the incarnation is complete, that all creation is the new creation, and that God's kingdom has come. This is consonant with what Saint Paul says, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet ... When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him to put all things under him, that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:25, 28).

Does it make a special difference to a place if Jesus was there during his earthly ministry? If it does, then the Church is a sort of secondary body of Christ which can impart only a second-class kind of holiness to a place. On the other hand, if it makes no difference, then what is to prevent the Church from making arbitrary decisions regarding the holiness of places; from asserting, for example, that the centre of St. Peter's Square in Rome is the site of the crucifixion? To suggest that it would be the same as the site in Jerusalem is to deny, or at least fail to recognise, what incarnation is basically concerned with. Incarnation is the revelation to man, through man, of what God is really like in terms that mankind can understand. Jesus' life as the image of God is fixed absolutely firmly in this world, in a specific context, in our human day-to-day experience. We need to be reminded of this constantly; hence the reason why we feel the need for holy places at all. So to suggest that any place where Christians decide to remember an incident in the life of Jesus is automatically made holy and is on the same experiential level as the actual site where the

incident actually happened, is to miss the point of the incarnation and to forget the purpose of our wanting to visit such a site. It is a gnostic way of looking at the holy places—one stressing that the place is not holy because of its physical associations with Jesus but because of the spiritual ones. This distinction between physical and spiritual is completely irreconcilable with the ideas which have been put forward earlier. The incarnation is a very physical matter, which is why we need to visit a site which reminds us very forcibly that God did indeed dwell on earth with his creatures. The theophany of the New Testament is of a radically different kind from the theophanies of the Old Testament. It is a physical theophany. So, in order to make the experience of visiting a holy place effective in mediating this physical theophany, we must do our best to locate the site as accurately as we can. This is achieved by assessing the traditions concerning them, examining sources like the gospels and early Christian writers such as Justin Martyr, and by archeological excavation of the sites. Archeology can be regarded as perhaps the most important in that it reveals the physical world in which Jesus lived. There is something very healthy in the arguments of archaeologists trying to decide, for example, whether the site of Jesus' trial before Pilate took place in the Antonia Fortress or in Herod's Palace near the present Citadel, because the arguments are rooted in physical evidence and not theological speculation. A holy place for Christians is therefore a combination of actual physical evidence in so far as it can be assessed, and the bringing of that place into the context of a definition of Jesus.

Finally, how might a theology of the holy places of the kind that has been put forward be applied to the pilgrims who visit these sites? A place never becomes holy because an individual thinks it would be a good idea, but by being adopted as such by a consensus of members of the Church. If I walked into Jerusalem today, for instance, and chose at random a place as the spot where Jesus spat and mixed mud to cure the blind man (John 9:6), it would not thereby be a holy place. There would be no indication or evidence or tradition that the incident happened in that place, and neither would the place be recognised as such by the Church. It might help me in my personal devotions, but the incarnation is not really about personal devotion. A member of the Church cannot do anything in this context without the consensus of the Church as a whole. Christ is not with me as an individual in the same way that he is present in the Church.

So what happens when our representative of the simple faithful comes to the stone of anointing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, really believing that it marks the spot where Jesus' body was prepared for burial? What her presence there does not do is *make* the stone the place where the body was anointed but it is, nevertheless, a holy place. In faith, many members of Christ's body the Church have, over the

centuries, appropriated the place and brought it into the context of the incarnation. The actual site was chosen intelligently, as it is close to the site of Calvary and the sepulchre even though it is unlikely that its authenticity will ever be proved or disproved by the archeologists. The site was chosen because it *could be* where Jesus' body was anointed. In other words, the physicality of the site was not neglected. This last fact makes the difference between that site and another site which might have been chosen at random, in St. Peter's in Rome, for instance. So anyone praying there is concentrating on the physical nature of the incarnation, and so regarding a place connected with the life of Jesus in the right way.

And what about our visitor who considers a holy place to be all right so long as the blessed sacrament is there? Judging by what has been said earlier, he is missing to a large extent the usefulness of a holy place and mistaking its purpose in the life of the Christian. By spiritualising it he makes it dematerialise before him. It loses its physical associations with the life of Jesus and therefore fails in its purpose of bringing home forcefully the physical aspect of the incarnation. It is difficult to see what difference there is for this pilgrim between praying before the blessed sacrament in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and popping into his own parish church at home.

It does not matter, then, if we do not know the exact locations for certain events in the life of Jesus. The site of Calvary may be thirty metres in any direction from the present chapel marking the spot for Christians. The ground that Jesus walked on in Jerusalem is, on average, three metres below the present ground level of the city. What does matter is that we do our utmost to search out and locate the sites as accurately as possible, so that they can fulfil their function of bringing home to us the physicality of the incarnation most effectively. The holy places are a constant and effective reminder that the dwelling of God with men was the same dwelling which forms our environment. By visiting these places we are brought face to face with the material from which God's image, in the person of Jesus Christ, was fashioned, and we recognise that we are made up of the same material. The holy places are indispensable. In spite of, or perhaps because of, their vulgarity, their liturgical insensitivity, the uncertainty of their authenticity, the wide-ranging nature of the piety practised at them, and their present situation of being largely in occupied territory, they form the touchstone which enables anyone who visits them to assess how genuine is his or her belief in the physicality of the incarnation.