

Reflections and Prayers: Holy Ground

This is the 26th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

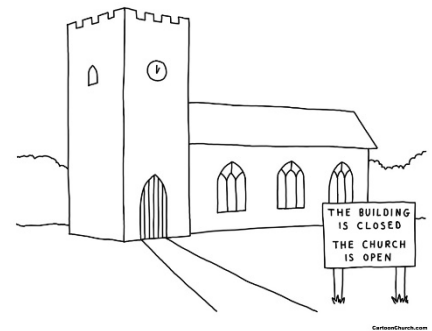
Preamble

Exodus 3: 5 describes how Moses, leading his father-in-law's flock, comes to Horeb, the mountain of God, and is suddenly confronted with the sight of a burning bush from which God calls to him, 'do not come near, put off the shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is **holy ground**'. This is the first of over five hundred times the word 'holy' appears in the bible. Translated from the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New, we associate it with sacred, hallowed, sanctified, solemn or special in different contexts.

Holy Ground

"Be still for the presence of the Lord", we've sung in our homes in our Zoom services (as members of Oakwood Church in Leeds) in recent months (*StF 20*). As we sang it recently, I looked around: "we stand on holy ground". I'm not sure that the somewhat unholy mess surrounding my computer in our study quite comes into that category. And yet

We've all had to give some anxious thought during this period about our "holy places", and the tension (not yet over, by any means) that we've felt. On the one hand, there is what so many of us we feel about our church buildings, our sacred spaces: a real love for them and a desire to be together in them for worship and fellowship (always, of course, with loving concern for each other's safety). On the other, we have that sense of the presence of God at work in our lives and in all the life of the world, summed up in the slogan: "The church hasn't closed; it has left the building."



The image of churches, and cathedrals, closed for so many weeks, and another – you might think unrelated – image, of the flimsy, overloaded, inflatable dinghies in which desperate people have been trying to cross the English Channel, together brought to my mind an experience I had many years ago, but which is just as real in 2020, so no apologies for repeating it, if any of you have heard it before.

It dates back to an earlier time when we were seeing people taking to small boats to flee danger and oppression: when the Vietnamese boat people were arriving here in large numbers. They weren't, of course, coming all the way by boat, but many arrived in Australia and then a number of other countries, including the UK, accepted them – a time when our attitude to such incomers was so much more generous than now.

Some of them were placed at a reception centre not far from Leeds, and a number of us from our church used to take them out and help them to adjust to life in this country. One day, I drove the two teenage girls I'd befriended up to Durham to see some compatriots who had been allocated a council house there, and of course I felt I must show them what I have been brought up to believe is the most beautiful building in the world, Durham Cathedral – back to my links with John Bell: I trust he was brought up to think the same!¹ "What is it?" they asked. How do you explain the idea of a church, let alone a cathedral, to someone with a vocabulary of about 50 English words, words like radio, denim, biscuits, particularly when driving in the middle of Durham,² without using hands?!

After several false starts I remembered that the reception centre where they lived was actually a Roman Catholic retreat centre, where a group of nuns was cleaning, cooking, and generally caring for them – and of course going to receive Holy Communion at the daily Mass in the little chapel there. Somehow or other, I *think* I

¹ Yes, he was. Durham Cathedral surely gives travellers the finest view from a railway train passing through any UK city.

² I trust Susan is content that I have inserted this comma: the phrase might otherwise cast doubt on her driving habits.

managed to get over to them the idea that those people who were loving and serving them were doing it because of their belief in a God whom they worshipped in a building a bit like Durham Cathedral. It was the people who made the building mean something to them – a message then, and now, to me about our worship and service.



Yes, of course our church buildings do matter to us. And that's not just the old and beautiful buildings like Durham Cathedral. I wonder how many of you remember singing that hymn, "We love the place, O God, wherein thine honour dwells" (MHB 677). It always reminds me of my teenage years, when sometimes on Sundays I went with my boyfriend (now husband) Peter to a little colliery village not far from where we then lived in Pontefract. We used to have a lovely Sunday tea with his great uncles and aunts, and then of course we had to go to chapel! They would sing that hymn as an introit, and really mean it. We heard stories of Peter's great grandfather, Harry Seymour, who worked down the mine – dark, dirty, back-breaking, dangerous work – nearly 150 years ago. He would come off the Saturday shift, and go

straight on to clean the chapel, to make it fit for worship on Sunday. It was quite an ugly old building – a cross slightly off centre which used to catch my eye! - but to them it was the very gate of heaven. (And I should add: thanks to the vision of the present-day members, some of them descendants of Harry, and their minister, there's now a modern and attractive building and a growing membership – the only place of worship left in that ex-mining village.)

But that's not the only story told about Harry Seymour. Loved and respected by his mates down the pit, it was said of him that he lit up that dark, harsh place underground with the very presence and joy and love of God so that it became indeed a holy place.

Back to my Vietnamese friends. After I'd stumbled through my explanation, they expressed polite admiration at the beauty of Durham Cathedral. The following week, I drove them into Leeds to do some shopping. We drove past what I think in nearly anyone's view we would describe as unattractive, even ugly, 1960s high-rise flats. In their halting English they asked, "Are they houses? For people to live in?" "Yes." And with all the fervour of the insecure, dispossessed, homeless, they said with genuine, not just polite, admiration: "They are *beautiful*". As we begin to move back with joy into our "holy" buildings, let's not forget all those other grim places which can be transformed into places of beauty, safety, comfort for others – holy ground.

In all our "goings out and in" (to quote another well-loved hymn: *StF 73, R&S 406* verse 3) we do indeed stand on holy ground. We're called to make that real to those whose lives, and the situations in which they find themselves, we can sometimes carelessly describe as 'God-forsaken'? How wrong can we be? For there is nowhere in this whole world – nowhere in the whole of creation – which God has ever forsaken, or ever will. But how will they know that, unless we are there too?

Susan Howdle, September 2020. Susan is a former Vice-President of the Methodist Conference and lives in Leeds. Cartoon of church provided by the Revd Sue Levitt (it was used in Reflection 15 too). Photo of Durham Cathedral from publicity material of Cross-Country trains.

Both/and, not either/or

Susan's reflection is most apposite as we, the congregation of Norley Methodist Church, expect to resume live worship in our church this Sunday morning, September 27th. All is prepared, thanks to the diligent and detailed efforts of some of our members. Many of us have not seen each other since mid-March, and while some will not be able to return yet, those who are able will rejoice, albeit in muffled tones.

For most people of faith, their regular place of worship – be it chapel, church, cathedral, meeting room or mosque – is the holy ground which roots and sustains them as a congregation within the community, whether



village or city. It is the place of gathering from which they are sent and it is hard to imagine being without it for too long. Moreover, places of worship are the visible signs of the presence of people of faith in a community and are invariably appreciated by the wider population, most of whom rarely enter them: but they give an assurance of 'being there when needed'. They can be a focal point and often, nowadays, churches are the only public buildings offering space for communal activities.

People of faith and places of worship are complementary: it is both/and, not either/or.

Turn now to William Cowper's words (*H&P* 549, *R&S* 476 verses 1 and part of 2):

'Jesus, where'er thy people meet, there they behold thy mercy-seat;
Where'er they seek thee, thou art found, and every place is hallowed ground.
For thou within no walls confined, inhabitest the humble mind.'

And John Ellerton's (*H&P* 376 verses 1 and part of 2):

'Behold us, Lord, a little space from daily tasks set free,
And met within this holy place to rest awhile with thee.
Yet these are not the only walls wherein thou mayest be sought.'

Both hymns express the sentiment which Susan Howdle so powerfully sets out – that God is in all creation and, in some sense, every place, not just churches, can be someone's holy ground. It's both/and, again.

Holy Ground – for you

Holy, sacred, hallowed, solemn, special – where is your holy ground?

A few weeks ago (in edition 22), following Susan Howdle's reflection on 'a pair of scales', we offered prayers of thanksgiving for places and things which mean much to us. This week, we focus just on places and buildings: as we've read, what may seem to us ordinary, run-of-the-mill may be holy ground to another person.

If there is one place or building which is, above all others, your holy ground, where is it and why? You may have shared it with someone, or it may be a deeply personal experience nobody else knows about.

Close your eyes or gaze into the distance.

In your mind's eye, as you recall and picture it, stand again on your holy ground.

Then, take a few moments to remember, reflect and give thanks to God.

John Bell, September 2020. Photo by Martin Bell, September 2017, in Norley Methodist Church. Many readers have copies of the booklet, 'In God's house – what do you see?', which I compiled in 2017: it tells the story of the many artefacts in the church, their origin and history, with their photographs. If you would like a copy, let me know – see email address below.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Any hymns are referenced from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (*Singing the Faith* – StF, *Hymns and Psalms* – H&P, or even the 1933 *Methodist Hymn Book* – MHB), and, for URC readers, in *Rejoice and Sing* (R&S), their present hymnal.