

St Mary Abbots, Matins

Haggai 2:1-9 & John 2:18-22

Father Christopher Rogers

There's a book of psalms in my old college library that has recently been discovered to have been owned by St Thomas Becket. And not only that, it's also thought to have been owned before him by another Archbishop of Canterbury, St Alfege, who was martyred by the Danes where his church in Greenwich now is, in the year 1012.

It's thought that St Thomas may even have been carrying this book when he was murdered in 1170 by those three knights who clattered into Canterbury Cathedral on that fateful night, and that he reached for it as he approached his death because it had been owned by his sainted predecessor. So, a very special book, owned by two martyred archbishops, both saints. It has therefore been described as a relic, and was clearly thought to be one by St Thomas Becket too, even before his own death.

I had a long conversation with a friend of mine recently about what it is that makes an object like that seem special. What gives it a frisson when we see, or even hold it?

I remember as a little boy coming to London for the first time, in 1988. I was seven, and was obsessed with the Spanish Armada – my father brought me to the exhibition at the National Maritime Museum, also in Greenwich, and I was transfixed by one thing in that exhibition, which I still remember. It was a letter from Elizabeth I, with her wonderfully elaborate signature at the bottom. I had learned all about her; I even knew one of her speeches by heart. And here was a letter from her. Wow. And yet, she was long dead; this piece of paper only had a few scrapings of ink on it that happened to have been applied by the quill that she had once held. So, what made it feel special? It's very hard to put your finger on I think. Yet we human beings have a habit, a yearning even, to set certain objects aside as being special, as having an aura around them, particularly if they have a connection with someone we greatly admire. For you it might be a signed first edition of a favourite novel; or a rare LP by a favourite band.

I think this sense of aura that we feel about particular things is very similar to the sense of holiness that we attach to things in church, and indeed to the church itself.

Something I often hear people say is that they don't need to go to church to worship God, because God is everywhere, and they can worship Him at home. It's a fair point, and one that isn't that easy to answer, particularly as we were all forced to do precisely that at various points over the last couple of years. And yet I think that as a result, many have also realised in that time precisely what is missing when we worship by Zoom. For the church is set aside as being separate from the ordinary things of life, and brings us into contact with God, and even with ourselves, in ways which we struggle to find at home. I for one find silent prayer totally impossible at home, whereas I can happily kneel for half an hour or so in the Resurrection Chapel, and find total peace. There is a different quality of silence in church than that in my home.

Aside from setting aside spaces, and buildings, in the Ten Commandments we hear that the name of God is to be set aside – we are not to use it for bad purposes.

Sunday, the sabbath, is set aside as holy. We don't just set it aside because it's good for our well-being to have a day without any work, but because God hallowed it, set it aside as holy, by resting on the seventh day of creation.

Jesus clearly views the Temple as a holy place. He is angry at the money-changers, turning over their tables and chasing them out with a hastily improvised whip which He had made. And today we celebrate His presentation in the Temple, when His parents offered Him to God, and redeemed

Him as the first born with their offering. So, this making of particular things or places as holy is not just a slightly superstitious instinct, as some might see it – it is, and always has been, an important part of our faith. At the same time however, Jesus doesn't approve of the way Jewish law for making certain things separate, or holy, is applied, does He?

Here, while driving people who are defiling the Temple out, He also speaks of the destruction of the Temple, and of the Temple of His body seeming to replace it on the third day, something that was seen as deeply, deeply shocking; and indeed, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, this is the main reason why Jesus was put to death.

He is also constantly attacked by the Jewish authorities for healing on the Sabbath, isn't He? '*Was the Sabbath made for man or man for the Sabbath?*' He responds. So, while Jesus has an idea of the holy, He also looks at *why* things are separated out as holy.

Things are set apart as holy to point towards what we are truly made for and the glory of God; to draw us forward in our pilgrimage in this life, as saints of God; and to give us a foretaste of what lies ahead for us after this life. And to defile those things that are set aside as holy is to degrade the ideals that we live for. But when keeping those things pristine and intact for their own sake starts to undermine people's flourishing, and therefore also probably their worship of God, then those things are *not* properly holy.

Our word Holy in fact is related to the word Whole, and is about being complete, healthy. We set aside things as holy to help us to focus on what we are truly about, on what we *should* be about in all our being. They are in a sense an icon, a sign, of what the whole of our life is for. And in cleansing the Temple, and speaking about His body replacing the Temple in His resurrection, Jesus is pointing to His *body* becoming the thing that is holiest for us. And this Body is the body of a wounded, tortured, crucified man, *the Man*. And the symbol both of God and of all of us. And we are therefore assumed into what is holiest in the person of Jesus.

How can what is holiest no longer be a building, which has been 46 years in the making, as we hear, but instead be the broken body of a man crucified as a criminal? Well, that is why St Paul tells us that '*God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*' We may never fully comprehend, but in Jesus we discover the holiest in the most humble, the despised and the rejected.

As Christians we *do* find the holy in our building, in keeping the sabbath and in particularly in the Eucharist, because all of those things lift us towards heaven and feed us in our pilgrimage through this life. But the holy is also to be found in those who are sick, in the vulnerable, in those who are broken. And what brings those things together? They might seem like opposites: we find God and the holy in sanitised, separate ritual up here in the sanctuary and in those who are in need coming in through the door at the other end of church. But this is where we are mistaken.

When we receive the pristine white host here at the foot of the sanctuary steps, and when we welcome someone in need, we are in fact doing the same things: we are welcoming the broken body of Christ. We are welcoming the one whom others reject; and in doing so we are welcoming God. And in finding the holy in both prayer and the sacraments in church, and in our brothers and sisters, we grow into the image of Christ Himself. And that is ultimately what holiness is all about. Amen