
What is a Holy Place?

An article from the *Cathedral Times*.

I have spent the last week in Israel, surely one of the most sacred and yet most controversial places of our time. Israel is a land of paradox. It is sacred, yes, to three great religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But modern Israel is also quite secular. As a modern country, Israel represents much that is dazzlingly new, especially in technological and scientific and construction matters. Yet, paradoxically, the country also contains wondrous archeological sites and ancient holy places. Finally, of course the land has known violence and controversy: from the Roman occupation to the Crusader invasions down to our present era of contested territories and wars. Yet, the very name “Jerusalem” means “city of peace.” Finally, many people are paradoxically confounded as to its very name! Israel? Or Israel/Palestine?

These are just a few of the paradoxical contrasts represented by Israel/Palestine. Yet, we call this land “holy.” Indeed, I consider that I have been on a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to “the holy land.”

What is it, then, that makes a place “holy”? It was ten years into my ministry as a priest that I even considered making a trip, or pilgrimage, to the holy land. When people returned from Israel and told me how moving it was to have walked in the footsteps of Jesus, I replied that I could just as easily walk in his footsteps here in the United States. In fact, I continued, it might even be more faithful. Jesus the Christ is everywhere, and one need not journey to Jerusalem to find him.

Still, I was moved to make that pilgrimage. I continue to believe that every land is holy, and that Christ can be known in all places; but I am also glad to have experienced Christ in Israel.

What makes a place holy? Maybe a place is holy simply because holy people have prayed there. A holy place is where holy people have prayed. And who are the holy people? They are you. And me. The holy people are those who have struggled and rejoiced through life, and who have marked those struggles and joys with a sense of space and time. Holy places are where holy people have somehow sensed the divine in whatever circumstance they have been in, wherever they have been.

Yes, those places could be anywhere, and they ARE anywhere. They are wherever we grew up; they are wherever we came of age. They are where we were married. They are where we had children. They are where we have loved, and they are where we have lost love. They are where someone has been ill. They are where someone has died. They are where we have sensed someone above us and beyond us, and somehow loving us and strengthening us, no matter our circumstance. They are where we have experienced the fullness of humanity – and divinity, too. Israel, where Jesus experienced all those things, is certainly one of those places.

I remember, years ago, when one of my faithful friends explained to me why she loved serving on the altar guild, preparing the vestments and vessels for Sunday services. She said something like this, “When I tend to those particular altar vessels as if they really do contain the body and blood of Christ, then I am able to see the body and blood of Christ everywhere else.”

Her words represent what I believe, too. If I can locate the presence of Christ, particularly, in a special place, then I am set free to experience that same presence anywhere else, as well.

A place is made holy, then, when holy people have known the presence of God there. A place is made holy when holy people have prayed there – no matter what the prayer. Israel is, indeed, a place made holy by the centuries of faithful prayer offered there. If one can touch the holiness there, one might be able to see holiness in other places, as well.

So, we make our pilgrimages. To Israel, or England—or to India or Thailand—or to the seacoast or the mountains. God is truly in those places. But God is also right where we are, right now. God is where we pray. God is where we live. Those places, all of them, are holy.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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