

Holy Ground

by Canon Keith Lamdin, Sarum College Principal

What does it mean to be grounded? As a school boy it meant being punished by not being allowed beyond the school grounds but as a performer it means being connected with the ground (feet on the ground) so that stability and steadiness can be the base for thought and action.

When Moses approached the burning bush he was told he was standing on Holy Ground. He needed to be bare foot so that body and holy ground could be in touch.

As a child I spent much of the summer barefoot on the beach, running across shingle and sand but it was a shock in later life at the beginning of the human relations movement to be told to take off my shoes and socks and to stand in meditation, feeling the ground beneath my feet. It was a kind of coming home.

For too long the separation of body from soul or spirit has reigned supreme, fed it seems to me by a longing to imagine life after death essentially spirit without the body. Robertson Davies in his novel *Rebel Angels*, part of the *Cornish Trilogy*, in a conversation between Parlabane and Maria, talks about the importance of the tree being not only crown above the ground but roots as well. He suggests that Maria needs to be not only the academic above the ground but connected to the gypsy roots from which she came. Ephesians 3.14 reminds us to be rooted and grounded in love, and only then can we really understand the nature of God's love for us. The body and the spirit belong together, and that is why place is so important. To be grounded you have to be grounded somewhere.

People speak of an immediate sense of change as they come through the High Street gate in Salisbury into the largest Close in England, from the bustling medieval shopping centre into an altogether different kind of space. The cathedral itself, surrounded on all sides by expanse of grass, can be seen for what it is; a magnificent building built in less than 50 years so all of one Early English style. For more than 750 years, day after day, bread is broken, psalms are sung, prayers are said, and just possibly tourists become pilgrims. At the same time this Gothic building is surrounded by the Close wall which is made up of many of the stones of the Norman cathedral from Old Sarum. So one cathedral is embraced by another one.

This has been a place of prayer for so many years and here also it is possible to be connected with the ground that is Wiltshire, so famous for its chalk downland, outcrops of beech on flint and chalk streams, with Stonehenge, Avebury, and the many burial mounds that pepper the landscape, with its sense of early occupation and human rituals.

In the North East corner of the Close stands Sarum College, a mixture of buildings - an original 17th century elegant house inspired by Christopher Wren, extended in the 1880s by William Butterfield with brick and flint when the building was developed to be a residential place for training ministers for the Diocese of Salisbury, and added to in the 1960s and 70s when Wells Theological college joined.

What does it mean that people have prayed morning and evening in the small upstairs chapel? What might the effect be that students have sat in the library and still do and grapple with ideas beyond their understanding and have fallen asleep on books late at night? Can the walls absorb something of the loss of faith and recovery of belief and the endless sense of sacrifice and calling?

One is reminded of the words of Jesus as he rode on a donkey into Jerusalem: 'If these were silent the stones would cry out' (Lk.19.40)

Following its closure as an Anglican theological college in 1994, Sarum College was reborn as an ecumenical centre for theological study where our passion is learning to nourish the human spirit. Now people come here for a variety of reasons; to retreat and take a break from ministry to read and pray, and think; to engage in serious postgraduate study in Spirituality, Liturgy, Theology Imagination and Culture, or Leadership; to attend day programmes; to retreat or learn about spiritual direction; to come to conferences or to see the art that we display in these historic buildings. People from all over the world meet one another at breakfast and find themselves in conversation over lunch.

Is it presumptuous to claim some kind of special holy ground here? It is just as possible to stand in the midst of dereliction and decay, or brownfield sites or at the holocaust museum in Jerusalem and still find oneself grounded in holiness. Every ground is holy because God is there, but maybe there are different kinds of holiness. I am reminded of the line in T.S. Eliot's Little Gidding 'to kneel where prayer is valid', or from a more sceptical perspective, Philip Larkin's Church Going

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, once he heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

We have wondered whether we should sell our building and move to a trading estate close to the station, but return to staying here because we do think there is something special, not only about our commitment to Benedictine hospitality, but about the place as well. We can only believe what so many people of little faith or none tell us about their experience of coming here: what they find when they walk through the Close gate and turn left and find their way into our college. It may be that there is a special kind of holy ground when so many feet from so many faithful people from so many centuries have stood here, and prayed and touched the love of God. I wonder why we go for standing rather than sitting or kneeling. Maybe we should do a bit more prostrating, lying face down on the ground without worrying about what it will do to our clothes.

It just becomes possible standing on such ground that we can lay aside our defences, and wriggle our toes into the earth and thus connected, open ourselves to the mystery of love and find that kind of union with God that brings about a new kind of wisdom and courage to change the world. The ground becomes holy because it is a place of meeting and greeting, a place of turning and choosing.

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