

THE POWER OF PLACE



I met a young Sudanese man in jail this week. He had come to Australia when he was twelve. He felt that since arriving, everything was stacked against him. He was convinced that if he could just return to Sudan, all his troubles would disappear. I imagine that when you spend twenty-three hours a day in a cell smaller than many of our bedrooms, you start thinking about a place where everything is fixed. Places are powerful.

As the weather points more directly towards winter, I'm prone to convince myself that I'd be happier if I lived in a warmer climate. I guess the 'tropical island dream' is built on the assumption that says a peaceful place will make me feel peaceful; a relaxed place will make me feel relaxed. This seems reasonable enough. It makes sense. But maybe it's not true.

Earlier this month I had the opportunity to spend two weeks in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories with a group of clergy. I was part of a group made up of two Anglican priests, three Catholic priests, two Baptists, and a Rabbi (and yes, we did go into a bar!).

In the land many call 'holy', Jerusalem holds the attention of pilgrims - Jewish, Christian and Muslim. As a place of pilgrimage it says, 'the nearer the place, nearer the God'. And as a place that testifies to the human seeking of something greater than itself, The Western Wall and the Dome of the Rock in the Old City of Jerusalem for me, can hardly be surpassed.

As a 'holy place', a place that seeks to locate the intangible presence of the divine, Jerusalem stands on ground that testifies to some of the worst of human behavior. It is a city layered with the rise and fall of empires. It is literally built on the tragic story of oppressors and the humiliated. A tragic cycle in which the humiliated become oppressors and the oppressors become the humiliated and on and on and on; the same plot, with the same characters, played by different actors in different times.

A man in a cell might convince himself that peace, joy, happiness, contentment, purpose and meaning exist in another place, usually far away, and that if he can just get there all will be his. So we too might convince ourselves that the sacred or holy or divine can be located in a temple or ashram or mosque or synagogue or church or retreat house or

monastery or meditation centre; that the intangible can be made tangible; that it can be here and not there.

Intuitively we know this is nonsense. We know the experience of home cannot be contained in the possession of a house. We know the integrity of a relationship cannot be assured by the title of brother, mother, husband, wife, sister. And yet we are prone to forget this simple truth. In the battle of remembering against forgetting Jesus said, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you."

In a world of things and places, we are indeed blessed to remember the intangible foundations of our lives. We are blessed when we recall the sacred presence that can be glimpsed but never contained, even by the holiest of lands.

May this and other blessings, greater than can be imagined, be with you.

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