

Sacred places in secular society

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Society today seems to be reaching out for space: space to connect with others; space in which to remember and celebrate; space to gather in and space to be alone. This space may become sacred to a particular person or group or people. This space may have a particular reason for being considered sacred. This space may be continuous or just temporary. This space could be almost anything. Whatever this space may be, it creates a sense of connection. It marks something: a feeling, an experience, a consequence, a decision. Nothing defines the space except that it is a space with significance, a sense of sacredness. So what and where are these spaces? What do they mark and how many of them are there? These were the questions I was wrestling with when I visited New York City. My recent visit to the USA was an amazing adventure. It is the first time in a long time that I have been able to concentrate on one idea, one searching without everyday ministry crowding in. Here are some of the thoughts, feelings and spaces that I found.

In the environments in which I minister I create spaces: spaces in which to celebrate and do all that I've mentioned above; spaces to invite people into and connect with them. Some of these spaces will tell stories; some will just 'be'. Most will probably involve remembering of one sort or another.

My continual struggle, as I am called upon to honour the sacred, is with the question, "How do I create these spaces?" Are there necessary components or will the components differ as each situation differs? In a place of remembrance, what icons are included to enhance that remembrance? In a place of celebration, again, what icons, but also what actions or rituals need to be included to enhance the space and the sacredness that some may find there?

All these questions are ever present in my thinking and planning. How I respond to them and imagine their answers directly affects the results and the 'space' that I assist to create. I can only begin the space, make room for it. It is the way that space connects with the person, or people, that completes the space. For some, the connection is perfect, a sacredness is born or experienced. For others, the connection is just not there and the whole space becomes nice but does not resonate.

A GRAND MEMORIAL

My explorations of this theme coincided with my trip to the USA and my plans to visit the 9/11 Memorial in New York. I had been told a number of times of the impact and the sacredness of the 9/11 Memorial. People would describe it to me as a tangible feeling of sacredness, a place to reflect and be amazed at not only the devastation but also at the survival and outpouring of people who were affected by the attack in one way or another. Another person to whom I spoke told me how the space did not connect with her at all. She went on to say that none 'of that sort of thing' ever connected with

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her, and so she wasn't surprised at her response to visiting the memorial. It became a space that I wished to experience and explore: to not only 'feel' but to see which icons or ritual had been put in place to enhance the connection with the sacred.

I had two different reactions to the 9/11 Memorial when I finally go there. The first time I visited was on a hot and sunny day. There was virtually no shade, it was a Saturday and so there were a lot of people, and walking around the space was not easy. To enter the space and see immediately in front of me two huge pools of water surrounded by steel picture frame-like structures set amongst trees, paths and concrete seats made me stop and take it all in. Here was a place where close to three thousand people died in an act of terrorism that was unlike anything that the American people had ever experienced before – and it was on their home ground. To see people honouring the memory of that event and the people who perished because of it was inspiring. As I walked the surrounds of the pools I kept searching for some connection with in me. I touched the steel frames around the pools that bore the names of those who had lost their lives, but quickly removed my hand because of the heat that had settled there from the sun.

As I walked and looked, walked and listened, walked and read, I became more aware of a connection: the thought of 'what a waste'; a sense of distress at the loss of life that was represented here. One of the connection points, and I would say, a point of sacred connection, was the naming of the women who were pregnant when they were killed. "... and her unborn child" appeared ten or twelve times in total around the pools. I began to wonder if they were first pregnancies or if there were other children left without their mums.

As I headed towards the last side of the second pool a couple of ladies and a young girl came up behind me. They were clearly looking for the name of someone with whom they had some connection, and just as they came to where I was they found the name they were looking for. I was asked if I had a camera and would I take a photo of the name for them. They had apparently been at some function or place where they were not allowed to take cameras or phones and so, although they had found 'Anthony's' name, they could not take a symbol of that finding with them. I was more than happy to take a couple of photos and I received an email address to which I happily sent the pictures that night. I don't know the connection the women had with Anthony's name. I don't know the reason for their visit or the sense of connection to the sacred they found there. I didn't ask: it didn't seem right. Since that encounter I have sent them another email asking if they wouldn't mind telling me some of the history and why that place is sacred to them. I haven't received an answer yet, and I may not, but that doesn't matter. It was sacred to them for one reason or another.

These women had connected with the space, but I walked away a little disappointed with the space. Maybe it was the number of people – I don't know – but I did decide to come back later in the week to see it again.

A GRUBBY CHURCH

Before I returned to the Memorial itself, I spent another part of a day exploring the churches located near to the 9/11 Memorial site. That they were still standing in good repair, given the devastation that had happened just across the street, was amazing. Amazing, also, were their stories and their responses to the 9/11 tragedy that unfolded in their back and front yards. Of the two churches I visited, one was a story of openness, hospitality and extreme generosity; the other story was also of openness, but the back story seemed to be one of control, hierarchy and of greater concern for the building and place than for the people and their needs.

A colleague of mine opened my eyes to the untold story of St Paul's, and the minister who cared for that flock at the time of the attacks². This small church, immediately across the road from the World Trade Centre, has an amazing story of care, hospitality and connection with the community at that time. They opened their doors to those fleeing the attack. They fed, housed and cared for those who

² <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/28/nyregion/chapel-and-refuge-struggles-to-define-role.html>

responding to the attack. This church became the place where others could focus their involvement and response as they gave themselves to others in the recovery phase, and the later clean up phase that followed. This church supplied food, clothing, places to rest and sleep, support, advice, and help in connecting people. The members of that congregation, along with their minister, provided care and focused on the aftermath of that event for over eight months following 9/11. Their church was grubby but used. Their church had people from every walk of life and faith and it was full. Their church was a centre of prayer, good work and sacredness, but not always based in a Christian perspective. It was open 24/7 for whomever needed that space, and people volunteered to staff and keep it open and to meet the needs of the day as the needs presented themselves. It was doing just as Christ would have done had he been there. You can read about this and see the photos and displays on the storyboards that surround the church and help tell the story of that time.

The way this congregation used its space stands in stark contrast to the approach of other congregations to their church space. For a neighbouring church, there is a different story about the way in which church buildings should be treated. This other church was the big, rich sister to poor and small St Paul's. It too helped with the response to the disaster and opened its doors to people. It too became a place of prayer and sacredness for those who needed it, but it appeared to remain a place of worship and institutionalised religion. It was reported that this congregation was appalled at the condition that St Paul's was in; dirty, overcrowded and with people of so many different faiths. The big sister's management committee eventually decreed that St Paul's would be closed in order for it to be cleaned up and become holy again. Its minister, the man who put all this care in place and created this space for the people, left following a disagreement over the plans for the future direction of St Paul's and was given very limited recognition for all that he had done. He doesn't even get a mention in the storyboards around St Paul's.

Regardless of what actually took place and the disagreements that may have occurred, I believe this minister at St Paul's found the grace and ability to create a truly sacred place for that time and space, in the middle of, and in spite of all the chaos and despair and mess hopelessness and that was happening. Thanks be to God for that!

CONNECTING WITH THE SACRED

So where is the sacred? I believe there is not one answer to that question. As individuals we connect with different things, different people, different places and at different times in our lives. My challenge, as I minister in the very secular world today, is to make those connections. They won't be for everybody or with everybody: they will be intangible and difficult to re-create. They may prove to be points of reference, points of inspiration, or they may just be passed by without a second thought, a second look, or any flash of connection. But I will never look at them in the same way again.

Sacred space is now so much more than I can imagine or define. Sacred space is where God meets us, and in today's secular society that can be just as likely in the middle of a busy city street as it is in the middle of the amazing creation we have around us - in the setting of the sun or the dawning of a new day.

Sacred space in secular society calls for one thing – the space itself. It may be purpose made, it may be big or small, it may be just for one person, or it may spring up unannounced or prepared. What I do know now is that I have to look for it, that I can see it everywhere and that I have no control over it.