

Where is the beauty of the temple for the disciples of Jesus?

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One of the few items on which the majority, but not all, of Jesus' fellow Jews were agreed upon was that the temple in Jerusalem was not only the place where heaven and earth touched each other, where the Creator made his Presence available and accessible, but that it was the most beautiful building in the world. This belief in its beauty is found in psalms (e.g. 96:6), echoed in the gospels (e.g. Mk 13:1) and described in numerous other sources.¹ If there was ever a religious 'centre,' it was Jerusalem. There were, however, other voices. For the Samaritans – retaining a tradition of several temples prior to the 'official' canonization of Jerusalem – there was the temple on Mount Gerizim; for many of the Greek-speaking Jews of Egypt there was another temple there; and for Essenes (located not only in Qumran but more widely in Palestine) and similar communities, such as those in the Nile delta, the temple had been replaced by their common dining hall, their dinner tables replaced the temple's altar, and their song of thanksgiving at their weekly main meal was seen as replacing song of praise uttered by the priests in Jerusalem.²

This complex picture is replicated among those who chose to follow Jesus, while also being obscured for us because virtually all our documents come from a time after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70. Luke presents a picture of the temple remaining central to the followers of Jesus for decades – and has a story of Paul, returned from his journeys, involved in sacrifices there (Acts 21:26). The unknown author of Hebrews, by contrast, presents the notion that the Jerusalem temple had become outdated and was now replaced by a heavenly temple with Jesus as the high priest whose term of office does not end. Indeed, this view of the temple as now redundant and replaced would become the standard Christian position. However, other views of the temple, the need of a special place of encounter with God here among us, and the need to offer the sacrifice of thanks and praise to God, now addressed as the Father, remained part of the Christian inheritance. So in John we have the statement that the temple is no longer geographically localized on any mountain (be that Jerusalem or in Samaria) but wherever the community gathers in spirit and truth (4:23-4). Across the gospels we have Jesus visiting the temple, but we also see him as a guest at table after table, and his arrival in an ordinary house is the moment when salvation comes to that place (Lk 19:9). Moreover, the whole sweep of early Christian texts show that the meal gathering of the disciples became *the* place where they saw themselves enacting their new set of relationships established by Jesus as brothers and sisters. There, at their common meal, they became 'the body' of the risen Christ and encountered his presence among them, and there they offered thanksgiving to the Father (e.g. 1 Cor 10:17). Indeed, by the end of the first century (at the latest) they were explicitly viewing their meal

¹ The best guide is C.T.R. Hayward, *The Jewish Temple: A Non-Biblical Sourcebook* (London 1996).

² Philo, *De vita contemplativa* – many aspects of their liturgy (e.g. sung eucharistic prayers) became standard among Jesus's followers.

as the fulfillment of the prophecy about the perfect temple. The prophet Malachi had written about the Lord's pure table: 'for from the sun's rising to its setting my name shall be great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering, for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts' (1:7 and 11); now the Christians learned by heart that they should: 'On the ... Day of the Lord gather together for the breaking of the loaf and giving thanks. ... For this is the sacrifice about which the Lord has said: 'In every place and time let a pure sacrifice be offered to me, for I am the great king, says the Lord, and my name is feared among the nations'" (*Didache* 14:1-2).³ The table had become the temple.

This new status of the tables in the houses of the Christians – the everyday table could be focus of the encounter with God – is an expression of the incarnational nature of Christian faith. The Lord has 'pitched his tent' among us, and the effect is that we can encounter him at our elbow around the table of the liturgy. We need to unpick those three images of 'tent,' 'table,' and 'liturgy.'

The word 'tent' is not for us a word with sacred connotations: it belongs to the world of scouting and camping holidays, yet we find it in the gospel phrase so often used in our prayer: 'the Word became flesh and *dwelled* among us (Jn 1:14). Literally, 'he *pitched his tent* among us' and for the first followers of Jesus this was a rich echo of 'the tent of meeting' Moses was ordered to build in the desert (Ex 26, 36, and 40) so that God could accompany his people on journey. That tent we usually refer to using the word *tabernaculum* – the Latin for 'tent' – and this, for Catholics is further obscured in that 'a tabernacle' is a fixture in a church rather than a word with rich Old Testament history. The tabernacle in the desert was tent in which God's glory was manifested in the midst of his people, it was the sacred area marked off from the camp, and it was the place of beauty. The tent was eventually replaced by temple in Jerusalem – and for John the evangelist the manifestation of God's presence among his people, seen in the tent and the temple, was now to be seen in Jesus.

The idea of a table, likewise, does not conjure up for sacral emotions. You can perform this little test. On hearing the word 'table' do you think of religion or the kitchen or both? On hearing the word 'altar' do you think of religion or the kitchen or both. Most modern people link 'table' with the kitchen and 'altar' with religion. But this veils our history and identity. The Lord prepares a table for his people (Ps 23:5) and the altar in the temple in Jerusalem was the Lord's table served by his people. The table was place of thanksgiving for the Essenes, and Jesus welcomes the new people – a strange mix including drunkards, prostitutes, a variety of 'sinners' and outcasts – to his table and share it with them. The promise of heaven is a banquet – sharing in the heavenly table. For Paul sharing in the table of their fellow believers was sharing in the table of the Lord – and *sharing in* the Lord's table meant *sharing with* others at that table. The table became the focus object among the Christians – and for Pliny in 108 CE all they seemed to do was gather for a meal and sing hymns. Why was this a problem?

³ T. O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (London 2010), 85-104.

The answer lies in the fact that in every other kitchen and dining room in the Roman empire there were not only tables but also altars. In Roman jargon these were the altars to 'the Lares' and 'the Penates' – and every day and at every meal they were given a little sacrifice on their altars. An altar – usually a small rectangular pillar – was as familiar an object in a Roman household as a Holy Water font was in a Catholic house a generation ago – and those altars were used as frequently as my parents' generation sprinkled Holy Water around the house. The problem for the Christians was that when it was known that they did not have altars in their houses, nor use them, it was suspected that they were subversive people: atheists! Christians replied with two strategies. The first – represented by Minucius Felix – was to point out that they needed neither sacred groves nor altars because God the creator could be invoked everywhere within his creation. The other, more accommodating but less theologically precise, was that of Ignatius of Antioch (after 160) who said that they had altars: their tables! The result is that in our church buildings we have structures shaped like tables but we refer to them as 'altars' – forgetting that that designation is a theological interpretation for what happens at the table around which Christians gather.

'Liturgy' seems an obviously sacred word belonging to the world of temples and sacred sites: we think of attending liturgy, we study it as rituals, we think of it as an object. But *leitourgia* is the term for collective service: it refers to our group activity as a group with a common identity, vision and purpose. Liturgy is not something that 'I take part in,' but joining together with other Christians I engage in a common activity of praising God, the Father, asking for his care, and above all giving thanks (*eucharistia*) for his wonderful works in creating and redeeming us. It is this engagement by a community in this task that is their liturgy. Liturgy used to take place in the temple, but now it takes place wherever two or three gather in the name of the Christ (Mt 18:20), in him we encounter God's presence manifested among us, and, through him, with him and in him, at his table bless and thank the Father. The sacred location of our sacrifice in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24) is sitting next to our sisters and brothers at a table.

This shift from temple-space marked off as 'apart' to an ordinary space wherein we must recognize God's presence is the defining characteristic both of Christian liturgy – we do not *need* a specific sacred site – and of our confession that Jesus is the Word made flesh – the Lord among us as an individual human being. We need not only an incarnational model of liturgy, therefore, but also an incarnational model of the beauty of liturgy. If beauty was a characteristic of the temple-based liturgy, it must take a new form in an incarnation-centered liturgy.

But this shift to a new understanding of beauty, in line with who we confess Jesus to be, is problematic for many Christians. Down the centuries, we have made a massive investment in having special 'sacred' buildings, buildings that stand apart from the ordinary and the everyday – and we use a buildings-based approach to beauty. This can be very easily illustrated. The criterion of beauty that was used for classical temples in Rome – and which influenced the notion of beauty used in the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem during Jesus' lifetime – was that of beauty as an aesthetic quality. If we look at a Baroque sanctuary we see the same fascination with gorgeous detail that can be seen in a Hindu shrine.

And, for many, the notion of beauty is beauty *at* the liturgy in the form of elaborately decorated vestments or exquisite metalwork in vessels. This is beauty that one looks at – aesthetic beauty. But there is also beauty that is a quality of that which is genuine, of that which leads us towards our fulfillment, of that which is free from pretense, of that which is truly in harmony with the incarnational love that God shows us in Jesus. Here we are concerned with beauty that is identical with the real and the true – and the divine as known to us in the revelation of God in the Christ. This is ontological beauty and we betray it when we concentrate on aesthetic beauty. What does this ‘look’ like?

There is no easy answer to this: for it is as varied as the occasions when the People of the Christ assemble to offer thanks to the Father. But we can note certain pointers to the pursuit of ontological beauty in the liturgy. First, and foremost, there should be an acknowledgement of the wonder of the ordinary: God is present in the whole of his creation and the Word has pitched his tent among us – human beings are the temples of the Spirit (see, for example, 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; or Rm 12:1). The ordinary is never ‘just the ordinary’ (and it is certainly not the ‘profane’: that which is outside the sacred realm) but where we can encounter God and the where we bear witness to God’s love. That a dinner table can be the place of the sacrifice of praise, our thanksgiving in Christ, seems underwhelming, if not bizarre; but if we cannot discover God there, if we cannot act as his People there, then what does ‘worshipping in spirit and truth’ mean among us? Second, there must be a beauty in our acting that is in accord with our encounter with God in the creation. To gather at the Eucharist is to *share in* the life of God at that table, but if we share in the divine, we must *share with* the human. Just as we are forgiven and so must forgive, so sharing in the life of God means sharing the creation more fully with human beings.⁴ Anything less makes our liturgy a sham – and the false is alien to the true and the beautiful. And, third, we must enact a true vision of the universe we preach: the liturgy must exhibit welcome, forgiveness, bearing each other’s burdens, and remind us that liturgy is a spur to action for our mission as Christians.

Beauty, of whatever kind, is transcendent of the facts and figures of the material – it is a constant pursuit rather than a possession, and will only be ‘attained’ at the Eschaton. Every artist knows this when pursuing aesthetic beauty: the next work will be ‘closer.’ I knew a parish priest once whose delight was to make ‘his’ church beautiful: he decorated this, adorned that, and added yet another layer of gilding – but there was always more to be done! Beauty as a quality of our action as those among whom the Logos has pitched his tent is likewise a quest: the perfection of liturgy will be in the court of heaven. But it is a quest that we start upon here, not among sacred precincts or gilded altars, but with welcoming tables, shared loaves, and generous shared cups. For us, as followers of the Christ, ‘the hour ... for now here, when the true worshippers ... worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him’ (Jn 4:23).

⁴ See T. Balasuriya, *The Eucharist and Human Liberation* (London 1979).

