

GROWING Together

14th Series

THE PILGRIM PATH

*“Riverbanks lined with green willows, fragrant grasses:
A place not sacred?
Where?” ⁽¹⁾*

Pilgrims seek the “sacred” — something beyond the ordinary. But when one thinks about it, nothing is ordinary. Existence itself is extraordinary.

Pilgrims find the sacred in mountains, valleys, deserts, volcanos, caves, springs, rivers, stones, shrines. Mt. Fuji; River Ganges; Machu Pichu; Stonehenge; Golden Temple of Amritsar; Mecca; Jerusalem; a spectacular sunset; the Northern Lights; the autumn flight of geese; a hoarfrost wonderland... The place and the situation differ because people’s stories and experiences differ. For those who perceive the sacred, the shoes come off because they know that they are on “holy ground.”

The “PLACE”

In Sikh tradition there is the story of the founder, Guru Nanak. To teach a lesson, he lay down with his feet pointing in the direction of the most holy Muslim shrine. He was rebuked for this unacceptable behaviour. [In many traditions, pointing the feet towards a person or holy place is considered offensive.] “Why do you point your feet toward the place where God is?” Nanak turned himself round and round, then said: “I can find no place where God is not!”

In Jewish tradition “Ha MAKOM, “The Place”, is a favourite name for God. Jacob, on waking from his dream of a ladder linking heaven and the very spot on earth where he lay, exclaims: “God is in this place and I knew it not! ... How awesome is this place!” The Rabbis saw in these words the opportunity for a midrash, a commentary on Scripture that leads to a new insight. They realized that not only is God in this place but in all places; or, more precisely, it is we who are in “The Place”. As Psalm 90:1 says: “Lord, *thou* has been our dwelling place in all generations.”

The goal of the pilgrim journey, or simply the journey of daily life, is to become aware of “The Place” in any place.

To Be a Pilgrim

Pilgrims travel light. They carry memories more than baggage. They journey alone; therefore they are accessible to others. Vulnerable, they are aware of their need of divine protection; uprooted, they are unburdened from their regular worldly cares; humble, they are ready to discard inadequate convictions for the greater truths they are encountering.

The Search

The search for the sacred can begin with footsteps or heartbeats; however it begins, it ends in the heart. A Jewish hymn begins: “Where I wander — YOU! Where I ponder — YOU!”

A story is told of the great Spanish painter El Greco. The day was bright and beautiful. A friend found El Greco sitting in a gloomy corner of his dwelling. “Why not come out where the sun is shining?” His answer: “It would disturb the light that is shining within me.”

A Prayer for the Journey

God of the Way,
You are the Road we travel,
and the Sign we follow,
You are the Bread for the journey,
and the Wine of arrival. ⁽²⁾

¹ A Zen Buddhist saying, quoted in T. C. McLuhan, *Cathedrals of the Spirit*, (Harper Collins, 1996), p 23.

² Adapted from *Voices United* (United Church Publishing House, 1996), p. 648

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