

HOLY GROUND



Finding God where we are

By Revd Anne Le Bas

SESSION 1: HOLY GROUND IN HISTORY

“During the first three centuries of the Christian Church little, if any, attention seems to have been given to the concept of 'holy' places. Instead the emphasis was on the possibility of experiencing the presence and guidance of God throughout the world. The Christian message spread rapidly through the Roman Empire and many Gentiles as well as Jews responded. Jerusalem, which had been the focus of Jewish pilgrimage, had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and the entire city sacked in 135 CE. Some Christian commentators saw this as God's judgement on a city which had rejected Jesus, the Messiah. Jerusalem, therefore, was for Christians a warning rather than an inspiration, a city rejected by God rather than a city where he was to be encountered in a special way.

Nevertheless, Christianity was not immune to external influences. In 312 CE the Roman Emperor Constantine was converted to Christianity. With the help of his mother Helena, he set about creating a 'Holy Land' in Palestine through identifying sites connected with biblical events and characters and building churches to commemorate them...

As a result of this development and the growing interest in relics of the saints Christian attitudes to the concept of holy places underwent a major shift, though not without considerable debate and dissension”

From: Pilgrims and Pilgrimage (Christianity and Culture ed. Dee Dyas)

- How many places of Christian “pilgrimage” can you think of?
- People of every faith go on pilgrimage, and there are also secular “pilgrimage” sites, associated with special people or events. Add these to the list!
- Have you ever gone on pilgrimage or visited a pilgrim site (Christian or otherwise). If so, why did you go, and what did you gain from it, if anything?
- Why do you think that some places become “holy” to people?
- Are there places which you regard as personal “holy ground”, places which are special to you?



Read Psalm 84

Traditionally a number of the Psalms are thought to have been composed for use when people came to the Temple for the festivals. This was a duty laid on all Jewish adult males, but many others went too. (note: the “valley of Baca” – vs 6. No one is absolutely sure what or where this valley was, but it is variously translated as the thirsty valley or the valley of weeping. The sense is clear, though. A place of hardship becomes like a spring of water when the pilgrims pass through it.

- What do you think the pilgrim who wrote this Psalm is thinking and feeling as he or she approaches Jerusalem?
- Is there a particular verse which strikes you from this Psalm?
- Are there any verses which puzzle you, or which you don’t like?
- If you had to construct a “back-story” for this pilgrim, what would it be? What has happened in his or her life to make

**him or her feel like this? What has the journey been like?
How near to the end is he or she?**

A JOURNEY IN SEARCH OF ITSELF

Pilgrimage is sometimes called “a journey in search of itself.” In other words, you often find out what you really need to know as a result of the travelling, rather than as a result of what is at your destination. It is making the journey that matters, not arriving at the destination.

- **Do you agree?**
- **Do you think God is specially present in some places more than in others?**
- **Are there dangers in thinking this?**



SESSION 2: HOLY GROUND IN SEAL

Home, sweet home?

1. Where is “home” for you? Is it Seal/Sevenoaks, or somewhere else – the place you were born, for example? Why do you feel like that?
2. Do you consider yourself as a “native” of Seal/Sevenoaks, or an incomer? Is it “your” community?
3. How does an incomer become a part of a community?

Read Psalm 137 and Exodus Chapter 3. 1-6

The people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. Their city and Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed, and they thought they would never go home, and they thought they had been abandoned by God. Psalm 137 is their lament.

1. *“How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?”* What do you think this means?
2. Have you ever been homesick?

In Exodus 3 Moses encounters God in the desert, speaking to him out of a burning bush. Moses is almost the archetypal outsider. He starts his life literally adrift in a basket on the River Nile. He grows up as a Hebrew in the Egyptian courts, but doesn’t belong properly in either community. Now he is out in the desert, far from anywhere that might be called home, neither in Egypt nor in Israel, out in the middle of nowhere. Yet here he finds God – this is home to God even if it isn’t to him.



Moses and the Burning Bush
St Catharine's monastery, Egypt.

- 1. Can you recall a moment when you started to feel at home somewhere you had been a stranger? How did that happen?**
- 2. Moses is told to take off his shoes. Why does it matter that he should be barefoot? How does it affect the way we feel and think to be in contact with the ground?**

Holy Ground in Seal?

- Look at a map of the parish of Seal. Where do you live? Inside or outside the parish?**
- What is good and bad about the street you live in?**
- How long have you lived there?**
- How does it compare to places you have lived in previously?**
- What would you miss if you moved away?**
- Think about your neighbours. How many do you know? What do you feel about them? Connected/ disconnected? Do you even know them?**
- Put on the map as many features of the village as you can – these might include schools, businesses, places where people gather.**
- What do you think this community needs to be the kind of place where people can thrive as individuals and together? How can we meet God here?**

We are planning a walk around the village on Saturday March 17, starting at church at 11am. As we walk around we'll be trying to look at our neighbourhood as a place where God might be, sharing stories, experiences, thoughts and prayers which we can add to the map of the parish in church.

You might also like to have a walk around the church. It is easy to come along week by week, but not ever really look at it. Pick up a "prayer trail" leaflet, and spend some time considering what each feature of the church tells us about Holy Ground.

SESSION 3: HOLY GROUND AT HOME AND AT WORK

In the times when the Bible was written many people worked at or from home, and there was not the division between home and work which many now experience. This session will explore the place where we spend our days, therefore, whether that is a workplace to which you commute, or your own home. How do we look for and find God in our day to day experience, the routines and places of our daily lives.

Read the passages below.

- **How do they make you feel?**

Proverbs 15.17

Better is a dinner of vegetables where love is than a fatted ox and hatred with it.

Proverbs 17.1

Better is a dry morsel with quiet than a house full of feasting with strife.

Psalms 128

Happy is everyone who fears the Lord, who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labour of your hands;

you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you.

Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house;

your children will be like olive shoots around your table.

Thus shall the man be blessed who fears the Lord.

The Lord bless you from Zion.

May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life.

May you see your children's children. Peace be upon Israel!

- **Think about the place or places where you spend your days – your home and or workplace.**
- **What do you like about your home and/or workplace?**
- **What don't you like?**
- **How do they compare to previous homes and places of work?**

- Are there places within your home or workplaces which seem like sanctuaries to you or places where it is easy to reflect? What is it about them which make you feel this way? Have you deliberately created such places in your home or workplace?

Read Luke 19.1-10 A day in the life of Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus is described in this story as “a chief tax-collector” and “rich”. Tax collectors were not just despised because they took people’s money off them, but because they were seen as collaborators with the Roman authorities. The taxes they collected were mostly spent on paying the Roman army which was occupying the nation and funding the administration of the occupation.

- Imagine you are part of Zacchaeus’ household – a member of the family or a servant or employee.
- What does it feel like to live and work in his house?
- What do you think of him?
- Are you surprised that he wants to see Jesus?
- Jesus says “today salvation has come to this house...” What do you think he means?
- What difference might this encounter with Jesus make to the life of the household? How do you think the rest of the household will respond to it?

“I must stay at your house today.”

- If Jesus were to turn up unannounced at your home and/or workplace, what would happen?
- Would he be welcomed or resented? What would you want him to see, and what might you not want him to see?
- How do you think it would challenge you and those around you?
- Would you like him to turn up, or would you rather he stayed away...?

How might you make a place of sanctuary, a focus for prayer, in your house or workplace, so that you are reminded that Jesus has turned up, and is present?

SESSION 4: HOLY GROUND IN OUR LIVES

- **Draw a timeline of your life or think back over its course.**
- **What have the high and low points of your life been?**
- **Are there times when you have felt especially close to God, or especially distant. What caused that feeling?**

Read Genesis 28.10-22 & Genesis 32. 22-32

(If you have time you might like to read the whole story – from Gen 25.19-33.15)

Jacob's life is full of reverses, often brought about by his own foolishness. He cheats his brother, Esau, out of his birthright as the head of the household (Esau is the elder son), and has to run away from home, thereby losing the very thing he was hoping to snatch. He seems to fall on his feet with his uncle Laban, however, and falls in love with his younger daughter, only to be cheated into marrying her older sister instead. Through sheer low cunning, he builds up a substantial flock of sheep, but eventually decides to risk all he has and leave Laban's protection to go home and face Esau.

The two passages above "bookend" the story, and in both of them Jacob is reminded that God is with him, first in a vision, and then in the shape of a mysterious figure who wrestles with him through the night.

- **Why do you think Jacob might have been particularly aware of God at these moments?**
- **Why do you think he made the choices he did – good or bad – during his life?**

Holy Ground through the year

The church has, since its earliest days, marked the year with a cycle of feasts and fasts, seasons and special days.

They can help us to be aware of God not just in the good times but in the bad times as well (and in times which seem mundane, when nothing much is happening.)

- What do you value about each of the seasons of the natural world?
- Do you have a favourite season?
- On the circle below can you mark in where (roughly) the liturgical seasons fall? Do you know what colours are associated with them?
- What Bible stories and special rituals do you associate with these seasons? What do they mean to you?
- Which of these seasons means most to you? Has that changed over the years?

The Church's Year

