

Axis Mundi

John 19:16-42

Good Friday/21st March 2008

As we approach Holy Week and Easter this year, I've been thinking a lot about my pilgrimage to the Holy Land last June and, in particular, walking around Jerusalem. One of the highlights of the visit was the chance to go up to the Temple Mount, one of the holiest sites in Judaism, home to both the First and Second Temple of Yahweh. Before that, it was, according to tradition, the site where Abraham was prepared to sacrifice Isaac and where Jacob had his ladder dream. It is the place, tradition has it, Mohammed (c.570-632) ascended to heaven. A stunning mosque, the Dome of the Rock (completed in 691), marks this spot, the second holiest site within Islam. Religious Jews are prohibited from going up there in fear of accidentally walking on the site where the Temple stood. We had to go through additional security checkpoints to go there. I was transfixed by the beauty of that building, indeed captivated by the entire experience of being on the Temple Mount. There the three major monotheistic faiths – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – touch, with power and intensity (sometimes explosively so). Ancient Rabbinic sources described Jerusalem as “the navel of the world,” the world's point of beginning. As a place of prayer for centuries, I felt a remarkable calm and sense of peace up there at the top of the city, as if I'd been there before or felt at home there.

It is not surprising that Jerusalem has been called the *axis mundi*, the axis around which the world spins out its destiny. Many religions and cultures have similar kinds of places (such as Mecca or Delphi in Greece); locations of considerable mythological and symbolic power (trees, mountains, streams, or temples) where it seems heaven and earth meet. An *axis mundi* is a *liminal* place, a rare word (actually one of my favorite words), from the Latin, *limen*, meaning threshold. The axis mundi is a threshold place, a doorway, providing a means of access, travel and correspondence between two realms, such as heaven and earth (not unlike Jacob's dream). That's what makes it holy, different, special. Some have suggested that the Temple Mount itself is the *Axis Mundi*.

Christians believe the axis of the world is different because of what transpired on this day, the axis of the old world has been knocked off kilter because of the cosmic struggle that took place on this day. The axis has shifted away from the center of the city, to outside the city walls. The *axis mundi* is not the Temple Mount, but Golgotha, the location of Jesus' crucifixion in a quarry which was just outside the city walls. For us, that is the threshold point between heaven and earth, where humanity touches God and God touches humanity in the person Jesus Christ high on the cross, “it is in high places love/ condescends to be put to death.”¹ It is the place where evil was allowed to do its worse, yet not prevail over the power of God's love. It was the place where God absorbed all the evil and sin of humanity and offered in exchange, not anger and further violence, but forgiveness and the healing power of his presence on the other side of death. Calvary has become for us “the navel of the world,” for what took place there and what was accomplished there for us is the point of our new beginning.

¹ R. S. Thomas (1913-2000), “Jerusalem,” *Collected Poems, 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2004), 509. “A city – its name/ keeps it intact. Don't/ touch it. Let the muezzin's/ cry, the blood call/ of the Christian, the wind/ from sources desiccated/ as the spirit drift over/ its scorched walls. Time/ devourer of its children/ chokes here on the fact/ it is in high places love/ condescends to be put to death.”

At the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem you can see a massive cracked stone in the old quarry where, tradition has it (actually more than tradition, there's a good case for this being the actual site), into which the cross of Jesus was placed on Good Friday. Whether it was actually inserted in that split stone, we'll probably never know. But it was very near there. We know that's where the Romans crucified political enemies of the Empire. For centuries Christians have made long and sometimes arduous, dangerous journeys just to be near that site, to kneel there, to touch some of the stones, to sleep there in order to have God speak to them in their dreams, to pray there, to feel connected to that holy place between heaven and earth. Along the walls of the church you can see religious graffiti, hundreds, thousands of crosses etched into the stone – one for each pilgrim.

Of course we don't have to travel to Jerusalem to connect with Calvary, but what matters is that we connect with the experience, otherwise what's the point? Perhaps it is our own *inner* journey to Golgotha that is just as arduous (maybe more so than for ancient pilgrims, for we live in a time, in this skeptical age of ours, when it is difficult to have faith).

If, as we believe, the power of Christ's Risen Spirit is both among us and *within us*, then in some sense his cross is within us; if his cross is also our cross, then this means the *axis mundi* runs right through the middle of each of us. Heaven and earth meet in him. Because of him, heaven and earth now meet in us – in the depths of our hearts and our psyches. The door or access or threshold to God, the meeting place is now within us.

How I wish more people in the church and in Christianity in general really believed this, claimed this as true – *truly lived from the knowledge that the power of the Risen Christ is within us*. I think Paul was right when he said, "As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22). I believe all of humanity is on that cross with Jesus, he's Everyman and Everywoman, Every Adam, Every Eve; it's you and me up there, not suffering in order to pay the price of our sin and guilt or to appease the anger of a Father-God waiting to lash out at us, but the *cross as consequence*. *The cross as consequence*. The cross is what happens when we love God and love one another and even love ourselves. To love God and neighbor and even ourselves has consequences that often entail suffering. There is a suffering involved. But the suffering is not an end in itself, because it yields something new.

God's *new* world spins out its destiny of redemption from the axis of the cross, where we see the power of God's love to reach out even to God's enemies,
not to destroy, but to restore;
not to condemn, but to forgive;
not to leave for dead, but to grant new life.
Such is the proof of Calvary's power residing within us, when we see lives transformed. Such as when our hearts, and our psyches, and our minds become the "place" of new beginnings, thresholds into a new way of being, the "place" where we know forgiveness and know the redemptive power of God's grace.

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