

GENERAL SYNOD LITURGICAL COMMISSION

Holy Ground

The following paper is a summary of an address given by The Revd Dr Anders Bergquist, Vicar of St John's Wood and Member of the Liturgical Commission, to the CBC/DACs National Conference in Durham on 24 September 2008.

The theme of the session was "The perils of the beauty of homeliness."

The idea of "the Holy" is found in an enormous range of societies and belief systems. The classic study by a Christian theologian is Rudolf Otto's *Das Heilige* (1917, ET 1923 as *The Holy*, many times reprinted). Otto explored the concept of "the numinous", and of the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, the mystery which draws you to it, even as it inspires fear. There is a powerful evocation of exactly the same idea in Chapter 7 of *The Wind in the Willows*, when Rat and Mole experience an epiphany of the god Pan.

A great many cultures have systems for containing and handling the Holy. Leviticus is practically a treatise on coping with the Holy. In Lev., holiness may be attached to places, people, times, and things, and it is graded.¹ The dramatic setting of the book is the camp of the Israelites during their forty years' journeying in the wilderness. Here we find the graded spatial sequence *wilderness, place outside the camp where the lepers live, the main body of the camp, the sanctuary (with the altar), the tent of meeting, the holy of holies*. This is not unlike the sequence *the village, the lych-gate, the churchyard (where Faculty Jurisdiction begins!), the church porch, the nave, the chancel, the railed area enclosing the holy table, and (in some churches) the aumbry or tabernacle with the reserved sacrament*. Only certain people are allowed to do certain things in certain places in a church. Only the High Priest can enter the Holy of Holies, and that only on the holiest day of the year (Yom Kippur). But it would be entirely compatible with the system of graded holiness for, say, the nave of the church to be put to more secular uses than the chancel. Lev. also grades holiness in relation to people: *foreigners out there, the sojourner or stranger who is within your gate, Israelites, Levites, Priests, the High Priest*. There

¹ cf. especially Philip P. Jenson, *Graded holiness: a key to the priestly conception of the world*. JSOT Supp. 106. Sheffield Academic Press, 1992.

are increasingly restrictive marriage rules for these categories; cf. perhaps the way in which *Issues in Human Sexuality* envisages different disciplines for clergy and non-clergy.

The concept of “graded holiness” may be a useful diagnostic tool, for making sense of what goes on in churches, and how people react to proposals to reorder them. Of course it raises a big theological question. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, the curtain of the Temple, was torn in two at the crucifixion, and the whole point of Hebrews is that the Holy is now directly and without mediation present among us because of Jesus’ self-offering once and for all. That is absolutely true. But only saints and mystics can sustain that sense of the immediacy of the Holy, like looking directly at the sun. “Humankind cannot bear very much reality” (T. S. Eliot). The tension between Leviticus and Hebrews is a central dynamic in Christian practice. If the realistic alternatives are, either to graduate one’s exposure to the Holy, or to deny or hide the Holy altogether (as it were, the flesh enveloping the Word), then the first may be better than the second.

When a DAC looks at a proposal to “domesticate” the interior of a church (sofas, café tables, etc.), it may therefore be helpful to ask, “Is this something that fits within a structure of graded holiness in the church, even though it may involve moving some of the boundaries, or does it have the effect of denying space for holiness at all?” Because going to church should at some level, and in the proper sense of the word, be a fearful thing.