

Sacredness

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Esther 7:1-6, 9-10, 9:20-22; Psalm 124; James 5:12-20; Mark 9:38-50

A little bit of trivia. *Impure salts* is a name for salts which have lost their saltiness, and can also refer to natrons. Natrons are primarily a mixture of sodium bicarbonate (common baking soda) and sodium carbonate (soda ash) with small amounts of sodium chloride (table salt) with a little bit of sodium sulfate thrown in. Natron is somewhat antiseptic and is also an exfoliant and a desiccant. Esau could have used it to advantage.

In ancient Egypt, natron was mined as a powdery solid from dry lake beds near the Nile River and put to a wide variety of uses, including mummification. It was also added to castor oil to produce a smokeless fuel which allowed Egyptian artisans to paint elaborate artworks inside ancient tombs without them becoming besmirched with soot. Because it has strong grease-cutting properties, natron has also been associated with soap production. Natron was commonly used in glass-making by the Romans and others, until trade declined after 640 AD.

Here ends the trivia.

I was teaching at St Mark's last week, and a remark was made that seemed to imply that it is a no-no to castigate God or otherwise have a go at God. The only woman in the class happens to specialise in counselling school aged women and girls who have experienced sexual abuse. She responded by saying "I think that God is much bigger than that!" She went on to say that if any of her clients thought God was a blankety blank, that was OK with her.

Today is, I am reliably informed by the ubiquitous internet, World Communion Sunday, a day when churches throughout the world are invited to lay aside their differences and recognise instead their common ground, that is to say the sharing of bread and wine, and the common ground of our scripture. I wonder why we could not extend it to something like World Religion Day, or World God is Bigger Than That Day — a day in which we recognise the common ground.

The holy things of our religion, sacred things, are things in the face of which we, like Moses, may be wont to take the sandals from off our feet, because we stand on holy ground.

What exactly does the bread and wine, or the bible, mean for you? Do you ever think about it? It is a conundrum that returns to my consciousness often. The catechism, if I remember correctly (my prayer book has gone walkabout) says something like "a sacrament is an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace".

Mircea Eliade, in his book on the nature of religion, *The Sacred and the Profane*, neatly distinguished sacred and profane by saying that *sacred* is *the opposite of profane*. This might seem obvious, except that profane here does not mean swearing or anything like that. We become aware of the sacred, he says, because it is wholly different from the profane, or wholly other (*ganz andere*), as Rudolph Otto put it.

The sacred is characterised by the fact that it shows *itself*, or is manifest. An elementary example of this manifestation could be some ordinary object, a stone or a tree, or in church life, the bread and wine of communion. In each of these there is a manifestation or representation of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to this world, in objects that are an integral part of our "profane" world.

The paradox is that the sacred tree or sacred stone is not adored as a stone or a tree, but because they indicate something that is no longer stone or tree; they indicate the sacred, the wholly other described by Otto.

The curious thing about all this is that the sacred stone is still a stone; it does not lose its stone-ness. But for those to whom a stone is sacred, the immediate reality is transformed into a supernatural reality. Likewise the sacraments of our church. Likewise the sacred things of any religion.

I guess that considerations like these help us to come to grips with the Aboriginal idea of the sacred site. Bruce Chatwin, in his book, *Songlines*, recalled a journey into the remote outback with a man charged with finding out whether the then proposed railway line to Darwin would encounter and violate any sacred sites. Chatwin would spy a small hummock, or a significant landmark and ask, "Who is that?" His guide usually knew who "that" was, and if he did not, would ask the aboriginal guide who helped with his work.

Likewise, a friend of mine who did research in the Flinders Ranges some years ago recalled being shown around an apparently and empty landscape. For her it was an arid and stony area. For her guide it was peopled with ancestors, each located in a stone lying on the ground, each uniquely known, identified and named.

For Eliade, then, there are two modalities of experience — the sacred and the profane — which are at once indistinguishable and yet wholly different. Here again is an expression of the mystery of existence.

Many Christians regard the Bible as sacred, something that manifests the wholly other, whilst others regard the sacraments of the Church as sacred, or the cross.

A very evangelical gentleman who visited the Anglican church in Bombala was highly offended to see a crucifix on the wall behind the pulpit. "You people worship that thing" he said accusingly; "that's idolatry". "No we don't" replied the dog-collared worthy; "it reminds me when I enter the pulpit in whose name I speak".

In the same way that the casual observer might think that regard for a sacred stone is idolatry, so might the casual observer think that regard for a crucifix is idolatry. But who is the idolater, the critic or the worshipper?

My Grandfather, may he rest in peace, was a missionary in South India for thirty years, and one of his favourite sayings was "There are many paths up the mountain, but there is only one mountain." I grew up with that ringing in my ears, because my mother, may she also rest in peace, used it as an excuse to skip church. But for me it basically meant, "What's in a name?" In other words, as the famous Juliet uttered, "a rose by *any other name* would smell as sweet." Do we think that God changes character according to the name we give? The only thing that changes, if we accept the fundamental dogma of our creed, is our own representation of God. And so I am hard pressed to understand the arrogance of those who do violence in the name of their God, or even worse, in the name of the book of their religion. No religion of the book is innocent in this regard.

In the end we all face the danger of idolising everything from a favourite photo to a favourite idea. Once fixated on such, the sacred gives way to the profane, and the profane becomes a profanity. Is this what happens when people perpetrate violence in the name of their God? The spirit suffocates. The salt has lost its saltiness. It has become an impure salt.

What a pity! Jesus stood for sorting out the sacred wheat from the profane chaff, something he did with wisdom and strength of purpose, and mostly in a peaceable fashion. We can do little better but to follow. The Spirit is within.