

The Holy of Holies

I recently listened to a podcast interview with Father Laurence Freeman, the Benedictine monk who is the director and spiritual guide for the World Community for Christian Meditation. (In this community the word 'meditation' is used in the sense of being quiet with God.) Fr Laurence was talking about our human capacity to be still in God's presence – which is God's gift to us, enabling us to come ever closer into the divine love.

One image that he used struck me in particular. He said, 'When we meditate we step into the Holy of Holies within our hearts' - *The Holy of Holies* – the name of the inmost and most sacred place at the heart of the Jerusalem Temple, beginning with the earliest Temple, built by King Solomon in 950 BC (and restored by Ezra and Nehemiah around 600 BC), and then also in the huge and magnificent Temple in Jerusalem in Jesus' own time, built by Herod the Great.

The design of each of these temples involved a space, within a space, within a space (a bit like a Russian doll!), as a symbol of moving ever closer to the inmost **Holy of Holies**, where God was believed to be present in a unique and particularly immediate way. In fact in Hebrew/Jewish tradition the whole Temple was seen as the dwelling-place of God among God's people – so it's not difficult to see why Jesus spoke of his own being and his body as the Temple which would be destroyed and raised up in three days (John 2: 19, 21).



In the Jerusalem Temple that Jesus knew well (depicted here), there was a vast outer 'Court of the Gentiles', where Jesus often preached and from where he drove out the money-changers and traders. Within that was a smaller, enclosed area for Jewish people, first a space for both women and men, then an area just for men, and within that the central building, called the Holy Place, which only priests could enter. And finally, within that Holy Place was a curtained-off area, The Holy of Holies, into which only the High Priest could go, and then just once a year, on the Day of Atonement. Significantly, at the very moment when Jesus died on the cross, St Mark tells us that this curtain of the Temple leading into the Holy of Holies was torn in two (Mk 15:38). This is a powerful symbol of how Christ's life, and especially his death, removed any external or institutional barrier between us and God's mysterious, intimate presence.

It's not unusual for the church itself to be described as a 'Living Temple'. We read in Ephesians 2 (v. 21-2): 'In Christ the whole structure is joined and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. And in 1 Corinthians 3:16 St Paul says that we are 'God's Temple' and that 'God's Spirit dwells in our midst.' But I love the way Fr Laurence takes this image even further, applying it specifically to our individual spiritual life and speaking of the 'Holy of Holies' within our own hearts. For me this opens up a whole new richness for reflection, and I find it fascinating that the great 16th century St Teresa of Avila, in her work 'The Interior Castle', offers us a similar picture, of a structure with seven concentric dwellings, drawing us to the place of our deepest communion with Christ at the centre.

So now, **to lead us into silence**, we can perhaps picture ourselves moving gently from our 'outer courtyards' of busy-ness, into quieter and more prayerful places within ourselves, into our sacred inner space – which in fact Jesus refers to very simply in Matthew 6:6, as our 'inner room', where God our loving Father is waiting to meet us.

A prayer to close the silence

Beloved God, we thank you for inviting us to enter this quiet place of prayer, the Holy of Holies in the centre of our being. Help us, day by day, to return faithfully to this inner sanctuary of our hearts, so that the flame of your love, which you kindle there, may shine out through the rest of our lives. Amen.