SACRED SPACE

By ROBIN GREEN

IN MARTIN SHERMAN'S PLAY, *Bent*, two homosexual men develop a close and intimate relationship inside a concentration camp. Towards the end of the play, one of them, Horst, is shot by the Nazi officers. The other, Max, reacts to this by stunned silence. He is then told to go into the hole that Horst has been thrown into. He emerges wearing Horst's coat. The Nazi officers then order him to fetch something from the barbed wire fence. As he touches it, the fence explodes and Max is killed. The play is iconoclastic and Max's action is also iconoclastic. It is a historical parable about the road to self-discovery because it sets the human struggle for honesty and integrity in the context of twentieth-century history. But it is also a parable about defining sacred space: Max had to come to grips with the barbed wire. By touching the barbed wire fence, he confronted and challenged the idolatry that defines space by profanity and fear. That particular barbed wire defined and shaped a space in which some of the worst terrors of the twentieth century have been perpetrated. Power says that no looking or challenging or seeing is possible beyond this point. Max's iconoclasm was to define that space afresh, not according to humanity's most hideous crimes, but by the power of sacrifice. He trespassed across the barbed wire so that the world could be defined by a different kind of reality.

In Swaziland in Southern Africa, members of the Anglican Mothers' Union make an annual pilgrimage to a particular place, not defined by barbed wire, but by blood. It is one of the numerous places in Southern Africa where people of faith and integrity have been slaughtered for their faith. For twenty-four hours in that place, they sing and dance, pray and keep silence, worship and eat. It is the annual recollection that in the struggle, sacrifice still has to be made until a different day of liberation dawns. Throughout the twenty-four hours that they spend together, they hold their pass books in their hands. The continuing symbol of their oppression is brought to the holy place to be offered to God in hope.

I work in an office block in central London that houses, amongst other groups, the two largest Anglican mission agencies in Britain,

the Church Missionary Society and the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Two years ago they moved together into this building under the umbrella of the Anglican Partnership for World Mission. But to all intents and purposes, they have carried on a separate existence, indulging in polite conversations but not permitting anything fundamental to change. They even pray separately every day.

Partnership House has a chapel, a 'sacred space', but it is not a place of transcendence, a place where people move beyond the *status quo*, beyond acquired habits of behaviour and beyond current patterns of relationship. Instead the chapel is a place where particular cultural and ecclesiastical modes of behaviour are reinforced, where an ecclesiological identity is shaped. It reminds me of the debates about circumcision and particular kinds of food in the Acts of the Apostles 15!

I use these three very different examples because they have features in common, as well as radical differences, to help us to explore what we mean by 'sacred space' and how it relates to issues of human spirituality. I want to relate them to a New Testament story, the purging of the Temple by Jesus. There is no more powerful example of 'sacred space' in the bible than the Temple: by the time of Jesus, it had become the centre of Jewish political power in an occupied territory. It is not only the fact that it is abused for the purposes of exchange and bartering that Jesus mounts an assault on it: that system of exchange represented a whole culture in which power was being exercised in ways which were exclusive and damaging to thousands of the landless poor. In fact for centuries, a Temple system had operated in which handicapped and suffering people were excluded from the Temple compound and confined to the Court of the Gentiles. They belonged among those who were 'not touchable'.

One of the things that fascinates me about the use of this particular biblical story in a number of ecclesiastical lectionaries is the fact that the passage invariably ends before the full force of the passage is understood. Jesus does not purge the Temple to create a purified 'sacred space': he clears it so that handicapped and suffering people might come in and find their rightful place in the purposes of God! Why is it that ecclesiastical authorities in defining the lectionary have so often chosen to chop the passage at this critical turning point in the story of Jesus? I want to suggest that

the original story, the abuse of it by liturgical scholars, and the three stories with which I began offer important clues to an understanding of 'sacred space'.

What we call 'sacred space' is often the space defined by those who exercise power and authority in this world. Those who serve great causes have a remarkable ability to make those causes serve their own ends. The Jewish authorities had created a socio-political-economic system, embodied in the symbol of the Temple through which power was perpetuated even in a situation of oppression and persecution. In more profane terms, the Nazi regime had strung up circles of barbed wire so that hideous crimes and weapons of annihilation and torture could be kept hidden from view. The same is true today when the same circles of barbed wire are used to protect sites on which nuclear weapons are kept. The power of barbed wire is not so much its sinister appearance as the power and authority it defines and protects. A circle of space is laid claim to so that political and economic authority can be affirmed and law and order established. In the example from Swaziland, the pass book has a similar character to barbed wire: it is also the assertion of a profane authority. The Temple, too, has become a symbol of a similar kind of idolatry: it was a means not only of marginalizing people but also a way of defining political and spiritual power and authority.

The liturgical scholar's approach to the text also indicates something of a profane view of power and authority. The decision to cut the text before the full force of Jesus's liberating action is made known perverts both the character of Jesus's power and authority and the character of the salvation that Jesus brings. The implication of the abridged text is to suggest that Jesus's purpose is somehow to create a pure, empty space. It is, of course, nothing of the kind. It is an enactment of the central purpose of his being in the world: to bring people, however marginalized and violated by the oppressive power of personal and collective sin, into the heart of God. That indeed is central to what we understand by the Incarnation. So even at the comparatively trivial level of liturgical scholarship—trivial compared to the tyrannical use of barbed wire—power can be exercised to define space by a perversion of the true meaning of human salvation in and through Christ.

However, if we stay true to the whole text, we can begin to see that one possible meaning of 'sacred space' is the place where the transcendence of God is recognized. In his book, *Love's endeavour,*

love's expense, W. H. Vanstone makes this comment:

> So it is with the creative love of God. For the completion of its work, and therefore for its own triumph, it must wait upon the understanding of those who receive it. The love of God must wait for the recognition of those who have power to recognize. Within a certain enclave of reality, recognition or the absence of recognition determines the triumph or the tragedy of love.[1]

He then continues: 'The Church occupies the enclave of recognition: and this enclave belongs within the area of freedom'.[2] Vanstone is arguing that not only does the love of God await recognition but that it is also the responsibility of the Church to be that place of recognition. Whilst not disagreeing with that, I suspect that that is in fact to limit the recognition of the presence of God. Transcendence is about moving beyond the boundaries that those in power and authority have defined as acceptable. People catch a glimpse of God when they move beyond the *status quo* in hope or move outside themselves in love, or risk a new lifestyle in faith or move out beyond a city wall onto a cross or reach out from the edge of the crowd to touch the hem of a garment. But we also catch a glimpse of God when Max touches the barbed wire and becomes a parable of the truth that when you learn to stop lying and begin to start loving, you die. Part of the paradoxical power of God's transcendence is that it is about openness and vulnerability to truth and a different way of being.

The third story with which I began is an illustration again of the ways in which 'sacred space' can so easily cease to be an affirmation of God's transcendence. Instead of being open and vulnerable to each other, we use 'sacred space' to define ourselves over and against each other. Instead of allowing it to be a beckoning space in which we are called to move beyond organizational boundaries and ecclesiological norms, it becomes a means of defining and shaping those more sharply.

Jesus Christ in fact re-defines 'sacred space' because he re-orders our understanding of power and authority. The sovereignty of God is not an extension of our own claims and certainties and rigidities: instead the transcendence of God is revealed in this immense capacity for moving beyond, this readiness to wait at humanity's feet with towel and water. The suffering servant is a sure sign of this transcendence because that servant is always moving beyond

the world's defined ways of behaving and acting into a place that none of us have ever been to before. In this sense Christ re-defines God by demonstrating that this foolishness is in fact the way through to liberation and hope. 'Sacred space' is then a battleground within ourselves between our desire for power to define and marginalize others and our desire to wait at one another's feet in humility and sacrifice. It is a place within each one of us, but also a place in the socio-political-economic realm, in which we face choices about what kind of power we will exercise, with whom and for what purpose. The Church becomes the place and the means through which we recognize those choices and struggle to identify the resources of the Christian tradition in responding to them.

The second major feature of 'sacred space' as defined by the gospel of Jesus Christ is that it is iconoclastic. It pushes the boundaries of human meaning and endeavour to new limits. When people, like Max, trespass across the boundaries set by those in authority, they bring a new depth of meaning to our humanity. The profound intimacy that Max had developed with Horst leads him to make a sacrifice. He pushes at the boundary of human existence as defined by a concentration camp and reveals that even in that place of profanation, human integrity remains a viable option. It remains an open possibility for people to push at the boundaries, to cut the barbed wire at military bases, to create human chains in the face of violations to the environment, so that a different kind of human truth can be proclaimed. The same is true of the Mothers' Union in Swaziland: they are beginning to define holiness not in terms of separation but as a revelation of that integrity of purpose that exists in the whole of creation. Their annual claim on a piece of 'sacred space', defined not by ecclesiastical authorities, let alone the South African state, is pushing back the boundaries of oppression and violence so that a different order of things can be declared.

Part of the reality that defines 'sacred space' is sacrifice and martyrdom. It has both the power to draw others to a place where a different kind of living has been created as well as re-defining the boundaries of human creativity and hope. That parable of humanity becomes the power that enables other people to change. When I met Martin Sherman after a tenth anniversary benefit performance of *Bent*, I described to him how the original production in 1979 had changed my life. His play had created a kind of 'sacred space' in which I had had to confront the limits and meaning of

my integrity and face some profound and painful choices in my life. 'That night changed my life', I said to him. That is the power of 'sacred space': it has this iconoclastic ability to challenge our own perceptions of power and status, deceit and half truth and transform them, if we will allow that, into a different kind of living. Max's space in the play had become my 'sacred space', in which I faced the choices before me: the sacrifice of status and advancement in the Church or living the truth of myself: the sacrifice of a marriage that was in ever-deepening difficulty for the struggle to live in a society that would forever label me as 'abnormal'. 'Sacred space' is the place where we engage in conscious and unconscious battles with the demons within and without in order to make our choices for living before God.

'Sacred space' is also the place where the rule of God becomes clear. The Swaziland celebration was an affirmation that a time of *kairos*, of opportunity is at work in Southern Africa in which God is doing a new thing. Despite all the appearances to the contrary, a new world of justice and freedom is emerging, which will not come without conflict and suffering but is on its way. The word 'sacred' can carry meanings close to religiosity, to that kind of spirituality that refuses to engage with the social and economic realities of this world in favour of a private and personal love affair with God. But true 'sacred space' all over the world is much more a declaration that here is a space where religiosity was countered by a struggle with those powers that pervert and distort the history of humankind. It is a place where the divine purposes to bring creation and humanity to fulfilment are recognized and where Christian people struggle to bring them closer to realization. The engagement of the Swaziland women is not a withdrawal from the world of Southern African politics but the taking of everything that is meant by those politics into the presence of God.

In fact, there is an extraordinary contrast between the perverted policy of 'apartheid' which creates its own boundaries of who's in and who's out and that 'sacred space' which becomes an inclusive vision of God's love and hope. As in the purging of the Temple, 'sacred space' becomes a revelation of what happens when God's transforming purposes are made known. God is discovered on the other side of the cultural, racial and social barriers that humanity has created. 'Sacred space' is a tantalizing glimpse of the rule of God. This, at least, suggests that sacred spaces are there to enable us to recognize that there is no area of human life that is outside

the purposes of God. In this we are helped by another compelling biblical image: after the descent from the cross, Jesus descends into the furnaces of hell to ensure that nothing and nobody is left outside his salvific purposes. That means that all the pollution and devastation caused by environmental chaos, all the ravages of nuclear devastation and the most appalling crimes of humanity are visited by God so that even that might be redeemed. However smashed up, broken down, marginalized, enuretic, insane human life may have become, it is taken into the true 'sacred space', the heart of God, to be redeemed and recreated. This affects radically the way we see a locked psychiatric ward, the sexual offenders' wing in Broadmoor, or the long-term wing in Wormwood Scrubs or Dartmoor. Those places are acid tests of our capacity to define 'sacred space' within the redeeming purposes of God's just and holy rule.

There is another dimension to Christ's purging of the Temple. He breaks in unexpectedly leaving lives feeling penetrated and vulnerable. We may imagine that we can create 'sacred space' for ourselves but Christ has a way of 'breaking and entering' that exposes the false securities that we create for ourselves both institutionally and personally. It is very difficult, for example, for many people to enter 'sacred space' because it has become exclusive, a place of belonging for the few but banned to the many. Numerous churches feel like that and are certainly experienced like that. 'How do I get in here?' is a question that many people ask and few find an answer to. In contrast to that Christ breaks in unexpectedly and identifies what 'sacred space' is primarily for. This alerts us to be very wary about defining space in any ultimate, let alone ideological, sense. Christ has a way of calling into question our securities and asking how provisional they are. We all have ways of creating boundaries within ourselves that operate as a kind of 'apartheid' system. We use them to define ourselves over against others, to determine how the world should be organized, who is in and who is out. We all need a proper sense of our own identity in order to conserve our integrity, but that is different from the defensive boundaries that cultivate alienation rather than relationship. The same dynamic operates in institutional Church life: in an age in which the Churches are caught up in chronic anxiety, the tendency to define 'sacred space' by who is in is particularly prevalent. The mission of God is understood increasingly as the

drawing of people into sacral activity rather than into a deeper engagement with the world.

An Indian Christian, Jyoti Sahi, has explored the nature of 'sacred space' in his own culture and has begun to develop ways in which Churches can not only reflect Indian culture but also speak of the integrity of humanity and creation.

> I tried to see the very structure of the crucified figure as the basis of all sacred space. The vertical and horizontal beams of the cross were themselves the archetypal framework on which the whole fabric of the universe is ultimately constructed—the crucified body of Christ itself the cosmic temple . . .[3]

He sees the function of 'sacred space' as articulating how God is present in the world in creation and in redemption. For him 'sacred space' is the articulation of how Christ breaks into the world and becomes the focus of hospitality and vulnerability. The challenge in the creation of 'sacred space', whether it be within our selves, our homes, our churches is how do we reconcile that space being expressive of what our faith is about whilst remaining vulnerable and hospitable to others. We need to create individual space in which the symbols indicate something of our own search; we also need to create corporate spaces in which the symbols articulate some sense of our common struggle to participate together in hope and love. Both those creations need to invite response from others.

'Sacred space' necessarily has a very ambivalent character to it. It is double-edged because it can confine and restrict, create barriers and exclusiveness, be a place filled with the bartering and exchange of this world. But it can also be a place of transcendence, of sacrifice, of mutual vulnerability. It can happen in a theatre, in a rural wasteland, on an urban walkway; it can happen anywhere because God is not to be confined or restricted or kept behind barriers. But it also happens somewhere because the world needs places of recognition where the Word of transcendence, of sacrifice, of vulnerability is 'made flesh'. Holy ground is what we find under our feet on the way to a greater vision of what God intends for the universe.

NOTES

[1] Vanstone, W. H.: *Love's endeavour, love's expense* (London, 1977), p 95.
[2] *Ibid.*, p 103.
[3] Sahi, Jyoti: *Stepping stones* (Bangalore, 1986), p 145.