

## TEMPLE AND ALTAR

# Salvador Dali, *The sacrament of the Last Supper*, detail of central figure of Christ, 1955, National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.



# Monreale Cathedral, Sicily, begun 1174



**Peter Stuart**

In the Name of God, Creator, Redeemer and Giver of Life. Amen.

*Psalm 105:4 'Turn for help to the Lord your strength, and constantly seek his presence'*

**Phyllis Mossman**

*Rev 21:22 'I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb'*

**Peter**

Where *is* God? And where shall we *seek* Him? How do we *talk* about the presence of God? Can we dare to *visually imagine and represent* the presence of God? How should we *respond* to that Presence? How do we express in art and symbol this seeking, this finding, this Presence, this response?

That's the theme underlying what Phyllis and I want to explore with you today, on the Feasts of 'Christ the King' and 'Christ in all Creation'. And we're going to approach this theme using two images and concepts: 'temple' and 'altar'. Temple, and altar.

# Jan Brueghel the Elder (Brussels 1568-Antwerp 1625), *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*, 1615, Oil on copper, King's Dressing Room, Windsor Castle



We all seem to live in something of a Hide and Seek Universe. God the Divine Mystery seeks us, and we human beings also seek God. Yet often we hide from God, as did Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden story - and also God can seem to us to be a hidden God, hiding from us, for whatever mysterious reason.

Those of us humans who believe in a Creator God affirm that God is present within this world, as the ground of our very being. We are His creatures. God is in us. **God is in us**. Yet **we are also in God**, as part of this immense cosmos God has created. And the cosmos itself is **in** God, **within** God, created and held in being by God. God is a mystery, experienced within this world, yet this experience also points us beyond this world, to His eternal reality.

In short, God **indwells** this world which He has created, and God also **transcends** it.

It's important to keep the balance. Sometimes we've so emphasised God's indwelling that we identify God with the world, or even domesticate and tame and trivialise Him. And sometimes we've so emphasised God's transcendence that we make Him remote, far away, uninvolved and uninterested.

Most, perhaps all, human beings experience something of this Divine presence, even if they don't name it as such, or don't name it in ways that we Christians are able to agree with.

We can experience that Presence in the wonder and beauty of Nature **anywhere** – both in its vastness and its tiny intricacies.

Around 1600, the Netherlands artist Jan Brueghel was able to study botanical and zoological specimens in the gardens and menageries of the court of Brussels, and depicted many of these with fairly good accuracy. In the second creation story in Genesis, every species on Earth was present in the Garden of Eden, and named there by Adam. This is what Brueghel is conveying in this picture. Also, the landscape depicted here must be what Brueghel and his contemporaries imagined Paradise to look like. But in the background are Adam and Eve, possibly about to pluck the forbidden fruit....

# Nam-Tso, cairns, Tibet



## Peter

And there do seem to be particular places – the Irish call them ‘thin places’ – where the divine Presence comes especially near us, unbidden, again and again.

When human beings do encounter this Divine presence, they, we, often build a shrine of some sort. It can be very simple – like a cairn of rocks as here in Tibet.

# Kinkaku-ji, Temple of the Golden Pavilion, completed 1397, rebuilt 1955, Kyoto, Japan (Zen Buddhist Temple)



And that sort of simple shrine, at a place where the Divine has found us, develops bit by bit into the **Temple**, a building where the Divine dwells. And such a building can also signify human desire to seek the presence of the Divine. Or both.

These buildings are sometimes modest, sometimes substantial - like this **gold-leaf covered Zen Buddhist Temple**, the Temple of the Golden Pavilion in Kyoto, Japan. Japanese temples, whether Buddhist or Shinto, strive to bring together spirituality and beauty: beauty of Nature, beauty of building and beauty of garden and grounds surrounding the temple. (And there’s a lovely Chinese saying that ‘a garden is a painting in three dimensions’.)

# An Aztec sacrificial Altar from Mexico



The shrine also develops into **Altars** at or within these Temples, where humans respond to Divinity by offering prayer and sacrifice. Altars, like Temples, take many forms. At those altars, sacrifice also has taken a number of forms: incense, flowers, grain and produce, prepared food - and slaughtered animals or even human beings.

This is an Aztec sacrificial altar from Mexico, where human sacrifice was viewed as ‘the desire to be regarded as a god’, as well as a way to properly appease and honour the gods.

## Phyllis

And our wooden altar here at Wellesley is but one example of myriads of altars of different faiths, past and present – including Christian altars.

# *Pala d' Oro*, altar screen, San Marco, AD 1105-1345, gold, cloisonné enamels, precious stones, pearls, 3300 x 2100 mm, San Marco Basilica



Here's a very sumptuous Christian altar begun in the 12<sup>th</sup> Century in Constantinople (present day Istanbul,) which now stands in all its glory in the Basilica of St Mark in Venice. It's embellished with Byzantine metal work in gold and enamels, precious stones, and hundreds of pearls.

Some of us may be tempted to view these various images simply as works of art, especially when they're seen away from their original context in a church or a temple. Yet we always need to remind ourselves of the role of an altar. And that role is to be the focus of human **offering** to the Divine and the symbol of human **encounter** with the Divine. However heavily or simply ornamented, they exist as a sacred place of gathering for worship.

The key thing about an altar is that it's where we human beings offer 'sacrifice' to the Divine. **What** we offer, and to **Whom** we think we are offering it, are where the crucial differences come in.

# James J. Tissot, *Jacob's Dream* (c. 1896-1902), gouache on board, Jewish Museum, New York



Shrines, temples and altars are woven into the Biblical story. Think of the dream of the Patriarch Jacob. He was travelling in Palestine and stopped for the night at the shrine at Bethel. There he had a dream about a ladder resting on the ground with its top reaching to heaven, with angels going up and down it. And what did Jacob say and do when he awoke? *'Truly the LORD is in this place, and I did not know it....How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; it is the gateway to heaven.....He took the stone on which his head had rested, and set it up as a sacred pillar...'*

# Yehuda HaKohen *Ams Segula – Parshat Terumah*



Or think of Moses and the People of Israel in the Wilderness as they slowly travelled from Egypt to Canaan, (Palestine). They carried with them the Tabernacle, or Tent of Meeting. This was their place of encounter with Yahweh, and its enclosure was their place of sacrificial offering. This mysterious, tabernacling Divine Presence dwelt with them, and led them through the Wilderness to the Promised Land.

### **Peter**

And there the People of Israel settled. Later, King Solomon built a Temple, in Jerusalem. This meant that a great building replaced the travelling Tent of Meeting. And it also meant that the Temple altar replaced the travelling Altar as the sole place of Israelite sacrifice. Centuries later this particular Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, and many of Judah's people deported to Babylon. Eventually the exiles returned, and built the Second Temple, later renovated and expanded by Herod.

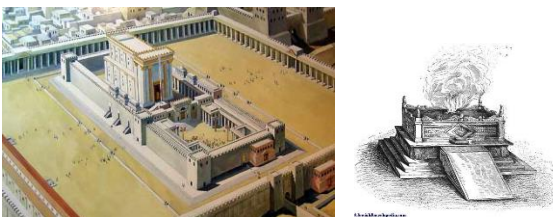
Each Jerusalem Temple and its Altar faced three problems. The first was how best to explain how the infinite eternal God could be especially present in this (or any other) finite place while still transcending time and space. The word 'glory' tracks this tension through both the Old and New Testaments. The second problem was that Israel had enemies, who posed a physical threat to Jerusalem and its Temple, and sought to destroy it. The third problem was the pollution of the Temple by Israel's various lapses into unfaithful idolatry, and into unjust living. Indeed, the prophets before Jesus denounced two things in particular: idolatry and social injustice. Both pervert worship (both then and now).

**# Photograph, source unknown, retrieved from <http://emmanuelenid.org> A definition and example of types November 2017**



The prophet Ezekiel had a haunting vision about the 'glory' of God departing from Solomon's Temple now defiled by Israel's idolatry, and the prophets interpreted this destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians as punishment for Israel's sins. 'Ichabod' – the glory has departed – one of the most devastating words which Jews or Christians can use to describe a religious building or institution.

**# Herod's Temple (model), and the altar in its forecourt (from the Jerusalem Encyclopaedia)**



This is a model of the Temple and its altar, as renovated by Herod It's the Temple Jesus in which was presented as an infant, and in which he debated with the teachers as a child...

**# Michael Smither, *Christ driving the money changers from the temple*, 1972, oil on board, 1210 x 1696 mm, Wellington, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection**



...and from which He drove the money changers as an adult.

Because a fourth and unexpected challenge to the Temple arose – Jesus of Nazareth himself!

We see here in this strong contemporary painting by a NZ artist, Michael Smither, the desecration of the Temple by those who worship money and use religion for personal profit, rather than worshipping the God who created them and who seeks their loving obedience. Jesus goes on to do something far more radical than this powerful act: He foretells the destruction of the Temple itself, and also (more radically still) its replacement by His own Risen Body.

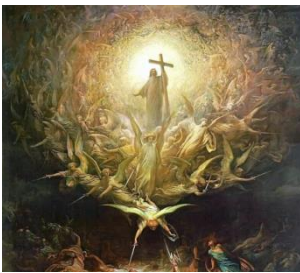
### *Phyllis*

# Francesco Hayez, *The Destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem*, 1867, oil on canvas, 183 × 252 cm, Venice: Accademia



Here we see a painting of the Second Temple in Jerusalem – which was indeed destroyed, by a Roman army after the Siege of Jerusalem in the year 70 AD.

# Gustave Doré (1832–1883) *The Triumph of Christianity...*, detail, c 1868, oil on canvas, 300 x 200 cm, Art Gallery of Hamilton, Ontario



So now Christ's human nature replaces the Jerusalem Temple as where the Divine Glory dwells within Creation: **He** is Emmanuel, God with us. And His life of perfect **obedience** to His Father, culminating in death and resurrection, is the perfect **offering**. It's the sacrifice correcting, fulfilling and replacing all other sacrifices – whether of prayer or incense or the fruits of the earth or of slaughtered animals. 'Temple' and 'sacrifice' come together and fuse in the sacred humanity of Jesus.

Those who choose to follow Jesus, place their faith in Him. Baptised into His death and resurrection, they become members of His Body the Church. And they, we, become stones in the new Temple which is His Body, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Reach out and touch the stones of the Temple alongside you. (Prod them if they've gone to sleep!!!) We don't have to go to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to see and touch the Temple. And this particular altar we see in front of us now is where **we** gather to respond to God's Presence and reach out to Him and make **our** offering. And what is that offering?

It's threefold:

- Firstly, the self-offering of Jesus in His life and death and resurrection, called into the present moment.
- Secondly, the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving for this and all the other mighty acts of God.
- Thirdly, the offering of ourselves.

We do all this in union with Jesus, present among us. The whole Christ, Head and members, offers the whole Christ, Head and members, to the Father, in the power of the Holy Spirit.



# The Mass celebrating the canonisation of John Paul II in Rome, photograph



And that is what occurs whether it's a huge outdoor Mass like this one outside St Peter's in Rome,

# Lucas Cranach the Elder, *The Reformer Martin Luther giving communion to the Princes*, print, Wittenberg: The Lutherhalle



... or in a gathering of Protestant princes in Germany at the time of the Reformation. Here we see a print by **the** artist Lucas Cranach the Elder. The Reformer, Martin Luther (on the left), is giving communion to the newly Protestant Princes.

**Peter**

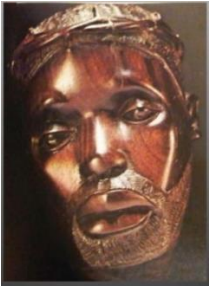
# Sandro Botticelli, *The dying St Jerome receives communion*, c. 1495, tempera on panel, 34.3 × 25.4 cm, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art



Or in a simple House Communion with a dying man. This painting (by Botticelli) is of St Jerome at his deathbed.

Christ **is** Risen. Nevertheless, this Earth remains a world torn by sin and suffering; the Divine presence within it does not yet shine out in all its splendour. Its human creatures do not yet glorify God with all their heart and soul and strength. The Kingdom of God is still to come in its **fullness**. So the universe (or at least our part of it) is not yet the cosmic Temple it was created to be, in Christ. And at our earthly altars we must still plead for God's forgiveness and reach out for the complete revelation of His mysterious presence.

Here's a moving wooden image of the Suffering Christ with his crown of thorns, carved in Africa.



A German writer, Jurgen Moltmann, draws on St Paul's words in Romans 8 and puts it this way: *'The cry for freedom is also the cry of the creation which man is destroying. ..That is why "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay" and "waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God". Matter in us and around about us is hungering for the power of the new creation....*

**Phyllis** Moltmann continues: *But the cry for liberty... is God's own cry as well. The Spirit of God himself hungers and sighs in the groans of the hungry, in the torment of the prisoners, and in nature's silent death pangs. The messianic traditions of Judaism and Christianity do not talk about an apathetic God, enthroned in heaven in untouched bliss. They show us the God who suffers with his forsaken creation because he loves it....He created man for liberty - to be the image of himself. He created nature for joy - as the play of his good pleasure.*

**Peter** And Moltmann concludes: *That is why God is affected by the world's history of suffering through his Creative Spirit, and is involved in it through his own pain. His Spirit hungers, sighs, and cries out for liberty. His Spirit intercedes for those who have fallen dumb, interceding with sighs too deep for words (Romans 8:26) and not with a glorious shout of victory. It is only in this way that he keeps the hope of creation alive...As long as God himself is still enduring his passion and has not come to rest in a new creation that corresponds to him, everything only lives from hope, not yet in fulfilled joy.'*



Now the last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation, has an acute sense of the gulf between the world God wants to see and the world as it actually is. And in that book, St John the Divine seeks to strengthen and encourage the Early Church in the midst of persecution, and paints strange but powerful word-pictures of the glorious worship of Heaven and the chaos of Earth, and of the final climax when the gulf between the two is abolished.

John writes, *'I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had vanished, and there was no longer any sea.....The One who sat on the throne said, 'I am making all things new! ....and showed me Jerusalem, the Holy City, coming down out of heaven from God...I saw no temple in the*



*city, for its temple was the sovereign Lord God and the Lamb.... The throne of God and of the Lamb will be there, and his servants shall worship him; they shall see him face to face’.*

Word-pictures are one thing, but it’s extraordinarily difficult to portray visually the future reality which John’s words point us to. Here’s a medieval tapestry attempting to visualise the ‘descent’ of the New Jerusalem.

### **Phyllis**

**# Albrecht Dürer, *The hymn in adoration of the lamb*, (c. 1496-1497) from *The Apocalypse* series, (from later Latin edition, 1511) 39.3 × 28.2 cm**



And here’s a portrayal of the heavenly worship of Christ, the Lamb of God, in a woodcut designed by the German artist Albrecht Dürer from his Apocalypse series, made in the year 1500 at a time when people thought the end of the world was approaching.

**# Hubert and Jan van Eyck, *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb (Ghent Altarpiece)*, completed 1432, oil on wood, Saint Bavo Cathedral, Ghent**



And here’s another attempt to portray the worship of the Lamb in the New Heaven and New Earth by the 15<sup>th</sup> Century Flemish artist Jan van Eyck. It’s beautiful in many ways, but bizarre in its literalism – more especially the Lamb standing on the altar. The imagery of the Book of Revelation – in this case a walled city and a sacrificial lamb – is far further from our own reality today than it was from what many people encountered daily in the first Christian century. And so artists and illustrators today often give up the attempt to visualise the New Creation, and take refuge in blazing light and angels and thrones way up in the ethereal heavens. And thus miss or evade the whole point of the Book of Revelation – the hope of the union of Heaven and Earth, with Christ at the centre.

St Paul similarly affirms the ultimate triumph of the Kingdom of God and the fulfilment of His purpose in the world, but he uses images more sparingly. Perhaps his most vivid and successful one is that of the whole creation groaning in the pangs of childbirth. Creation not only *exists*, but is *becoming* something more, something new.



Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit and scientist, has written extensively and powerfully about this cosmos evolving into a Christ-centred universe, fully transformed by the love of God. And he, and others like him, see the whole cosmos in process of itself becoming a temple because it's indwelt by Christ who is **The Temple**. And this evolved Cosmos is also the Altar on which Humankind, you and I, offer up our daily worship of love and obedience. Teilhard fuses all these realities within his understanding of the Eucharist: the past, present and future meeting place of Heaven and Earth, and of our daily life and Sabbath worship. I myself find this an inspiring and haunting and hope-giving vision.

### **Peter**

This is a painting by the Spanish surrealist artist Salvador Dali, 'The sacrament of the Last Supper'.

For me, it serves to capture this movement of transformation into the New Creation, though I doubt this was Dali's exact intention. The foreground of the picture is in darkness, as are the kneeling figures. Behind the central figure of Christ is the dawn, lighting the hills and the sea. Christ points upwards to the figure above – the Father whose face we may not see except in Jesus. The most solidly tangible objects are the bread and wine and the altar on which they rest (and it is an altar rather than a table). We are invited into the picture, to kneel, and move from the sacramental bread and wine to Christ, and then through Him upwards to the Father and forwards into the light-filled new world beyond. Incidentally, what we see behind the figure of Christ is the view out of Dali's own window: the coast of Catalonia. Now look out of the window behind **our** altar here: the harbour of Wellington. Both are destined for the glory of the New Creation.

So where do you yourself find God? Where have you found Him? Where is **your Temple**? Is Christ at its centre? Where is **your Altar** and what do you offer there? Crucially, do you offer **yourself**, and do it daily?

Where are you and I heading? What is our hope? Are we on the journey with Christ into God's New Creation?

The Kingdom of God is Creation **healed**, healed by the suffering love of God. And we are created for its joy.

Therefore: *Glory to you, Lord Christ; your death we show forth; your resurrection we proclaim; your coming we await; Amen! Come Lord Jesus.*

***A presentation in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne, on 26 November 2017, the feast of Christ the King and Christ in All Creation, by Phyllis Mossman and Peter Stuart.***