

Corresponding with the Invisible World

For the most part, of course, the presence of the great spiritual universe surrounding us is no more noticed than the pressure of air on our bodies, or the action of light. Our field of attention is not wide enough for that; our spiritual senses are not sufficiently alert. Most people work so hard at developing their correspondence with the visible world, that their power of corresponding with the invisible is left in a rudimentary state. Evelyn Underhill, The Spiritual Life

These words from one of the greatest mystics and spiritual directors of the 20th century describe a diminishing awareness of the holy in modern western society. Our corporate blindness also affects our individual abilities to respond to God's unique calls to each of us. In earlier centuries church bells marked God's time. Living in England, Underhill would have been reminded of the Daily Office, the call to Morning and Evening Prayer, by the bells of her parish church. Even in the business districts of London, tiny jewels of churches designed centuries ago by architects such as Christopher Wren, kept the divine hours. In other parts of the world the shofar (ram's horn) called observant Jews to synagogues on Sabbath and the muezzin's chant led the Muslim's prayers five times each day. Whether or not Christians, Jews or Muslims actually responded by stopping to pray, those reminders of prayer consecrated their day. Prayer became part of the background of people's lives, threads in their tapestries, waiting for them to take notice of God's presence in their lives.

Both this year and last I spent two weeks during the month of October in Israel/Palestine, where the precedence of the spiritual in daily life makes palpable that invisible world that Underhill speaks of. The first prayers of the day awaken you before dawn. Church bells in Nazareth chime the hymn *Immaculate Mary* at breakfast time. From sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday, no taxis travel the streets of Jerusalem, honoring the Sabbath prohibition against work. During the month-long fast of Ramadan it is simply not possible to buy morning coffee from the Arab cafe across the street from the Damascus Gate. Nothing enters or leaves your mouth during daylight hours: no cigarettes, food, water, spit, and no sex, either.

Churches commemorating every event in Christ's life abound in this land, some from the Roman era, others from the Byzantine period, followed by Crusader churches and modern ones. Often two neighboring sacred places compete for validity: the Greek Orthodox Church of Mary's Tomb on the Mount of Olives and the German Benedictine Dormition Abbey on Mount Zion; the Orthodox Church of Mary's Spring in Nazareth a block away from the Roman Catholic Basilica of

the Annunciation; The Church of the Holy Sepulchre (shared by the Roman Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Armenians, both Catholic and Orthodox, Syrian Monophysites, Ethiopian Copts) in the Old City and the Protestant Garden Tomb in East Jerusalem. A striking example of the proximity of the sacred and profane is the Via Dolorosa, which leads directly through the middle of the Arab souq. Walking the Way of the Cross you jostle shoppers, hear the calls of vegetable, meat and sweet vendors and catch glimpses of well-armed settler guards in doorways. Today, as 2,000 years ago, the crowds go about their business, unaware of the Incarnation. Yet I think the juxtaposition of the sacred and secular is precisely what allows people to apprehend the holy. When an iron gate on a dirty side street opens onto a spotless courtyard and tiny chapel commemorating Christ's flagellation and coronation with thorns, then the holy can appear anywhere in your daily life.

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, when church music moved from the unaccompanied, unison singing of Gregorian chant to harmonized motets and polyphony, church musicians borrowed freely from the secular. Hans Leo Hassler's *O Sacred Head Sore Wounded*, arguably the most famous of the passion hymns, began as a song of frustrated love from a suitor to his lady. Johann Sebastian Bach used the sarabande, a particularly lascivious dance in $\frac{3}{4}$ time where the accent is on the second beat of the measure, both in the *Crucifixus* of his **Mass in B-minor** and in the closing chorale of his **St. Matthew Passion**. Nearly all of the hymns that Ralph Vaughn-Williams harmonized originated from secular folk tunes. Congregations of these composers' days (Vaughn-Williams and Underhill were contemporaries) saw no conflicts with this crossover. Our ethos, perhaps due to the persistent separation of church and state in the US, seems to have lost that flexibility and, with it, the means to recognize the sacred in our everyday lives.

The visual arts played significant roles in the prayer and formation of Christians from the earliest days of the church. The most frequent images of Christ in the early church were not crucifixions, but rather various depictions of the Good Shepherd. Drawings of boats marked the spots where Christians worshipped. The walls of the catacombs in Italy are covered with paintings of people in prayer or sharing agape meals. The Eastern Church traditionally emphasized God's immanence (the Word became human) and so Orthodox icons were meant for private ownership. Their holy people lived as hermits, rather than in well-organized communities. The Western Church, until quite recently, emphasized God's transcendence (the Word became flesh) and so the visual arts (as with music) fell under the authority of the prevailing church hierarchy. Stained glass, frescoes, Books of Hours, all were meant to educate in theology rather than to provoke veneration. This

heritage of pedagogy, subservient to a patron who commissions and so retains the right to define valid doctrine, might make it difficult for artists to find an audience in today's church.

In the Jewish tradition we offer our first fruits to God, because the first were considered the best. The Feast of Shavuot celebrates this with its meals of cheese, fruits and vegetables from the spring harvest. Its timing corresponds with Pentecost, as Shavuot falls 50 days after Passover. In Judaism firstborn sons were consecrated to God by the priest or rabbi, in a similar fashion to the medieval Christian's tithing a child to the local monastery. As a pilgrim in the Holy Land, it was evident to me that from very earliest times Christians also offered their best work to God. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre is perhaps the best example. Crammed with ornate oil lamps, gilded icons, lace, marble, it represents the best work of many generations of artists from all over the world. Those artists each portrayed Christ as they themselves were, not as He truly would have looked, an indication that they grasped the meaning of the Incarnation. Underneath all of the gold and precious gems is the stark, cold and dirty rock of Calvary. Yet even standing there in the dark and touching it, you can still smell the beeswax, frankincense and anointing oil used in preparation for burial.

Today's church needs the visual arts to remind Her of the Incarnation: that Christ fully shared our humanity, both in His body and soul, so that we might share in His divinity. I think we need to provide ways for congregations to see Christ's humanity and the divinity of all people, whether we do it as part of the liturgy or in exhibits in our parish buildings, books in our shops, images on our websites. We need to give our best work, which includes the quality of materials as well as technique, in the service of God. Just as in agrarian cultures the first fruits represented an acknowledgement that all came to us from God, we pursue our art to His greater glory. After returning from Israel/Palestine this year I created an online photo-documentary of Christ's Incarnation. You can see it at http://www.geocities.com/damascus_gate/pilgrimage.html