

Along the track

The Oil Press

The olive trees in The Garden of Gethsemane are very, very old and gnarled. They are some of the oldest trees known to science. Carbon dating showed that three of the eight trees came from the years 1092, 1166 and 1198.

Gethsemane means "oil press" in Aramaic, the language spoken by Jesus. The old trees look sad and weary. Yet it is a very peaceful place and it invites quiet reflection. I often think of the hours spent there. It made its mark on me.

A sense of place is important in our lives. We all have places we love, places that have inspired us, comforted us, challenged us, places where we have found or still find peace. The love of place shapes us. When we say "I come from..." that isn't just a statement about geographical location – the hills or mountains or plains, the farming land, the inner city landscape, whatever it may be, all shape us. C. S. Lewis wrote that when we speak of a love of home, images associated with a way of life at a particular place—all of the sights, sounds, smells, mannerisms, dialect, and other peculiarities associated with the area rise within us. It is the same when we speak of love of our country; it is usually described in terms of the region one associates with home. We instinctively need to root ourselves in a particular place.

Place makes its mark on us.

When Pope John Paul II came to Australia, he spoke of the closeness of the Aboriginal people to this land: *For thousands of years this culture of yours was free to grow without interference by people from other places. You lived your lives in spiritual closeness to the land, with its animals, birds, fishes, waterholes, rivers, hills and mountains. Through your closeness to the land you touched the sacredness of man's relationship with God, for the land was the proof of a power in life greater than yourselves.*

You did not spoil the land, use it up, exhaust it and then walk away from it. You realised that your land was related to the source of life.

The silence of the Bush taught you a quietness of soul that put you in touch with another world, the world of God's Spirit.

Place had made its mark

Years later, Yahweh promised the people of Israel a place of their own, their own land in part because this land was to form and shape them, just as God's gift of the Torah was also to shape them as a people and their particular spirituality. It was a land of rugged wilderness, of mountains, rivers and lakes. Over many generations they grew to love that land – they sang songs (psalms) about it, wrote poetry about it; they praised God for it; they designated places as sacred, the places they had encountered God; they missed it passionately when they were in exile. When they were away from it, they lost their way, their roots, their inspiration. It was in this place that God formed them.

When the first European settlers came to this land, it was an uneasy relationship. Their early paintings and writings reveal nostalgia for "The Old Country," a disconnection with the terrain, the climate, the wide open spaces, and the unfamiliar bush. These early artists depicted the colours of the landscape as they had known in England. But ever so gradually, the land made its mark.

In the beginning of European settlement there were times of hardship, cruelty and danger, times of conflict between the Aborigines and the white settlers, times of brutality and hostility. We spread out across the country, crossed its rivers and mountains and wide open plains. But as much as we tried to make our mark on the land, more often than not, it shaped us. Culture and character, the shaping of common life, happens slowly as we interact with the landscape around us. In turn we became southerners or northerners, people from the outback or 'city-folk.' We grew as a nation, as a people and we welcomed others to these shores. Post-war migrants and refugees from war torn Europe came to make their home in this place as did those who have joined us from the Middle East and Africa and Asia. Australia is about all of this. We have been gifted by them all. They are all an integral and fundamental part of our identity.

Developing some spirituality of place is significant in our lives. Christian mystic and philosopher Simone Weil has described rootedness in place as "the most important and least recognised need of the human soul." That means developing some understanding of the importance particular places have in our lives, how they shape who we are, what we believe in and how we behave. Particular places are inherently important to everyone, whether we were born here and whether we came from somewhere else. Place will always remain important to us.

The land is still asking something of us - to connect again, to appreciate its beauty and its harshness, to appreciate its enormity and its extraordinary variety. In earlier times, both with the aboriginal people and the early settlers, there was a much deeper appreciation of and respect for the land. For many, this appreciation and respect brought them closer to an experience of the sacred in their lives. Developing some sense of place reminds us of the footprints we leave behind. That appreciation may be calling us to reach a better understanding with the first inhabitants of this land and to address more constructively, more humanely and generously those seeking asylum in this land, not to be complacent about unbridled development, especially in areas we consider to be sensitive historically, culturally or environmentally.

After all, God is present in us, around us, and in every person, place, and thing we encounter. We experience God through all of these.

Regards
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