
What is A Holy Place?

**An article for the *Cathedral Times*
by Dean Sam Candler**

Welcome to my home study again!

Wait! Hardly any of you have ever been in my home study! But you sure have seen a lot of it lately, in online video worship services. Most of you have seen me praying different parts of our Sunday service, or preaching the sermon, or recording midday meditations, from that home study. I am usually in some sort of religious garb. And the study is often set up with candles and holy items. Then, on another day of the week, you have seen me in a regular video meeting, maybe in regular clothes, and you have said, “I know that familiar place! Where are the candles?”

Are there only some parts of the week when my study is holy? During this season of quarantine prayer, and online religious services from everywhere, the question arises, “What is it that makes a place holy?”

I remember that it was ten years into my ministry as a priest that I even considered making a trip, or pilgrimage, to the ultimate holy place for Christians, “The Holy Land” (of Israel/Palestine). When people returned from Israel and told me how moving it was to have walked in the footsteps of Jesus, I had replied that I could just as easily walk in his footsteps here in the United States. In fact, I continued, it might even be more faithful. Jesus the Christ is everywhere, and one need not journey to Jerusalem to find Christ. (I have ended up making five pilgrimages to Israel/Palestine – and it is holy!)

What makes a place holy? Well, it may be that a place is holy simply because holy people have prayed there. A holy place is where holy people have prayed. And who are the holy people? They are you. And me. The holy people are those who have struggled and rejoiced through life, and who have marked those struggles and joys with a sense of space and time. Holy places are where holy people have somehow sensed the divine in whatever circumstance they have been in, wherever they have been, and then marked that particular space and time.

Yes, those places can be anywhere, and they ARE anywhere. They are where we grew up; they are where we came of age. They are where we were married. They are where we had children. They are where we have loved, and they are where we have lost love. They are where someone has been ill. They are where someone has died. They are where we have sensed someone above us and beyond us, and somehow loving us and strengthening us, no matter our circumstance. They are where we have experienced the fullness of humanity – and divinity, too.

I remember, years ago, when one of my faithful friends explained to me why she loved serving on the altar guild, preparing the vestments and vessels for Sunday services. She said something like this, “When I tend to those particular altar vessels as if they really do contain the body and blood of Christ, then I am able to see the body and blood of Christ everywhere else.”

Her words represent what I believe, too. If I can locate the presence of Christ, particularly, in a special place, then I am set free to experience that same presence anywhere else, as well.

We who have known the presence of God in the special place we know as the Cathedral of St. Philip are now—I hope—knowing the presence of God in the special places of our homes. Yes, my study is holy when I experience the presence of God there. But so is whatever place you are watching and hearing our online service!

Yes, your homes, too, have more and more become holy places – because you are praying there. A place—any place—is made holy, when holy people have known the presence of God there. A place is made holy when holy people have prayed there—no matter what the prayer.

Yes, we make our pilgrimages. To Israel, or England—or to India or Thailand—or to the seacoast or the mountains. And those pilgrimages will return, one day! God is truly in those places. But God is also right where we are, right now. God is in our homes, where we have struggled, and where we have loved. God is where we pray. God is where we live. Those places, all of them, are holy.

AMEN.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sam Candler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

The Very Reverend Sam Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip