

Walking on Holy Ground

Moses, drawn towards a desert bush, aflame but not consumed, hears a voice saying, "Take your shoes off! This is Holy Ground."

Why should you take off your shoes on Holy Ground?

Some dozen years ago I began to suffer from a strange discomfort in church on Sunday mornings. Standing behind the altar I started to feel that it was somehow not right to have anything on my feet. It was Summer time and I was in sandals, so it was easy to slip them off. But I was embarrassed. What would people think? So as soon as I left the privacy of the altar to distribute communion I put them back on. But that felt like cheating. I honestly thought I was getting a bit unhinged. Then, this reading came up.....

But why should you take off your shoes on Holy Ground?

For me it was something about being in touch with the ground, skin to carpet, as it was there. Skin to Lino here. It was about getting free of the layers of things, shoe soles, socks, between me and the holy ground. It was about being without the protection of those layers, being exposed to bumps, cold, sharp things. Maybe it was about being vulnerable. One of our folks, a lovely old Jamaican dairy farmer, who always wore proper, polished, lace-up shoes, would try, in pretend, to stamp on my bare toes when I walked near him. Being barefoot was risky!

Why take off your shoes on Holy Ground?

(Muslims and Hindus and Buddhists all remove shoes on entering places of holiness....)

I think it is a symbol of coming into the presence of holiness.

It is acknowledging that you must be open, honest, without pretense and without any protection from God.

How odd to think that I might need to be protected from God.

But the Holy One is not a presence you should come to lightly.

Jesus, the Holy One incarnate, says, "If you want to become a follower of mine then you must deny yourself, take up your cross, your death, and follow me. You must lose yourself, let go of your own life. That is the only way you will find your life in me."

Deny yourself.

I think that to deny myself means to try to stop being all the things that seem cool, or will make me more popular. It means to strip away the pretenses and acts I use to keep myself safe, protected and shielded from criticism. We all fear being disliked, or rejected, and so we hide behind slight masks. The person who is always laughing at the party might, in fact, be the one closest to tears. The brash, noisy person at coffee hour might be trying to mask the shame he feels because he is actually terribly shy. The person of strong opinions is often the one who can no longer bear the weight of uncertainties and the real confusion and complexity of life.

To deny yourself for God is to go without the "false selves" we hide behind.

It is, like bearing your feet, to be open to wincing when you "step" on something awkward. It is to be *without*, to be poor and in need.

Lose your life.

Losing your life sounds like suicide. But again it almost is!

One of my friends, some years ago, had a “nervous breakdown” and ended up in psychiatric hospital, lost and helpless. Some 12 months later he told me that it was not, as it appeared, a “breakdown”. It was, in fact, his “breakthrough”!

His successful, important job, his jovial round of parties, his big income and lavish lifestyle, his perfect family; charming wife and intelligent children, smart car and so on. It was all more than he could sustain. It was a show he had been putting on and had no idea how to stop. His magnificent success had taken him prisoner. His utter disintegration and hospitalization had been the loss of his life. The death of his manufactured, award-winning life.

Being utterly broken and shamed, failing in a spectacularly public way, he finally came to see, was the only path to find his real self, his real way to love his wife and kids, and to be his real self to his few remaining friends. He found freedom.

“I’ve got my feet back on the ground.” he said.

Give up the masks and games. Get rid of the fake versions-of-you that you hide behind.

I think you cannot come into the presence of holiness if you are faking, or hiding or pretending. You have to come, shoeless. You have to come hiding nothing. Spiritually uncovered.

“Just as I am, I come”, says the old hymn.

Paul describes this undefended vulnerability of life as holding fast to good and hating evil.

Rejoicing in hope, not hiding behind cynicism. Not attacking but blessing everyone, even those who are mean to you. Never repaying evil with evil, but going to the very people you are afraid of and feeding them when they are hungry, giving them a drink when they are parched.

I wonder if the people we never feed are perhaps also the pieces of ourselves God created, but that we don’t like. If the people we let die of thirst are the aspects of ourselves we think unworthy, or stupid, or unacceptable to our friends, family, church? (We had a 16 year-old boy staying with us last week. He is training to be a ballet dancer. I would never have had the courage to let out that I wanted to dance!!!)

When Moses, bare footed, nervous of sharp rocks and scorpions, comes to the bush and talks with God he asks, “Who are you? What is your name?”

God doesn’t say, “I am the Creator of the Universe.” or “I am the saviour of my people”. or “The eternal judge of the world.”

God says “I am.”

That’s it.

“I am who I am.....put up with it!” No excuses, no summaries, no CV of divine acts, no biography, no recommendations or lists of impressive achievements. Just himself.

Just himself requiring only that you be yourself.

That is where you meet holiness.

Come to God, he calls to you. Take off your armour. Set aside your disguises. Walk barefoot in spirit, shameless before his gaze. He has forgiven you all your mistakes, your sins your failures or shortcomings. He loves your silliness and your hidden hopes. He knows you, calls you by your true name, and offers you his holiness to stand in. Come.