

*In dealing with “ungentlemanly young men” Sister Perpetua told her girls to say, ‘Stop, sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!’ (From a story by Flannery O’Connor)*

I wonder whether the founding fathers of the United States had biblical history in mind when they decided to set aside neutral land to be the site of the U.S. capital – i.e. the District of Columbia. It was a wise thing to do. Sure, there were other already established cities: Charleston, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, each having prestige, commerce, a history. But they were provincial and perhaps unlikely to put national oversight ahead of local interests. And so a new city, fresh out of the damp of the Potomac and equidistant to the northern and southern regions of the country, would become the home of a truly national center.

I say maybe the Bible influenced this decision because when the great King David took over the nation of Israel it was a collection of twelve tribes in scattered locations – often fighting among themselves or hard to unite against foreign foes. So what did David do? Shrewdly he captured the Canaanite city of Jerusalem and made it the “District of Columbia” of the whole of Israel – diminishing the local tribal centers, to dominate them from Jerusalem’s Mt. Zion. He and his son Solomon also centralized Israel’s religion by building what would become the nation’s one and only Temple with clergy and rites mandatory for everyone. A Temple, by the way, arranged in stages: a Holy of Holies wherein God dwelt invisibly and to which no man had access but the high priest once a year; a courtyard for the clergy, a lower one for men, a lower one for women and at the extreme outer limits, one from which non-Israelites might watch the goings on – all segregated according to relative worthiness.

Of course the royal descendants of David and Solomon turned out to be careless about their politics and their creed – and so centuries later along came a prophet named Ezekiel who published a vision in which he sees God, as resident of the Holy of Holies, leaving the Temple in the shape of a cloud – allowing a vacuum for an invader to level both city and Temple. Later the Jewish survivors of that invasion rebuilt the Temple but of a lesser splendor than that of old Solomon’s.

Today’s readings bring us back to meditating on Jerusalem’s Temple from a New Testament point of view. What was the revolutionary attitude of the founders of Christianity? Revolutionary indeed! For in their vision of the future there would be no temple in the New Jerusalem (the Church), because the unveiled glory of God would enlighten everything. Even more: each person (not just the high priest) would have direct access to God as graciously intimate. Indeed *each of us* would *become* a temple, a *dwelling place of God* – as St. Paul says: *Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*

I used to hear those words often as our New Testament was read but they bounced off my noggin for some reason – until one day I *did* hear them – and I have not been afraid of God ever since. As the Letter of John says: *God is love, and those who dwell in love dwell in God and God in them.*

