The World Community for Christian Meditation

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Providentially it was Midsummer Eve and the white night of Scandinavia was reaching its zenith. So, late but in preternatural light we walked up the hill to Hedalen church. It stands commanding a view over the forested hills and valleys, its generations of worshippers sleeping in the graveyard around it.

It is one of the 29 remaining wooden medieval churches of Norway, a survivor of more than a thousand that were constructed after Olaf Haraldsson had returned home in 1015 with a new faith in the White Christ whom he was determined would drive out the old Norse gods.

The Vikings had perfected the arts of timber construction in shipbuilding and log houses and the stave churches adopted them to create these forceful places of Christian worship, built generally on old Norse sacred sites. Externally they can look like smaller, wooden versions of Thai temples. Graceful and ascending with their shingled roofs like pinecones, they are also heavily solid and earthed. These last of the wooden temples that were once spread throughout Europe are so called because of the stafr or load bearing posts that in so virile a way embody the verticality of the theology.

The doorway into a Norwegian stave church is narrow. Like everything in these self-confident, self-contained material symbols of spiritual experience this has a point. It seems to reminds you that entering the presence of God means passing through a portal of consciousness. We enter the sacred alone and with a minimum of baggage. The narrowness is single-mindedness. Whatever worship is conducted on the other side of this entrance is not the light stuff of a Sunday routine but an encounter that brings psyche and cosmos closer.

It is hard not to stop half way through and become absorbed into the elaborate carving all round the portal, that is the portal, and try to decipher its meaning or story. After a while you trace the dragons heads and tails as they curl round each other in a frenzy of snarling, sneering battle. Disturbingly, it seems not just a conventional illustration of the duel of good and evil but a deeper insight into the self-destructiveness of evil. These dark forces that separate us from the holy and the good spend themselves at the entrance to the very place they came to destroy. But to pass through them is unsettlingly ambiguous. The battle is won but not over.

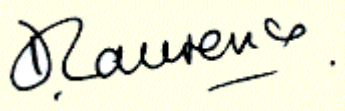
Inside the church you are in the midst of a deep but peaceful forest, a human dwelling in the heart of nature. Your eyes accommodate in the darkness and you become a citizen of this

new world that first envelops your sense of smell. Wood, tar, maybe the wool clothes of generations lost and a trace of incense. In the late 12th century it was originally a simple square room with a chancel for the altar but the cruciform extension has not diminished its intimacy and immediacy. Near the soapstone font is a rosy-cheeked Madonna and child imposing a gentler authority. The Crucifix over the altar is one of the great works of medieval art in Norway. The feet and toes of Jesus are spread out in graphic pain but the face has already found peace.

According to an undoubtedly true legend the Black Death had depopulated the valley in the 14th century. The forest encroached and the church was forgotten. Two hundred years later a hunter shot an arrow and missed. As it penetrated the forest he heard a metallic ring and discovered the church bell. Believing the church belonged to a huldra or forest spirit he threw metal over it and thus reclaimed it for human use. Inside he found a bear hibernating in front of the altar, killed it and the skin is still hanging in the sacristy, too small, however, to be my vestment for mass as I had hoped on first hearing the story.

As several stave churches have legends of animals being killed within them I am suspicious of this one. Maybe some old Norse gods slipped through the portal of the writhing dragons and indulged a little in the old-fashioned kind of sacrifice. As we know today, people can be very nostalgic for old-time religion. At midsummer the people of Valdres and Adal used to come for several days of revelry (as Vikings, this meant drinking and fighting). The church atmosphere restrained but did not extinguish this custom until, sadly, in the late 19th century a firmer pastor banned it.

We were a very different congregation. New secular legends have replaced the old myths. Old certainties have met other certainties. But something - that the stave church embraces - is timeless. We broke bread and meditated after communion. When we went outside again the night was still bright



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