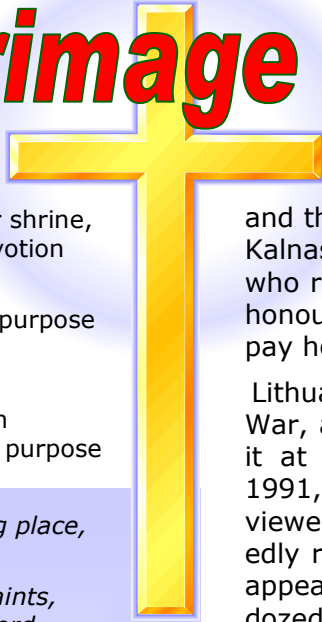


Power, Promise and Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage:

1. A journey to a sacred place or shrine, as an act of religious devotion
2. A long journey or search, especially one of exalted purpose or moral significance
3. Any long journey, especially one undertaken as a quest or for a votive purpose



*How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord Almighty!*

*My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the Lord.*

My heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.

*Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young*

*--- a place near Your altar, O Lord Almighty,
my King and my God.*

*Blessed are those who dwell in Your house;
they are ever praising You.*

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
who have set their hearts on pilgrimage.*

*As they pass through the Valley of Baca,
they make it a place of springs;*

The autumn rains also cover it with pools.

*They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.*

- Psalm 84:1-7

Lithuania is probably not the first country one thinks of in terms of a vacation, or even a 'pilgrimage'. Yet for hundreds of people a year, it holds a special significance, found on a hill located 12 kilometres north of the small industrial city of Siauliai (pronounced 'Shoo-lay'), otherwise known as Kryziu Kalnas, the "Hill of the Crosses".

The origin of the hill is a little sketchy. Siauliai was founded in 1236 AD, and occupied by Teutonic Knights during the 14th century. Somewhere between that time and the early 1800s a tradition began of placing crosses at Kryziu Kalnas. In 1831 a rebellion took place against the tsarist regime who ruled them. Relatives of victims placed crosses on the hill to honour their loved ones who had died, because they could not pay homage any other way.

Lithuania was captured by the Germans during the Second World War, and suffered heavy damage when Soviet Russia recaptured it at war's end. From 1944 until Lithuania's independence in 1991, Siauliai was a part of communist USSR. The Soviets viewed Kryziu Kalnas as an affront to communism, and repeatedly removed all the crosses from the site, only to find more reappearing as fast as they were removed. Three times they bulldozed the site (1961, 1973, 1975), but the hill kept returning, along with more and more crosses. Burning crosses and covering the area with sewage didn't even stop it, as local inhabitants would still somehow be able to slip past the KGB guards and replace them all. Even flooding the hill in the late 1970s could not demolish it. In less than 24 hours, crosses reappeared again.

Enthusiasts have counted the crosses at different times. In 1902 155 crosses were counted. When the Soviets first destroyed the hill in 1961, there were 5000. In the 1975 destruction, there were 6200. Since Lithuania's independence, more than 55,000 crosses have been counted on the hill, some more than four metres high.

Every person who visits the site leaves a cross, many with life stories and inspirational quotes carved into them. Some crosses are placed in honour of loved ones. While some crosses are intricately carved, some are simply made from stones or branches found at the site.

Everyone, whether Christian or not, finds the atmosphere of the place compelling, affecting, and a little overwhelming. One blogger wrote "It is, in fact, a couple of modest mounds festooned with crosses, but is nonetheless more impressive than any postcard or guidebook (this one included) could hope to convey... Once you start meandering along the little paths that weave all over the hill... you become lost in a strange depth... Each cross has a story to tell, and there is something about being in among all those stories, all those hopes and dreams, and all that clutter of compassion and concern, that is both bewildering and moving. No one owns the Hill of Crosses. There are no tickets to buy or opening hours, and the 'gift shop' consists of people who sell things, including crosses that you can buy and then instantly deposit on the hill yourself... It is just kind of there, and has been for a very long time."*

The story of Kryziu Kalnas can be paralleled in scripture, in Psalm 84. Here the author speaks of pilgrimage, of yearning for



Map of Lithuania is reprinted courtesy of theodora.com

* For the entire blog, go to <http://www.inyourpocket.com/Lithuania/siauliai/feature/55808-hill-of-crosses.html>



the courts of the Lord. There is compelling evidence that the author of the Psalm, though not named, is King David himself. First, because the opening parallels Psalm 63, which we know for certain is a Psalm of David. Second, because the opening statement of the psalm, "How lovely is your **dwelling place**" literally translated from Hebrew, should render "tents" or "tabernacle", which places the writing of the psalm prior to the building of Solomon's temple. Third, because verses 5-7 describes the yearly Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the psalmist must be writing at a time when the tabernacle was located in Jerusalem, with the ark of the covenant resting there (see 2 Samuel 6). Fourth, because the author's lament tells us that he is barred from going to Jerusalem to worship himself... he even envies the swallows who can nest near the Lord's altar, when he himself can't (verse 3).

There is one time in David's life when he could not go to Jerusalem to worship God at Passover, and that was during his time of exile on account of his son Absalom's coup against his throne (2nd Samuel 15). In the Psalm David sees in his mind the travelers passing through the dry desert-like Valley of Baca (in Hebrew, 'Baca' means 'weeping') on their way to Jerusalem, and it becomes a metaphor for his current situation. In verse seven, the Hebrew word for 'strength' can also be translated 'company', 'force', 'valor', 'riches', 'resource', even 'army'. In the literal picture, travelers on their way to Jerusalem for Passover would have had a few days' journey, and would have to stop and camp overnight at various places, where they would rest and rejuvenate after the long day's travel, and perhaps obtain more food supplies and whatever other resources they might need for the journey.

But through David's lament, he is claiming a promise for himself and every Christian in Christ: That no matter what the opposition, no matter what "valleys of Baca" we might have in our lives, there is a promise from God to provide strength and valor and riches and company and resources to enable us on our

earthly pilgrimage, as we head towards our final destination, our heavenly 'Zion'. Furthermore, God has promised that the desert valleys of our life will become a 'place of springs,' that what was thought to be tragedy ultimately becomes a place of blessing, and a means of bringing glory to God.

The country of Lithuania knows this first hand. Through horrendous war, occupation and opposition, the Hill of Crosses endures as a testimony of their faith, courage, hope and spirit. Throughout their yearning for freedom, and freedom of worship, the Hill of Crosses was a strength for them, an act of defiance against earthly odds and Satanic oppression. And just as God promised in His Psalm, the very place that was the centre of weeping and mourning, is now a place of hope, inspiration and abundance in a land that is finally and truly free.

The Hill of Crosses actually exists in the centre of a farm field, in fertile soil. Like a mighty sea in what was once wasteland, it stands today as a testimony of faith for the thousands who pilgrimage to it: That the power of the Cross in the life of a believer can never be defeated. Not 2000 years ago, not today, not ever.

Kim Garreffa would like to thank Major Joanne Binner for being the source of inspiration for this article.



Photo by Dezidor, courtesy of wikimedia.org