



The Church in the Modern World

The Fate of Place

14 May 2017

The Right Reverend Dr John Inge
Bishop of Worcester

Genesis 2: 4–9 Revelation 2: 1–5

If I were to ask you where you came from, I wonder what you would say? When people ask me the question it tends to throw me into confusion. I say that I was born in Kent where my father's family had lived for generations and spent the first thirteen years of my life there but that since then I've lived all over the place: Oxford, Durham, London, Sussex, Tyneside, Yorkshire, Cambridgeshire and now Worcester.

I'm typical of very many people in our society in that I don't really have roots. My situation is characteristic of a culture which lacks what has been referred to by one social geographer as 'place identity'. She observes that in our culture we have de-emphasised place and are more keen to move than to root. 'The skyscrapers, airports, freeways and other stereotypical components of modern landscapes,' she asks, 'are they not the sacred symbols of a civilisation that has deified reach and derided home?'

Those of us who have moved for employment or education are the fortunate ones. Elie Weisel described the twentieth century as 'the century of the refugee'. The first two decades of the twenty-first have been worse, if anything, to devastating effect as we are reminded with depressing frequency in the media.

The French philosopher Michel Foucault stated that 'the anxiety of our era has to do fundamentally with place'. It's not just to do with lack of 'home'. It's to do with destination too. People do not generally, I think, feel that they are on a journey somewhere, literally or metaphorically. They are aimless. When people are not aiming for anywhere, they are no longer pilgrims, people journey with a purpose, but vagabonds, wandering aimlessly without a destination.

Place is important to our humanity but the fact is neglected. Sadly, the Church doesn't generally do well in helping to address the problem. I hear so often the mantra that the Church is about people and not about buildings. The implication is that place is insignificant. That's strange, from a biblical perspective: a cursory glance at the scriptures might lead one to think that geography has a crucial part to play in God's way with the world.

We've been reminded this evening that in the Bible the story of humanity begins in the Garden of Eden, a place. That is the image we are given of paradise as it existed before the fall, Adam and Eve rooted in a most glorious place. That image of paradise resonates, I believe, with our deepest displaced selves – 'the laughter in the garden, echoed ecstasy', as T.S. Eliot puts it.

After the Fall, God relates to his chosen people not anywhere but in the Promised Land. All three were important. Though the emphasis changes in the New Testament it is not true to say that place ceases to be significant. The consummation of all things is represented in the Book of Revelation, as we have been reminded, by the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem, a place.

It is, in fact, very difficult for us to imagine salvation except in terms of place, and the Biblical witness recognises this fact. We need to attend to it in our own spirituality if we are to find that wholeness of life which God yearns to give us.

A little girl sitting behind me at a service a while back said, 'I want to go home.' I felt the same, frankly, but since I was leading it didn't feel free to agree. Salvation is about going home as much as anything: 'There are many rooms in my Father's house,' Jesus tells his disciples, 'if there were not I would have told you. I am going now to prepare a place for you.' Not a nice group of holy people, notice, a place. The Bible is addressed to the central human problem of homelessness and seeks to respond to that agenda. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman, tells us that:

In the Old Testament there is no timeless space, but there is also no spaceless time. There is rather *storied place*, that is a place which has meaning because of the history lodged there. There are stories which have authority because they are located in a place. This means that biblical faith cannot be presented simply as an historical movement indifferent to place which could have happened in one setting as well as another, because it is undeniably fixed in this place with this meaning. And for all its apparent 'spiritualising', the New Testament does not escape this rootage.

The offence, the particularity of place, is intrinsic to the incarnational character of Christian faith. As a result, places matter.

In biblical faith, holy places are associated with divine disclosure: 'Surely the Lord is in this place; and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven,' says Jacob.

Such encounters happen continually in the Christian tradition. The most famous include the Emperor Constantine at the Milvian Bridge outside Rome, St Francis in the little Church of St Damiano outside Assisi. They changed history. More locally, I think of Ely Cathedral where I ministered for several years, the holiness of which is associated with that of St Etheldreda who went there in the late seventh century. Her story became part of the story of the place. Transparently holy lives lived in such places enable them to become 'a place where prayer has been valid', in T.S. Eliot's phrase. Elsewhere Eliot says:

For wherever a saint has dwelt, wherever a martyr has given his blood for the
blood of Christ,
There is holy ground, and the sanctity shall not depart from it
Though armies trample over it, though sightseers come with guide books
looking over it...

Our attitude to holy places should be a bit like our attitude to Sundays. It's not that Sundays and churches are nearer to God or more excellent: they are fractions, set apart to represent the truth that all time and space are God's. The part is consecrated, not instead of the whole, but on behalf of the whole. Places where 'prayer has been valid' can help us to be aware of God in all places, for all time and all place belongs to God and nothing is 'secular'. The skyline of our country is replete with towers and spires which can witness to this and to the fact that this world is not a system closed to itself. In this sense places can take on sacramental significance. The language of sacrament bids us see through. As George Herbert puts it:

A man that looks on glass
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heaven espy.

Through is the sacramental preposition. We come to God only through Jesus Christ, the ultimate sacrament in whom we see God. If we can see 'through' we shall become aware that 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God'. Someone once asked William Blake whether, when he saw the sun setting, he did not see a ball of fire about the same size as a golden guinea. 'Oh no,' he replied. 'Oh no. I see a multitude of the heavenly host crying Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.'

Place and a sense of place are intrinsic to biblical faith, to a Christian understanding of things and to any spirituality that might flow from it. At the heart of our faith lies a deep appreciation of the significance of place to human experience. We have a deep and enriching vision to offer to a society which has lost its bearings as we acknowledge that, as the psalmist puts it, 'the heavens proclaim the glory of God and the earth shows forth his handiwork'.