

St Mary Magdalen's – Dedication Service: 25 October 2020

Dr Bethany Sollereeder

"But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth"

Does place matter?

Over the last 6 months, we've been trying to make the best of a bad job. Trying to convince ourselves that pixelated faces are just as good as three-dimensional ones. Trying to make the best of poor internet connections, online meetings, and having to make our own coffee.

We've gathered virtually, taking another step in the journey that modernity has had us on for centuries, slowly converting place into mere space. If place is where we have belonging, space is simply room we occupy. If place is, as Walter Bruggeman has suggested, space with history and memory, then space is three-dimensional amnesia. If all we do is occupy space, we end up with no past, no roots, and no belonging. We end up isolated with place.

Alan Durning, a researcher for World Watch, was studying the relationship between social and environmental issues, when he found himself speaking to a revered priestess in a remote Philippino tribe. After a day of being guided around the tribal lands, this lady asked him "What is your homeland like?"

He was flustered by her question, unsure of how to answer. For many years he had spent his life flying around the world, with only a homebase in Washington. Nothing so permanent or meaningful as a homeland. Flustered, he stalled. She asked again, and again, he could not answer.

"In America" he finally said, "we have careers, not places." Looking up, he saw deep pity in her eyes.

For Durning, that was a pivotal moment, which inspired him to move back to his home city, to try and recapture the meaning of place.

Christians often have a similar confusion when asked about the spirituality of place. "We don't have places, we have callings" they say. Or, if you are more posh, you might have a "vocation". And rarely do these callings or vocations involve staying in one place—indeed, to be called is usually to be called to another place. And, as Loren Wilkinson points out, this follows a long-established Biblical tradition. Abraham is called from his place to go to Canaan. Jacob leaves that place and goes up to Egypt.

The Israelites, finally returned and settled in the first place, are exiled to a foreign land. The theme of wandering is central.

Central too in Christian spirituality, has been the notion of pilgrimage, and the temporary nature of our stay here on earth. Jesus tells his disciples that he will go to prepare a place for them, not an earthly place, but a heavenly one. Our New Testament passages today seem to emphasise, ironically, the unimportance of place. Jesus tells the Samaritan woman that the traditional places of worship will not endure (no doubt referring to the destruction of the Temple), and that what the Father seeks is those who will worship in spirit and in truth. St. Paul makes a metaphor of the physical church—God's people are the building; we are the temple of God. The real bricks and mortar fade away. And for those of us who grew up on country gospel, rather than sound English hymns, we sang "This World is Not my Home" or, my favourite, "I'll Fly Away". (I'd mention "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" but then you will all think of Rugby, which is not the right mental pathway at all.)

But the yearning to go, that impulse for pilgrimage, and indeed Christ's own command to "go", is only part of the story. The other part, oft forgotten, is the command to stay. The command to the exiles to settle down in exile, plant gardens, and seek the good of the land. The ongoing promise of a place to dwell: of vineyards and fig trees and rootedness. Remember, the biblical stories do not end with everyone triumphantly going to heaven. Rather at the end of the book of Revelation, in the closing pages of the Bible, heaven descends to earth. The Heavenly Jerusalem, it turns out, is the temporary abode, and it is a renewed earth that is the dwelling place of both God and people. To quote Wilkinson once more, "Our pilgrimage through this barren land is ultimately about becoming (in the words of the great text from Isaiah) a "well-watered garden"..."repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings"." It is our text from Chronicles, of Solomon's dedication of the Temple that most loudly proclaims this theme: that our places, our Earth, becomes the dwelling place of God. That cloud of glory which fills the temple is actually just a shadow of the reality that is uncovered in the New Testament: the reality of the Incarnation, where God takes the final step of revealing that earth is the dwelling place of God.

All of our going, all of our doing, all of our calling and vocation, is for this one purpose: to finally dwell with God. And that is what makes this space, this church, from mere space and into place again. It is a place of worship, and place where we enact in ritual

and song and sacrament the dwelling of God in the world. And we do not do this alone. As you will know if you read your parish epistles, we don't know exactly when this church was dedicated. The first stone church here was in 1074, and our current church was dedicated in 1194 by St Hugh of Lincoln. There is deep memory in this place.

In Canada, in most of our churches, we talk about the great cloud of witnesses, of the saints who came before, as almost entirely an abstract concept. Here, we walk past them as we enter. Those who worshipped here through the years are all around us, or, well, at least, what is left of them. I often imagine, as I light the candles before a service of all the people who have stood doing exactly the same thing in exactly the same place, not just for decades, but for centuries. I think of the prayers that have been said, whispered, and those that were not dared to be said aloud. Of wedding bells rung, of funeral masses performed, and OH so many candles lit.

To some degree, I think I'm preaching to the choir yes? I think you all appreciate the memory held in these stones, you all, through your service and your worship, have helped make this space into place.

And then, it was taken away. We were locked out. Forced on an unanticipated pilgrimage. I think it is safe to say that we are the very first group in the whole history of this church, who have ever done a virtual pilgrimage. And it was OK. Our community held: we gathered together, we worshiped together, and we continued to love and serve one another. Some of our community continue to gather virtually, and that is perfectly good.

But, after our wandering, being outside our church for those months, it is good to be back. After all, there is no home like place.
Amen.