

The Importance of Place

Let me commence with a couple of disclaimers. The first is that I won't be talking about Willunga. My appreciation of Willunga and I do indeed appreciate it, remains very much a surface appreciation. I have no real and certainly no deep knowledge of the village and to pretend otherwise would be fruitless for me and frustrating for many of you. Secondly, although we are gathered at Willunga House and this forms the context for the occasion of this lecture, here too, this dwelling, this place, is not (or at least not yet) *my* place. Nevertheless it is my hope that over time both Willunga and Willunga House will begin for me to acquire the characteristics of place. Instead, my intention behind this lecture is to try to provide for you a conceptual map as it is were against which you may test your best and deepest intuitions about the meaning and power of place wherever you may have encountered it.

Place, according to the philosopher Aristotle, has some power. If anything, Aristotle was understating the case. For, according to him, *to be*, to exist at all, is to be in place. And yet, as Cresswell has noted, place 'is not a specialized piece of academic terminology.'¹ It's ordinary, everyday language. It's familiar; something which paradoxically makes it both simple and complicated. In the history of ideas 'the fate of place,' to use the title of Edward Casey's phenomenological study on the subject, has been mixed. For centuries place has been pushed to one side and largely ignored by those who have chosen instead to emphasize space and time, and then more latterly, space-time. But in recent decades place has rightly made a comeback and this, I shall suggest, is only a proper reflection of the way things should be.

Let us begin with what we know best, with that which is closest to us: our language. Cresswell invites us to think about some of the ways place is used in our everyday language.

'Would you like to come around to my place?' This suggests ownership or some kind of connection between a person and a particular location or building. It also suggests a notion of privacy and belonging. 'My place' is not 'your place' – you and I have different places. 'Brisbane is a nice place.' Here 'place' is referring to a city in a common sense kind of way and the fact that it is nice suggests something of the way it looks and what it is like to be there. 'She put me in my place' refers to more of a sense of position in a social hierarchy. 'A place for everything and everything in its place' is another well-

¹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction*, Blackwell Publishing: Sydney, 2004, 1.

known phrase that suggests there are particular orderings of things in the world that have a socio-geographical basis. Place is everywhere.²

Indeed place *is* everywhere, so much so that it is impossible to be essentially or fundamentally unplaced. Casey asks, ‘Can you imagine what it would be like if there were no places in the world? None whatsoever! An utter placeless void!’³ This would be incomprehensible to us.

Whatever is true for space and time, this much is true for place: we are immersed in it and could not do without it. To be at all—to exist in any way—is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. Nothing we do is unplaced. How could it be otherwise?⁴

Thus stated, place appears inescapable. We are always in a place, of some sort, and somewhere. And yet, curiously, no less threatening than the *horror vacui* feared by Pascal and his contemporaries, is our fear that we might ourselves be ‘unplaced.’ To say, as some do, ‘I have no place to go’ is ‘to admit to a desperate circumstance.’⁵ Indeed it is to admit to something both desperate and meaningful, for it does *really* create anxiety for us. How do we align these two statements: firstly, that we are never without place and secondly that we can be afflicted by the prospect of having no-place. Here it is necessary to provide a preliminary definition of place and its relationship to space.

Imagine that you’ve just purchased a new house. You arrive and walk through your house, which is now yours but is still yet to become your place. As you walk through the rooms you begin to notice things. You notice hooks for hanging where you wouldn’t have chosen to put them and you make a mental notice to change their position in the coming days. You notice smells from the various rooms as you walk through your house; for the most part the odours are neither pleasant nor unpleasant – you just notice them, and what’s more you notice that you notice them. You see the

² Cresswell, *Place*, 1-2.

³ Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1993, ix.

⁴ Edward Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, University of California Press: London, 1998, ix.

⁵ Casey, *Place*, xii.

slight stain on the carpet and idly wonder how it got there and how long it has been there. These are the ‘hauntings of a past habitation.’⁶ This anonymous space, new to you, has a history; but to this history you are and will remain a spectator. What you can infer is that this space—your house—has meant something to other people. So, what do you do? Well, you take a deep breath and you ‘settle in.’ Rolling up your sleeves, you move those hooks; you bring in your furniture and arrange it in the way that seems best to you; you hang some paintings; and so on. And in such wise space is slowly turned into place—your place.

It won’t have escaped your notice that I’m operating with two basic understandings of place here. There is, firstly, what we may call an ontology of place. This is the notion that, as Aristotle famously remarked, ‘to be is to be in [a] place.’ The second is an existential understanding of place, where place is very much connected to human meaning and self-understanding. It is this second understanding that I will be developing here.

For each of us there are right places and there are wrong places. There are places in which we feel comfortable and at home, while equally there are other places that grate on our very being. What is it about *place* that makes it so ingredient to our self-understanding and sense of being-in-the-world?

The mystic Simone Weil spoke of the importance of ‘rootage’. In her book *The Need for Roots* she wrote,

To be rooted is perhaps the most important need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his (or her) real, active, and natural participation in the life of a community, which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations of the future. This participation is a natural one, in the sense that it is naturally brought about by place...⁷

Life in the contemporary Western world is one that is beset by a quest for roots, as we all, I think, can testify. The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann has suggested that ‘it is rootlessness and not meaninglessness’ with which we find ourselves confronted today.⁸ In this observation he is supported by the claims of the sociologist,

⁶ Cresswell, *Place*, 2.

⁷ Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, New York: G P Putnam’s Sons, 1952, 43.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002, .

Zygmunt Bauman who likens the modern self to a vagabond: ‘a pilgrim without a destination; a nomad without an itinerary.’⁹ Our journey through the world and its places becomes one of ‘wandering’ or, as theologian Mark C. Taylor has suggested, ‘sauntering’ a *sans terre* ... Nowhere a homeland ... no place to lay one’s head ... rolling this way and that like someone who has lost his way ... who doesn’t know where he comes from or where he is going ...’¹⁰ Of course, this metaphysical homelessness is also freedom—of a sort. Paradoxically a modern sense of metaphysical homelessness is both ‘a consequence of modern rootlessness, but also in some sense, the purest expression of a peculiarly modern ideal: the aspiration to absolute, unencumbered freedom, the desire to do and to be whatever we want whenever we want.’¹¹

Scooting across and through places, we convince ourselves that we have no time to *dwell*. Many of us spend ever-increasing amounts of time in liminal ‘non-places’ (airports, hotels, office buildings, shopping malls and highways) that gradually ‘erode not only our sense of belonging, but our sense of what it would *mean* to belong,’ as Douglas Christie has remarked in his book, *The Blue Sapphire of the Mind: Notes for a Contemplative Ecology*. Twenty years ago Marc Augé argued that the contemporary world was multiplying ‘non-places.’ Among these he included

Spaces of circulation (freeways, airways), consumption (department stores, supermarkets), and communication (telephones, faxes, television, cable networks [the Web and social media]) are taking up more room all over the earth today. They are spaces where people coexist or cohabit without living together.¹²

Scooting through, along or over places we have, we think, no time to dwell. Many years before the situation had evolved to its present point, the philosopher Martin Heidegger had noted that

All distances in time and space are shrinking. [We] now reach overnight, by plane, places which took formerly weeks and months of travel. [We] now

⁹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1993, 240.

¹⁰ Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984, 150.

¹¹ Adam Glover, ‘Answering Dystopia: Christianity, Modernity and the Promise of Place,’ *Perspective in Religious Studies*, 25.

¹² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, London and New York: Verso, 1999, 110.

receive instant information ... of events which we formerly learned about only years later, if at all. We put the greatest distances behind ourselves. Yet the frantic abolition of all distances brings no nearness. ... [But] despite all conquest of distances the nearness of things remains absent.¹³

Such a vision readily brings to mind discussions surrounding the pros and cons of social media; the disturbing ingressions of the public into the private sphere and vice versa; the peculiar sense of isolation that seems increasingly to bedevil more people—often the young—who have hundreds if not thousands of friends on social media, but no sense of community or belonging. There are increasing moves away from the particularity of place to its homogenization whereby every place is seen as somehow the same: there's really very little difference between Macdonald's in West Terrace and Macdonald's around the corner from Wagnergasse in Jena. Such, we might say, are some of the negative arguments for the importance of place to humanity. What are the positive arguments?

As I alluded to earlier, Edward Casey has charted the history of place in Western Thought, noting its eclipse and gradual reawakening throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, however in many traditional cultures and societies place has always been prominent. So, for example, Keith Basso recounts a conversation with Dudley Patterson, a member of the Apache people. Basso asks him, 'What is wisdom?' He receives the reply, 'It's in these places. Wisdom sits in places.' Yes, says Basso, but *what* is wisdom? In response to this further prodding Patterson replies

Wisdom sits in places. It's like water that never dries up. You need to drink water to stay alive, don't you? Well, you also need to drink from places. You must remember everything about them. You must learn their names. You must remember what happened at them long ago. You must think about it and keep on thinking about it. Then your mind will become smoother and smoother. Then you will see danger before it happens. You will walk a long way and live a long time. You will be wise. People will respect you.¹⁴

Asked whether he has understood the answer, Basso confesses ruefully that he has not. Indeed his response is unsurprising—at least to me—because in the Western community at large the secrets and wisdom of the landscape – known and preserved by our ancestors, from the Indigenous peoples of this land, to the North American

¹³ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

¹⁴ Keith Basso, 'Wisdom Sits in Places,' in Steven Feld and Keith Basso eds., *Senses of Place*, Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996, 70.

Indians to the Christian monks in the deserts and mountains of Egypt – are becoming increasingly unavailable and inaccessible to us. ‘The sacred landscapes of old appear to us as mute, says Nick Trakakis, for they fail to provide as they once may have a window into another world.’¹⁵ But has Trakakis got this right? Don’t these places preserve a trace of shall we call it, transcendence? Is this not the allure that draws thousands each year to view—but not to dwell in—the harsh aridity of the Australian outback? Is this a hankering for the authenticity of place even if it simply be the resting in your place: a place which is not truly mine? Is it an insistent whisper that you and I should learn for ourselves how to dwell in places?

To talk of ‘windows into another world’ is to raise a question about the sacrality or holiness of place. Is place, or better, are certain places, intrinsically holy? The intrinsic holiness of places has a long history in pagan religion as the Roman notion of *genius loci* (spirit of place) makes clear. D H Lawrence observed that

Every continent has its own great spirit of place ... Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.¹⁶

In ancient times, outside the house, to picture the character of a place, the Romans imagined a spirit who owned it, the *genius loci*. In the ancient world, when people grasped qualities, functions or principles of activity, they often represented these intangible realities in a concrete image. The *genius loci*, which first appeared in Italy as a snake and later in human form, stood for the independent reality of the place. Above all, it symbolized the place’s generative energy, and it pictured a specific personal, spiritual presence who animated and protected a place. On the deepest level, the image of a guardian spirit provided a way of representing the energy, definition, unifying principle and continuity of a place.

Christian theology, while it has been wary of embracing a *genius loci* because it would prefer instead to speak of a sacramentality of place—a position to which I shall turn later—has nevertheless found it sufficiently alluring not to dismiss the idea entirely. For example, Philip Sheldrake reminds us that

¹⁵ Nick Trakakis, ‘Deus Loci: The Place of God and the God of Place in Philosophy and Theology,’ *Sophia* (2013) 52:315-333, here 318.

¹⁶ D H Lawrence, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, New York: Viking Press, 1961, 5.

Celtic Christians had – and still have – a strong sense of being on ‘edges’ or ‘boundary places’ between the material world and the other world. The natural landscape was both a concrete reality where people lived and, at the same time, a doorway into another, spiritual world.¹⁷

From a similar perspective George MacLeod, founder of the modern Iona Community spoke of the Isle of Iona as ‘a thin place’ where the membrane between the material and the spiritual was very permeable. The world is replete with such ‘thin places.’ Nonetheless it leaves us with a question. Is this the result of an intrinsic *genius loci* or spirit of place? Or does it have more to do with a sense of divine disclosure through the events that have unfolded in that place over time? On balance, Christian theology has plumped for the second answer, whereas popular piety and folk spirituality have often opted for the first.

Edward Relph, one of the trail blazers in the recovery of place, writing in 1976 understood the *genius loci* as an attribute of identity with respect to a particular place. He wrote

The spirit of a place involves topography and appearance, economic functions and social activities, and particular significance deriving from past events and present situations—but it differs from the simple summation of these. Spirit of place can persist in spite of profound changes in the basic components of identity ... Distinctiveness persists despite change. Italy and Switzerland, Paris and London have retained their respective identities through many social, cultural and technological revolutions. The spirit of place that is retained through changes is subtle and nebulous, and not easily analysed ... Yet at the same time it is naively obvious in our experience of places for it constitutes the very individuality and uniqueness of places.¹⁸

But do we—and by ‘we’ I mean those of us who are Christians—make too much of place? How important should place be for those who are followers of Him who ‘had nowhere to lay his head’; who said to the Samaritan woman, ‘I tell you, the time is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will they worship, but rather they shall worship in spirit and in truth’; whose texts number among their claims that ‘here we have no abiding city’. And even if, as Brueggemann shows, the Old Testament is replete with references to the land and the importance of place both for

¹⁷ Philip Sheldrake, *Living Between Worlds: Place and Journey in Celtic Spirituality*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1995, 7.

¹⁸ Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, London: Pion Ltd., 1976, 48-9.

worshipping and dwelling. And even if signal events such as Exodus and Exile have profound dislocating consequences (sometimes positive and sometimes not) for Yahweh's people, so that we cannot discount the importance of place and rootedness for the people of Israel. May we not say, and with some justification, that the importance of place has been relativized in the light of the New Testament?

W D Davies, who conducted an investigation of the importance of the themes of land and place in the New Testament concluded that the Gospel demanded a breaking out of its 'territorial chrysalis.' He argued that while there is a

concern with the realities of the land, Jerusalem and the temple ... these are ultimately transcended in Christ so that in sum, for the holiness of place, Christianity has fundamentally, though not consistently, substituted the holiness of person: it has Christified holy space.¹⁹

The sacred geography of Israel is not simply left behind, but continues to serve Christians both as a source of images and of metaphors which provide the stage upon which the Christian drama is enacted.²⁰ And although this is true, still much more can be said about place from the perspective of a religion based upon the Incarnation as is manifestly the case with Christianity.

In the claim 'the Word became flesh' the eternal breaks into the temporal and the boundless being of divinity breaks into the spatial existence of humanity and while the incarnation does not mean that God is limited by space and time, it asserts the reality of space and time for God in the actuality of God's relations with us. True, in the New Testament something does change with respect to place: the incarnation entails a movement away from a concentration upon the Holy Land and Jerusalem but at the same time it initiates an unprecedented celebration of materiality and therefore of place in God's relations with humanity, for 'to be is to be in a place.'

Brueggemann observes that in the Old Testament there are what he calls 'storied places'. These are *places* that have meaning because of the history that is lodged there. Similarly there are *stories* which have authority because they are located in a place. It is a twofold movement: the story gives meaning to the place and the place gives meaning to the story.

¹⁹ John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place*, 50, citing W D Davies.

²⁰ F C Bauerschmidt, 'Walking in the Pilgrim City,' *New Blackfriars*, 1996, Issue 77, 507.

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.²¹

Yahweh is disclosed, not just anywhere, but on the slopes of Mt. Sinai, at Bethel and Shiloh, at the Temple in Jerusalem. The God of Old and New Testaments is one who journeys or tabernacles with God’s people, always made known in particular locales. When Paul, who is seemingly uninterested in ‘place’ celebrates the “scandal of the gospel”, this is a reality geographically grounded in the person of Jesus, a crucified Jew from Nazareth (can anything good come out of Nazareth!!), of all places. The offence, the particularity of place, is part of the scandal of particularity—even if we’re not inclined to notice it very often. And let us not forget, as someone once pointed out, that the Bible begins with a Garden and ends with a City. Place is never entirely absent.

Earlier I referred to the notion of the *genius loci* and the fact that Christian theology has had an uneasy on-again, off-again relationship with it. The uneasiness is caused by a question of whether places bear an intrinsic holiness or whether instead the holiness is a result of the events and disclosures that happen in a particular place. This second approach is sometimes called sacramental. It proceeds on the assumption that nature and ‘the heavens are telling the glory of God.’ John V Taylor wondered what churches might be like if

it could become normal for people to know that they would be helped to reflect upon the experience [insights or consolations that point to the reality of God]; where they could learn that, just as they have known the approach of God in a strength of a tree or the swelling of a tide of music, others have known it in a bush lapped in flame or the action of a potter at the wheel; where they could find that the church itself was living and growing by response to such experiences; then, the Christian community might present a less mummified face towards the world.²²

These common encounters provoke the question: Has God made the world so that some places naturally evoke a sense of the divine presence? One is tempted to answer

²¹ Brueggemann, *The Land*, 187.

²² John V Taylor ‘Murder in the Cathedral’

Yes, but I want to resist that temptation. Such a question requires not the systematic theologian but rather the poet's or the mystic's eye, sensitive to the extraordinary richness of creation and the cunning of grace in history to continue to sustain a vision of the glory of the world as it is. Not only do poets make good theologians, they also, as someone remarked, make good topographers.

I close with one short story and one small remnant of poetry both pertinent to place and the sacred.

When he was an old man, the philosopher Martin Heidegger, a lapsed Catholic, used to go walking through the forest. One day he was walking with a friend and they came across a Catholic church—as one often does in Southern Germany—and much to his friend's surprise Heidegger walked into the church, and then, to his astonishment, proceeded to dip his finger in holy water and make the sign of the cross. 'But Martin!' admonished his friend, 'you don't believe in God.' 'No,' replied Heidegger, 'But I do believe in history.' People, place and the sacred, this triad helps us make sense of our deep intuition that place, or at least some places, are different; that they disclose to us something of the transcendent.

And finally, a remnant from T S Eliot that gestures toward the enduring potency of holy or sacred places:

For the blood of Thy martyrs and saints
Shall enrich the earth, shall create holy places.
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 ... T S Eliot

That, I respectfully suggest, applies not simply to cathedrals but to the whole world, for was it not a Reformer who spoke of the world as the *theatrum gloriae Dei*.