

Much of the course of my life has, I think, been dictated more by chance than by choice. A throwaway remark by a fellow student in a sixth form RE lesson led, at the age of 17, to my rediscovering my Christian faith. Not long after, I arrived here at King's as a Maths undergraduate; choosing it simply because, when my teacher ran through a list of colleges to which I might apply, it was the first one whose name I recognised. A few years later, studying for the priesthood in Birmingham, one of the tutors, a Methodist, was having a friendly dig at the Church of England, and those of us training for its ministry. "The definition of an Anglican", he said, "Is somebody who wants there to be lots of churches, with plenty of services going on in them, none of which he or she feels any obligation to attend."

The remark stung and stuck. I've been fascinated by the phenomenon of religious belonging among people who don't go to church very often ever since. As a vicar I confronted it week by week as I arranged baptisms, weddings and funerals, and as we prepared and delivered the big occasions such as Christmas, Easter, Harvest and Mothering Sunday, which drew some of those most infrequent churchgoers through our doors. I've become increasingly convinced that for Anglicans at least, and probably many other religious adherents too, our belonging has four basic components. We sustain and grow a sense of belonging with God and with our faith tradition through a combination that may differ from person to person, but where most of the basic elements are present to some degree.

Firstly, we participate in regular activities, such as Sunday or midweek services, bible study groups and committee meetings. Secondly, we attend one off events, for example the Carol Service, a family baptism, or the church Summer Fair. Thirdly, we have key people in our lives who somehow convey a sense of our religious identity to us. It may be the vicar, the leader of the church youth group, or a family member. And finally, we have religious feelings and associations with specific places; such as a church building, or the graveyard where our ancestors lie.

All four of these are strongly rooted in both Old and New Testaments, and in the polity of the Church of England from the Reformation on. My concern is that, especially in recent times, we have focussed our attentions and revised our structures to favour just one of them. We've made participation in regular church activities the only thing that counts, when, as my Methodist tutor said all those years ago, it's one thing Anglicans are not very good at. Now there is of course something to be said for any organisation paying attention to the things it needs to improve; whether it's a car manufacturer whose vehicles have a reputation for poor brakes or a University that fails to attract students from a wide enough demographic. But it is a well-researched and well-evidenced fact that successful organisations spend the majority of their effort on doing the things they do well; and trying to do them even better. I'm convinced that the church, both for the sake of its own flourishing, and for the flourishing of the lives of its members, however loosely defined that term may be, needs to address all four through its mission.

At the same time I'm also convinced that understanding how people belong, not just religiously but more generally, and how that belonging is often restricted or denied in contemporary society, is vital to the church's commitment to engaging in the public square for the wellbeing of all. As my great predecessor as Bishop of Manchester, William Temple, one of the key architects of the post-war Welfare State famously put it, "The Church is the only institution that exists to serve those who are not its members". For most of the last thirty years I have been actively involved in the field of Social Housing, seeking to build and sustain homes and neighbourhoods where people can feel that they

belong, and can experience that belonging as something that enhances their lives. As I've done so. I have found that I have relied more and more heavily on the theology of belonging that I was exploring originally simply to help the church focus on its evangelistic work better.

But before I turn to that, there is one further throwaway remark that proved life changing for me. It was made by Michael Till, then Dean of this chapel, when we were discussing my proposed move from researching in Pure Mathematics to studying Theology. "David", he said, "One day the Church will find a use for your mathematical gifts". I took him at his word, and in consequence the academic papers I've published, to test and explore my understanding of belonging, are rather heavy in statistical analysis. (Though there will be a book out in a few months' time that presents the arguments in a more accessible style.) What I've found is that, even for the most frequent of churchgoers, one off events, personal relationships and special places make a significant contribution to their religious identity and belonging. So what I want to do now is to offer a few comments specifically about the place dimension of belonging; firstly its theological grounding, then in terms of how it informs pastoral and mission engagements, and finally what belonging through place means for how we engage with social policy around housing and communities.

Theology of Place

The importance of the land in ancient Israel has been explored in detail by Walter Brueggemann. He writes of the Old Testament as being "not all about deeds, but concerned with place, specific real estate that was invested with powerful promises." And he describes the "dialectic in Israel's fortunes between landlessness (wilderness, exile) and landedness, the latter either as possession of the land, as anticipation of the land or as grief about loss of the land."

Within that and even beyond that territory, particular places are hallowed as holy, often as being sites where one of the ancient leaders of the nation had a particular encounter with God, for example Moses on My Sinai. Above all other places Jerusalem's especial significance pervades the Jewish scriptures. Here is the temple, where God's presence dwells, and where the people must come to celebrate the great feasts of the calendar.

Beyond places sacred to all, the Old Testament also gives due weight to the special relationship between a person or family and the particular place where they live. The Jubilee laws of Leviticus 25 cover the purchase and sale of domestic properties, distinguishing carefully between homes in walled towns and those in villages or open countryside. The principle aim of the laws is to enable people to retain or regain their ownership of and belonging with specific lands and buildings. There are even special rules regarding property held by Levites; probably the oldest piece of clergy housing legislation in existence.

Admittedly, place features less centrally in the New Testament. However, the early church soon begins to hallow particular locations, not least the sites of martyrdoms. And of course, the eschatological vision of the heavenly Jerusalem in The Revelation of St John draws Christians to identify themselves with a future place.

In many communities today, the church and churchyard remain the most significant places in terms of contributing to belonging. As almost invariably the oldest, or among the oldest, buildings in the area, one of their functions is to stand as a symbol of permanence amidst a society of change. That

permanence looks backwards in providing a sense of belonging to the heritage of the community – and makes the church the natural location for memorials to significant persons, institutions or events. But it looks forwards too. For a couple seeking to signal a sense of permanence when making their marriage vows to each other, the setting of a building that has itself stood the test of generations, provides a very powerful symbol.

The parish church is often the visual symbol of the identity of the community, very often it will feature on the community website and local memorabilia. Leave it unlocked and individuals never seen present during the hours of worship will use the church as somewhere holy to come and be quiet whilst they undertake their own spiritual journey, one that does not recognise a need for liturgies, doctrine or ministers. Outside the church walls, the churchyard affirms the belonging both of those who lie beneath its surface and of the community who remember them. Indeed the expectation that it will be there in future, to receive one's own remains, is something that offers belonging to the living.

The day of my enthronement as Bishop of Manchester began for me in the churchyard where my grandparents are buried. Alone, I moved round the side of the church to the place where my parents' ashes are interred. Then, joining a small congregation inside the building, I affirmed the vows made on my behalf by my godparents at the font where I was baptised as a baby and then received Holy Communion at the place where my ancestors have knelt to do so for over a century. Only then did I feel ready to travel, on foot and by tram, to the waiting Cathedral.

Places of Challenge and Mission

Understanding the theological importance of places is a very valuable help in engaging with some of the challenges and opportunities facing us.

It answers the questions as to why it is that country dwellers who have become quite accustomed to having to travel outside of their village to access shops, employment, leisure, medical services, schooling and for almost every other social engagement, balk at travelling a mile down the road to join the church in the next village with whom they have shared a vicar for the last twenty years. It explains why a number of inner city areas congregations contain a high proportion of worshippers who do not live in the parish and are not attracted to take any part in serving its needs during the week, but who attend worship there because that is the area their family came from before they became wealthy enough to move out. Such churches are often burdened by the building having been constructed to accommodate the inhabitants of tightly packed Victorian industrial slums that have long been replaced by much lower density housing serving a multifaith community. When they no longer have either a congregation able to maintain them, or a strong connection that inspires the wider community to step in to help, and closure becomes inevitable, a sizable proportion of the final congregation may simply cease to go to church.

Being sensitive to the role of place doesn't turn difficult decisions about when to close a church into easy ones, nor does it make the impossible feasible, but it does allow for better informed decisions, and for better pastoral and spiritual care.

At Manchester Cathedral we have a deliberate policy of keeping the building open all day and free to enter. In addition to having volunteers present throughout opening hours to welcome all comers, we

try to offer its space for art exhibitions, musical concerts of all types, meetings to discuss hot political topics, awards ceremonies and celebration dinners. My vision is of the cathedral as the first place to which the people of the city come to engage with what is most important in their lives, whether that is overtly recognised as spiritual or religious, or not. I know that people who have gained a sense of it being theirs through attending one of these functions are more likely to return to it in future with a more overtly religious intention. I'm also sure that the very transcendence of the building draws attention upwards, away from simply our mortal actions and activities, towards the sense of something far greater that commands our allegiance and even our worship. Every stone is a sermon for those who draw close enough to hear it. Letting those voices be heard is mission.

Place and Housing Policy

Finally, a few words on place and Housing Policy. For me, the imperative for Christians to engage in questions of Housing emerges from the answer to a question about belonging. What are the things that you and I must have, by way of our Housing, if we are to be able to feel that we truly belong?

Some of the answer lies in the building itself, and the ways in which we are allowed, or not allowed, to inhabit it. I don't think we can expect anyone to achieve much sense of belonging in a place where they cannot safely store their possessions, keep out unwanted visitors, share their space with their chosen household, and invite guests. Nor can a place be home if at any moment we may be thrown out of it without grave cause, or if it does not contain the basic necessities for washing, preparing and eating food, and resting. A home has to be somewhere that we can perform the normal functions of life in safety and security. Where such factors are absent, there is often a role for the church in helping create or sustain belonging through other means. I've noticed how churches providing single night winter accommodation (usually on a rota with other churches in the area) take seriously the nature of the welcome they offer. Respectful conversation and the sharing of meals can mitigate some of the alienating dimensions of the accommodation itself.

But the requirements for belonging do not stop at the front door or garden gate. Any home is part of a neighbourhood within which we access other services and from which we venture out further afield. To fully belong, we need to be able to get to our places of work, leisure and education without undue delay or expense. We need to be able to buy basic goods. We need to have opportunities to meet and socialise with others, so that we can build up the network of belonging through relationships that will get us through difficult times. We need to feel safe outside the house as well as within its walls. I need to belong on the streets of Salford, not just within the perimeters of my episcopal palace.

Where I have been a critic of government welfare policies in recent years, it has not been because I fail to share or support the ideal of getting more people into more paid work, but because of the damage to the belonging I see for those unable to meet ever more stringent requirements in order to receive ever diminishing welfare payments. Many of those most severely affected are either children or adults with disabilities. If you are forced to move fifty miles away, or even just a couple of miles, in order to live in a cheaper property with fewer bedrooms, the likelihood is that you are leaving behind not just a place with important memories and significance for your belonging but also the network of informal social support from friends and neighbours that has helped you with everything from childminding, through shopping, to coping with the symptoms of a mental health problem. The irony is that responding to these unnecessary problems must cost the state many

times the sums saved in reduced benefit payments. Often it is the churches and their members who are working to mitigate the worst impacts, and to sustain belonging through food banks, volunteer schemes, welcome to the new arrival and just general good neighbourliness.

Concluding remarks

I hope I have set out, however briefly, how theology is a very practical subject, not least with relation to the concept of belonging. It informs how we understand what is going on in both our own lives and hearts and those of the people around us, and so helps us to structure both our own engagements and the work of our churches and institutions better. Understanding how people belong may stop us trampling unnecessarily on something dear to others; or at least mean that, when hard and painful decisions have to be made, more of the likely pain has been anticipated and, as much as possible, mitigated. The failings in my argument are entirely my own, but much of the credit for giving me the capacity and desire to think and reflect across disciplines from maths to theology to public policy was learned in the five years I spent here at King's. Some of it in this chapel, some in lecture halls and supervision rooms, and perhaps more of it than I care to remember in the dining room and bar. Places where I truly found that I belonged.