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**The Surface and the Depths: God in the Parish**

**Paper for the conference**

*A Particular Place: Theology for the Future of Parish Ministry*

**Westcott House, Cambridge, 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> September 2009**

Professor Hauerwas began his paper by articulating the apparent irony of flying in from the United States to give a lecture on the importance of place. It's only fair for me to raise a similar question. The priests who know most about the parishes they serve tend to be those who rarely leave them. I think of my colleague at St Andrew's, Handsworth, who has ministered there for twenty years and knows the place better than the back of his hand. As the Desert Fathers might have said: 'Stay in your parish and your parish will teach you everything'. Perhaps we should be wary of those who leave their particular place to tell others about it.

And yet here I am, one hundred miles from my parish; and here you are, perhaps equally far from the particular places in which God has called you to serve; and it is right that we are here. One of the great strengths of the Church of England's pattern of deployment is that parish clergy, by and large, are outsiders to the parishes they serve. For all the benefits of local ministry schemes, it is better that we are not all natives or products of our own parishes, because it's just as important to know a place *outside in* as inside out. And notwithstanding the wisdom of the desert, that stranger's perspective is one that is helpfully renewed by time away at a conference like this one.

I don't stand here to bring you examples of good practice. I trust that what goes on at St Andrew's, Handsworth is good enough to be an effective channel of God's grace, but we make no claims to be a beacon of success. Nor am I here to share a

wealth of insight from my embeddedness at the heart of the local community: I am not George Herbert nor was meant to be – and even in this room today there are two priests the sum of whose service in my part of Birmingham exceeds mine by a factor of four. I *am* here, I take it, as one among many people struggling today to articulate a sense of how utterly vital the church’s parochial ministry is to the health of this country’s common life. As Grace Davie has said, the Church of England is ‘a weak state church’, one that has lost most of its power, but retained some influence, authority – some *place*, you might say – in the life of the country. Or, as Rowan Williams phrases it, we are:

A church occupying the shell of national political significance but having lost much of the substance. [...] [And, as such we are] peculiarly well placed to communicate something of the central vision of an undefended territory created by God’s displacement of divine power from heaven to earth and the cross.<sup>1</sup>

That means, I believe, that in each parish across the country we have a place from which, in both confidence and humility, we may seek to be faithful to Christ, whose power is made perfect in weakness (II Corinthians 12: 9). As we seek to proclaim the faith afresh in our generation, the parishes of our nation and their churches are not a hindrance, but a help.

Sometimes we express that thought in a rather elegiac mode: the parish system *still* works – as if in a few decades time that functioning life will have expired. There’s a bit of mileage in the old girl yet, so let’s keep her on the road for a few more years. Then we’ll swap her for a more fuel-efficient model with a lower carbon footprint. But it would be more accurate to see ourselves as not almost over the hill, but somewhere at its foot. To adapt William Temple: I believe profoundly in the parish system and I sincerely regret that it does not yet exist. The ministry of the

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<sup>1</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘Epilogue’ in Sarah Coakley and Samuel Wells (eds), *Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008), p.178.

Church in the geographical parishes of this country is an ideal that has never been fully realised. Perhaps it never *could be* fully realised, but it is from the perspective of aspiration towards a future hope, not decline from a past ideal, that we need to approach our theology for the future of parish ministry. As John Inge reminds us, place in the scriptures is not a passing category, but one of ultimate significance. He quotes John 14: “There are many rooms in my Father’s house; if there were not, I would have told you. I am going now to prepare a place for you” (John 14: 4); and then he comments: “These words give [an] eschatological dimension to the importance of place [...] the ultimate biblical promise is of emplacement”.<sup>2</sup>

‘I saw no temple in the city’ (Revelation 21: 22) – and perhaps we shall see no parishes either – but until then, the parish is the guarantor of that scriptural significance of place. Each particular place matters because all the particular people who live there matter too. *Et incarnatus est*: that cardinal point of the creed is also the pivotal point of the story of God’s workings among us. God chose to save us by taking upon himself the boundaries of our human flesh. And, irritating though they often are when dealing with wedding enquiries, the concrete reality of the boundaries of each and every parish is a small reminder of the concrete reality of the human beings made in God’s image who live within them.

I have called this paper ‘The Surface and the Depths: God in the Parish’. In doing so, I am echoing the Archbishop of Canterbury. ‘The best parish priests, he says, ‘in this and other eras are [...] those who have known how to read the surface and the depths, but have had no great interest in the shallows’.<sup>3</sup> Those words are an encouragement and a warning. Time management gurus warn you not to let the urgent always trump the important. Not to let what shouts loudest distract your

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<sup>2</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) p.139.

<sup>3</sup> Rowan Williams, ‘The Christian Priest Today’ in Douglas Dales, John Habgood, Geoffrey Rowell and Rowan Williams (eds), *Glory Descending: Michael Ramsey and his Writings* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005), p.167.

attention, not to let what has to be done divert you from what needs to be done. The quip attributed to Robert Runcie lends itself to the parish too; the parish is like a swimming pool in which all the noise comes from the shallow end. In paying attention to the shallows, it's easy to miss the surface and the depths alike, though they matter most.

The difficulty lies, though, in distinguishing: surface from shallows, shallows from depths. So let me give you one vignette from my particular place, because it is a good illustration of how what lies on the surface, if we have time to recognise it, can draw us to things that lie much deeper. The place I have in mind is the church steps – not the main entrance, but the steep back steps to the vestry door. This is a popular gathering place for small groups of people. As often as not, on arriving at church, you find a teenage couple, a pair of residents from a local hostel or a small group of Muslim or Sikh men drinking cheap lager from a can in a paper bag. I mustn't romanticise the reasons they have chosen the church steps – it's largely a question of concealment – but, talking, there is also invariably a surprising degree of respect for the building and those who come to worship in it. And from time to time the worship inside spills out onto the steps.

A few weeks ago I met Nick again, a nominally Sikh man in his late thirties. About six months ago, he had been in quite a state on the steps: worrying about having no money to buy his son's birthday present or even to travel to see him. I'd thought I'd seen a carefully fabricated begging story coming, but I had been wrong. What he had wanted was a prayer and a blessing and I had obliged. Six months' later he and I both assumed that we would have forgotten that event, but we hadn't: I'd remembered for the unworthy reason that it was a rare occasion when a tale about having no money hadn't ended in a request for a tenner; but Nick had remembered on the much better grounds that the day of the blessing had, in his own words, been 'one of the best days of his life'. Everything had gone right for him: a friend

had ‘borrowed him fifty quid’, he’d bought his present, seen his son, and even got on well with his estranged partner. What’s more, he had told all his friends what had happened. Suddenly I realised why an old, but still serviceable, DVD player has appeared on those same church steps a few months back: it was a thank offering from Nick. In a small way the steps had become a place of liturgical exchange – and the unworthiness of the minister and his thoughts had not hindered the effect of the blessing! Taking some time with the surface phenomenon of illegal drinking on the church steps has drawn me into the lives of Nick and his friends in a way that I could so easily have missed – and the fact that this encounter took place on the boundary of the church building – the boundary as Nick would see it, of a sacred place – is far from incidental.

Sarah Coakley, in her introductory chapter to *Praying For England*, draws attention to the threefold commitment to prayer, place and the poor that lies at the heart of parish ministry.<sup>4</sup> The church steps at St Andrew’s, Handsworth are one place in my daily life where those three realities forcefully interact. Prayer, the place of the parish church and the poor are realities that in our culture are thoroughly marginal, yet they are none the less real for that. Prayer, place and the poor are marginal because they serve no purpose, they are a waste.

*Prayer* is marginal because it is so little understood, even by those of us who should know. How easy it is in a busy day to squeeze the daily office into corner or to see the midweek lunchtime mass as a barrier to ministry rather than its fount and origin. And when we think like that, so very often do our congregations – and their friends... and the neighbouring shopkeepers who spot us going less and less to church... and the passers-by on the bus... and so on...

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<sup>4</sup> Sarah Coakley, ‘Introduction: Prayer, Place and the poor’ in Sarah Coakley and Samuel Wells (eds), *Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp.1-20.

*The poor* are marginal because their lives cannot be properly accounted for and because they have little or nothing to do. When Gary comes to the vicarage door, what I want is to make him a tea and a sandwich and send him away as quickly as possible. But what he wants is *attention* – which is one of the reasons why he is so particular in his dietary requirements. What I happen to have in the house invariably won't do. Despite my principles, my ideal would be a postmodern, pre-packaged, consumer one: to send him away as quickly as possible with the equivalent of a BigMac, fries and a coke. But what Gary wants is something much more real than that: to talk, complain, argue and banter – to interact with another human being at more than a merely functional level.

And *the place of the church building* is marginal because most of the time it's empty. It looks like a magnificent waste of space, even sometimes to those of us who worship there, so we may seek to justify its existence by making it serve lots of other purposes. That, of course, is absolutely fine, as long as the liturgical purpose at the heart of the church is not lost sight of. The church building is a sacrament: the outward and visible sign of the inward and invisible graces that are prayer and worship. It stands as a witness to criteria that are more than merely utilitarian. By a utilitarian calculus it is a waste of space, in the same way that the poor are a waste of space and prayer is a waste of time. But people and places and practices that look unproductive are often theologically very rich. Prayer, place and the poor are invitations to a hallowing of particular places and times as the locus of encounter with God

Earlier this year, Justin Lewis-Anthony, a parish priest in the Canterbury diocese, wrote a book on the future of priestly ministry. It's called *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him: Radically re-thinking Priestly Ministry*. It's been a regular in the *Church Times* top-ten column for the past few months, so I guess that many of you have read it – or at least bought it! The image of the title comes from the saying

about the Buddha: ‘Followers of the way, if you want to get the kind of understanding that accords with Dharma, never be misled by others. Whether you’re facing inward or facing outward, whatever you meet up with, just kill it! If you meet a buddha, kill the buddha...’<sup>5</sup> Lewis-Anthony believes that for centuries the clergy of the Church of England have been in thrall to an idol called ‘Herbertism’, a model of parish ministry that, if it ever existed outside the construct of Isaak Walton’s hagiography, did so only for three years and in a community of fewer than five hundred souls.

The book is well worth reading and bears upon the subjects we are discussing at this conference, but I don’t want to engage with it directly. This is in part because I think that the de-bunking of George Herbert goes too far. Herbert is one of the great saints of our English calendar. He is not to be imitated in every respect, of course, but then none of the saints are: they are those whose fellowship we enjoy, companions as we walk the path of discipleship and share more fully in the reality of God. But Lewis-Anthony’s book has inspired me to think about what other idolatrous illusions the parish clergy of the Church of England may be in thrall to. If George Herbert is fair game, then I guess that pretty much anything goes, so I shall focus on another apparently unimpeachable fixture in our religious landscape: Iona.

Of course I have nothing against the Iona Community, with its deep commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of God’s creation. My concern is with the much-quoted phrase attributed to George MacLeod, suggesting that ‘Iona is a thin place – only a tissue paper separates the spiritual from the material’. We all know the experience that underlies such a statement: I have never been to Iona, but there are a good number of ancient, wild or holy places in the British Isles where I have sensed something of this sort. The problem is that the language with which we

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<sup>5</sup> Justin Lewis-Anthony, *If You Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him: Radically Re-thinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Continuum, 2009), pp.4-5.

now naturally seek to put the experience into words is misleading. In fact, not only is it misleading, it is burdensome: it ties up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lays them on our shoulders. What I mean is this: if Iona is a thin place where the spiritual and the material almost meet, what are we to make of all the fat and lumpish places in which we daily find ourselves, places where God's grace is less tangibly, if no less truly, at work? To use the adjective 'thin' as a term of spiritual approbation seems to me to buy into all the worst fantasies of our postmodern culture: a culture where spirituality is held to be found only in the flight from people and place and habit; in the extraordinary rather than the everyday; in the arcane and not the mundane.<sup>6</sup> If thin equals spiritual equals good and fat equals secular equals bad, then we are left ill-prepared to look out for God's blessings in the daily round. And if we don't look out for blessings they rarely come.

Obviously I'm overstating the case here. The deeper sense of MacLeod's words is to remind us precisely that the spiritual and the material are inseparable and that it is only the dullness of our blinded sight that stops us from seeing this. But in common usage and lazy mental habit, we still tend to think of Iona as thin and our own parish as thick. A better way of coming at this, I believe, is to see places like Iona as icons revealing the spiritual and material depth of richness that is everywhere around us when we are attuned to it. Physically an icon is a thin and two-dimensional object, but, when approached devotionally and not aesthetically, it opens up onto 'the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge... filling us with all the fullness of God' (Ephesians 3: 18-19). Iona and places like it are icons. They are thin and deep at the same time; or, to extend Rowan Williams' image, they have surface and depth, but few shallows. Time spent there is time lived to the full; it returns us to the tangible stuff of the physical world as the place where God acts – and in that sense, you might well say that Iona is a thick place, not a thin one.

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<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, the critique offered by Marko Ivan Rupnik, *In the Fire of the Burning Bush: An Initiation to the Spiritual Life* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 2004)

But perhaps we should get away from the dialectic of thick and thin and think instead in terms of layers of meaning. Here is Rowan Williams again, on the question of the relationship between the sacred and the profane:

Sometimes we see the sacred and the profane as if they were ‘territories’ lying side by side. But the image I prefer is more of a layered one. At root everything is enfolded or interwoven, as Eastern Christians might say, in the Wisdom of God. Profanity is what happens when the crust of managing and fantasy hardens over this interwoven, living reality [...]. A search for the sacred is not looking for holy ‘territory’ so much as searching for what lies beneath the surface.<sup>7</sup>

The image here is of a palimpsest, a manuscript or an artist’s canvas that has been written or painted over many times. Painstaking attention will reveal what has been hidden by the overlay of the centuries.

This analogy works better, I think, because it helps us see that holiness is not obvious or easily found, but neither is it fragile and passing. It is robust and real: ‘the dearest freshness deep down things’, of which Hopkins writes.<sup>8</sup> And it is found in liminal places, like Iona or the church steps at St Andrew’s, because these are the places where the secular overlay is less impenetrable. The holy is not met by a postmodern flight into the shallow realm of the virtual or the ethereal, but in proper engagement with the surface and the depths. It is met in those liminal places and people and practices that elude the categories and priorities that our culture takes for granted: in church buildings that, like icons, point beyond themselves; in face-to-face encounters with the poor; in the disciplined habit of prayer and the practice of the sacraments.

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<sup>7</sup> Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes: The Wisdom of the Desert* (Oxford: Lion, 2003), pp.111-112.

<sup>8</sup> ‘God’s Grandeur’, Gerald Manley Hopkins, *Poems and Prose* (London: Everyman, 1995), p.14.

Place is space that matters, space that matters enough not to be merely functional. At the end of our road in Handsworth the tag 'B21' is chalked on the pavement. B21 is our postcode – a spatial designation that matters for the Royal Mail, perhaps for estate agents and insurance companies, but not of much concern for the rest of us. Except, that is, for the members of the 'B21' gang. For them B21 is their turf. This is a good instance of what Professor Hauerwas in his paper termed demonic locality. The gang's members have chosen a postcode area precisely because it is a geographical designation with little real significance. Lacking a true sense of belonging to a place or a home, they have conjured up a sort of pseudo-place from the signifiers most easily available: this is shallow demonic place – space, you might say, with no depth and not much surface either.

That's one extreme of place in Handsworth, the other pole might well be the Uplands Allotments on the edge of our parish. The allotments occupy a swathe of territory between the built-up part of Handsworth and the Sandwell Valley Country Park and they are a major presence in the locality not only for their geographical size, but also for the place they occupy in people's imaginations. On one level they are a marginal zone – they occupy unwanted ground that was too steep or unstable for house building – but on another level they are central to the local sense of community. For the past sixty years they have been a liminal place where boundaries are crossed: where toil becomes play; where waste ground bears fruit; and (more recently) where cultural differences are overcome through friendship. They are a perfect instance of that 'interwoven, living reality' breaking through the crust of profanity, described by the Archbishop. Time in the Uplands allotments – whether hoeing a plot or drinking rum in a cabin – is not unlike time spent in church. In fact there is an almost liturgical quality to the way people behave, even if the language is often a bit fruitier than would be normal in a Christian assembly!

If B21 is demonic place and the Uplands allotments are sacred space, the rest of the parish is somewhere on the spectrum between them. Handsworth Park or the banks of the River Tame are places of considerable beauty, but they are also places where drugs are pushed and sex is sold. Or there is our parish Sports and Community Centre: at its best a place where cultures meet and community groups of all sorts find a hospitable home; at its worst a focus for fights, graffiti and abuse. All of this is a reminder that, while *space* may perhaps be a neutral empirical category, *place* certainly isn't. Place is a human construct, an imagined and contested territory, but no less real for that.

And it seems to me that what makes the difference between space and place is recognition. Here I want to use the term recognition very much in the sense that Ben Quash employs it in the article already referred to by Stanley Hauerwas. 'The vocation of the human being', Quash writes, 'is to recognize':

All creation is oriented towards a fulfilment in God [...], but it is uniquely the human being who is bestowed with the gift of consciousness, of knowledge of self. In the human being the created order can think at last; it can think about itself. It can be present to itself, in a distinctive and higher way than through the fact that its parts are just materially lumped together. It can also think beyond itself, towards God – and so God too becomes present to the created order in a new and higher way, through the medium of the human being.<sup>9</sup>

This vocation of the human being to be a recognizer is a profoundly priestly calling: the priesthood of all humanity, we might say, which all believers should seek to foster. And one of the most effective ways to foster it is by taking with full seriousness the parish system as a way of hallowing space. Let me give one

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<sup>9</sup> Quash, 'The Anglican Church as a Polity of Presence', in Duncan Dormor, Jack MacDonald and Jeremy Caddick (eds), *Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity* (London: Continuum, 2003), p.40.

example. A good friend of mine, Kenneth Clark, is Vicar of Stone just south of the Dartford crossing of the Thames in Kent. The vast Bluewater shopping centre occupies a significant chunk of his parish. Now I have a horror of giant shopping malls: they seem to me deeply unreal places, sterile zones, wiped clean of the imprint of human history and community. Kenneth, too, is more at home in a mediaeval church than a twenty-first century mall, but his response to this challenge to his ministry and mission has taught me a great deal.

Kenneth took at face value the fact that Bluewater fell within his geographical parish and so he offered to be a chaplain there. He has pastoral responsibility for one section of the retail area and spends his time in particular making sure he gets to know the shop staff. The rules of the shopping centre would prevent any sort of overt Christian evangelism, but what Kenneth does is mission in the deeper sense. He would never put it in these terms, but what I believe he has done is to refuse to let the economics of consumerism encroach into the boundaries of his parish. Instead he has found a home for the church in the midst of this temple of mammon. Faithfully pursuing a very traditional parochial ministry – visiting the people of his parish – Kenneth is refusing to see Bluewater as secular space and recognised it for what it of course already was, a part of God’s good creation falling within the ancient parish of St Mary’s, Stone

In the fourth chapter of *A Christian Theology of Place*, John Inge makes the suggestion that we should seek to see the parish churches of our nation as shrines. He writes this:

The building is not the Church [capital ‘c’], but it [does] speak of the character and reality of the Church in a profound and vital way. It helps to root the community in the faith, nurture its prophetic witness, and draw it to its destination. In this manner a proper relationship between God, people

and place is maintained, and when it is, the church [small 'c'] will speak as an effective sign.<sup>10</sup>

Bearing this in mind, I wonder if the love and care with which Kenneth and his congregation look after the fabric of their ancient parish church of St Mary, Stone may not have been part and parcel of their recognition of Bluewater as a true part of the place that is their parish. Taking care of the particular place that is your parish church – not seeing it as a burden – perhaps makes it easier to take care of the particular place that is your geographical parish – to see it as beloved territory, not threatening space.

The human and priestly gift of recognition helps us to learn that place, for all that it is a human category, a cultural construct, is also a divine gift and a sacramental reality. The sacraments are the finite media by which the infinite God speaks to us. And, strangely enough, it is their finitude, their createdness, their very difference from God, that makes them holy things. The sacraments are not miniature fragments of the divine in a profane world: they are signs to us of the fact that creation, in its very difference from God, is the object of God's infinite and unconditional love.<sup>11</sup> In this sense the parish system is a sacramental reality. The fact that everyone in England belongs to the Church enough to be baptized or married or buried through their local parish is a sign that God's love is for all. Amidst all the cultural and economic variety and confusion that surround us the parish system stands for the unchanging love of God in Christ – and it teaches us all not to write *anyone* or *any place* out of the story of God's generous love

Of course we cannot aspire to treat every place with equal love, just as we cannot aspire to treat every person with the complete intimacy of friendship. Particularity requires the making of choices, opting for this and not that. But in recognising and

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<sup>10</sup> John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003) p.91-122.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, Rowan Williams' chapter, 'Sacraments of the New Society' in *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 209-221.

valuing one particular place we are also making a statement about the worth attaching to every place; just as in loving one human being enough to marry them we may share in embryo in the love of God. This recognition of the particular is perhaps the common denominator between the parish system and the Fresh Expressions movement. Fresh Expressions, on the whole, seek to recognise the value of particular cultural groups across geographical boundaries and to share in the love of God with them; parishes seek to recognise the value of every person in one particular place and share in the love of God there. These movements need not be in tension or competition; in our mixed-economy church they simply need to remain recognisable to one another. In the end, though, I believe that the embodied reality of our human life is the gravitational pull that will always draw us back to the reality of place.<sup>12</sup> The most successful form of mission to those gang members who identify their locality as B21 could well lie in making them acquainted with the real place that is the Uplands Allotments. Fantasy brought face-to-face with reality: a placeless community of violence, speed, vengeance and addiction confronted with a localised community, rooted and grounded in the soil of a particular place.

Whether what I have said amounts to a theology for the future of parish ministry I am not at all sure. But I *am* sure that by paying proper attention to the surface and the depths – by recognising the particular place we serve as the dwelling place of God, and everyone who lives there as God’s people – we have a real prospect of helping a restless, rootless world find a hospitable home in the only place and time where it matters: here and now. Letting the shallows take care of themselves is easier said than done, of course, but we must try. As Tim Jenkins has said: ‘A Christian minister [is] required to pay attention: not to bring God into a situation,

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<sup>12</sup> John Milbank’s polemical essay, ‘Stale Expressions: The Management-Shaped Church’ repays study on this point. See *The Future of Love: Essays in Political theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2009), pp.264-275.

but to learn to discern his work and presence in a place'.<sup>13</sup> In that practice of discernment, the hallowing of place and time fostered by the Church of England's 13, 000 parishes is not a bad point of departure.

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<sup>13</sup> Paper given to the Cambridge Theological Society, Divinity Faculty Cambridge (February 2000), cited in Quash, 'Polity of Presence', p.46.