

A Particular Place:
The Future of Parish Ministry
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1. Representing “No Place”

I am sure you have not failed to note how odd it is for me to be here to reflect with you about the importance of place.¹ That I have just flown in from America to give this lecture in which I try to convince you that place is important surely seems to invite us to engage in group self-deception. Of course, that way of putting the matter is misleading because the verb “engage” suggests “trying.” If you try to be self-deceived you cannot be self-deceived. Self-deception is a condition you inhabit which means we may not be able to name where we are at this time and in this place.

Toward the end of his Gifford Lectures, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition, Alasdair MacIntyre raises the question whether the very idea of a public lecture is any longer possible. According to MacIntyre, the lecture as a genre depended on the assumption of a common intellectual culture which can no longer be presupposed.² Given our lack of frameworks that might make our differences articulate the lecture has become a relic from the past in which form is mismatched to content.

The challenge facing us in this place is not quite the same as that MacIntyre suggests confronts the Gifford Lecturer, but they are not completely dissimilar. I must try to deliver a lecture on the importance of place from no place. But that cannot be quite right because I am able to assume, in a manner MacIntyre could not when he delivered the Gifford Lectures, that we must share some place in common. The place we share in common has to be something called church, but if the church is necessarily local then the assumption that the conditions for communication exist must be tested. That I am able to give this lecture is, therefore, an exemplification of the challenge before us; that is, how the church can at once be anywhere without losing its hold on the necessity of being embodied in the habits of a people and a place.

Habit is the heart of the matter.³ Place must be inhabited because it is this inhabitation that creates memory, and memory is essential for a place to be a place.⁴ Language is a particular habit crucial for memory, for there is no more fundamental form of habituation than the training of the tongue to speak. That we need the tongue to speak is a reminder that we are first and foremost bodies that inhabit place. Because we are bodies we must be one place rather than another. Our bodies at once place us, give us a past, but require we have a future. I assume that one of the major challenges before us concerning place, therefore, is the Gnostic character of modern life.

¹A paper written for a conference on September 16-18, 2009 at Westcott House, Cambridge, England on “A Particular Place: The Future of Parish Ministry.”

² Alasdair MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990), pp. 220-221.

³ See, for example, Felix Ravaisson’s, Of Habit, preface by Catherine Malabou, translation, introduction, and commentary by Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair. (London: Continuum, 2008). Ravaisson’s work is quite simply crucial for the recovery of the metaphysical significance of habit.

⁴ John Inge rightly calls attention to the role of inhabitation in his, A Christian Theology of Place (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 135-136. Inge has said in this book most of what I take needs to be said about the theological significance of place.

But that is to bring to the fore another problem about my presence among you. I am an American. I represent the ultimate form of disembodied life. I often try to resist that description by recalling my identification as a Texan. It is true that I am a Texan, but this identification threatens to hide the more determinative identification, particularly when I am in England, that I am an American.⁵ I am a representative of that place that is no place just to the extent that Americans believe that we are what anyone would want to be if they had our education and money. America is the first universal society.⁶

To be sure America has a history, but we think our history is but the outworking of our ideals that are available to anyone anywhere. America is, of course, a country with a diverse and extraordinary geography that invites a sense of place. Yet as the most advanced capitalist social order our history and geography, which at one time could and did supply some with quite distinct identities, are increasingly subject to the processes of modernity that require standardization.⁷ You have to be able to build a Wal-Mart and sell McDonalds anywhere.

To the extent that as an American I represent “no place” I may be able to help you place yourselves. To be English now means you can rejoice that you are not an American. Of course that puts you in the peculiar situation of needing Americans in order to be English. In short, your particularity now depends on us which means before too long you will realize that you are now “us.”

This may not be bad news if you believe those who celebrate that phenomenon called “globalization.” From their perspective we face the inevitable interconnectedness of the world which will require us, if we are to live in peace, to become cosmopolitan citizens of nowhere so that we might be capable of negotiating difference. As John Inge suggests, some of the fundamental philosophical and political convictions of the West, interestingly

⁵ I do have an accent which may or may not be discernable to the English. I think accent, moreover, is a quite telling indicator of place. Accents are, however, increasingly disappearing in America. I take it to be one of the strengths of England that accents are nourished. I understand that there are class implications involved in the ability to locate accents, but the loss of accents in America does not insure that class is any less an invidious reality.

⁶ In his American Babylon: Notes of a Christian Exile (New York: Basic Books, 2009), Richard John Neuhaus describes what it might mean to say America is a universal nation this way: “An academic friend who teaches religious ethics at a prestigious university fervently insists that she is not an American citizen but a ‘citizen of the world.’ You perhaps have friends like that. This is also a very American thing, thinking we have transcended being American. We are, after all, as some like to say, the world’s first ‘universal nation.’ By that is meant that we are a ‘nation of immigrants,’ and therefore that American identity is an amalgam of identities of all the peoples of the world. The phrase *universal nation* is established not by national origin, ethnicity, race, religion, or other historically contingent features but by subscribing to certain *universal principles*—for instance, the principles set forth in the Declaration of Independence.” (pp. 29-30) Neuhaus seems to provide a qualified defense of such an understanding of America though he emphasizes that the American story is but one story in the story of the world. He is sure, however, that “God is not indifferent toward the American experiment.” p. 55. I am also sure God is not indifferent to the American experiment, but I do not believe God is indifferent to any people. God’s judgment on that experiment, however, may be just that, that is, a judgment.

I think, however, that Neuhaus is quite right to worry about someone who might think they are a “citizen of the world.” That is, of course, an attempt to be a citizen of “no where” which is a contradiction in terms. MacIntyre, for example, has argued that American notions of patriotism and citizenship as commitment to universal ideals are incoherent. See his “Is Patriotism a Virtue,” in Theorizing Citizenship, edited by Ronald Beiner. (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 209-228.

⁷ One of the names that can be given to the process of standardization is, of course, capitalism. For an incisive analysis of the shift from use value to exchange value for the development of market societies see Christopher Franks, He Became Poor: The Poverty of Christ and Aquinas’s Economic Teachings (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

enough a spatial designation, have conspired to convince many that “local embodied relations are to be transcended and left behind.”⁸ According to Inge, space and time, particularly in the academy, have replaced any serious consideration of place as having metaphysical or ethical significance.⁹

Many concerned about our increasing interconnectedness think it important that our religious and moral convictions not depend on the particularities of place and/or history. A universal ethic is required if we are to negotiate a mode of survival for the future. Philosophers are working overtime to develop the conceptual tools necessary to sustain an account of rationality that is free of contingency. Tradition determined accounts of rationality, such as MacIntyre’s, are from such a perspective seen not only as reactionary but dangerous.

These kinds of considerations are not irrelevant for questions concerning the future of the local parish in England. The very phrase, “local parish,” I assume is redundant because by its very nature a parish is local. The parish is the ecclesial form that has tied the church to place. Yet it seems that form of the church may not have the resources to respond to an increasingly mobile population that is no longer tied to place. Again America beacons because the church in America, with few exceptions, has not been tied to place. In America you do not belong to a parish, but you can be a member of a church.

In her insightful article, “Debate,” in Praying for England, Grace Davie notes that the dominant mode of religious and political organization and power in Europe was territorial. Populations lived and many continue to live in “parishes.” Parishes were not only ecclesial structures, but they were also a mode of administration for civil purposes. You were born in a parish, Davie observes, whether you liked it or not. That mode of administration worked well for pre-modern Europe which was constituted by relatively stable social orders. The church was accordingly embedded physically and culturally in the everyday.¹⁰

However we are now living, according to Davie, in a different religious economy. The religious economy in which we now live she characterizes as one that has shifted from a culture of obligation to a culture of consumption or choice. What was once imposed or inherited has now become a matter of choice.¹¹ She notes, moreover, that in America “economic development and a freedom *to believe* interacted positively with voluntarist forms of religion, which—unlike their European counterparts—were able to move rapidly and effectively into the growing cities of North America.”¹²

So again, your future, which may be already your present, is to be “us.” But at least, if Davie is right, there is this difference, namely, that the church remains for many in Europe and England a “public utility.” This means that many feel no need to attend the church, but are none the less glad that churches exist in which an active minority engage in and sustain religious practice. Davie describes this as a form of “vicarious religion.” She, moreover,

⁸ John Inge, A Christian Theology of Place, p. 5.

⁹ Inge, A Christian Theology of Place, p. 10. Though I do not disagree with Inge on this point I think it is not time that has trumped place, but a particular understanding of time as speed.

¹⁰ Grace Davie, “Debate,” in Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture, edited by Sam Wells and Sarah Coakley. (London: Continuum Books, 2008), pp. 149-150.

¹¹ Davie, p. 155.

¹² Davie, p. 151.

thinks “vicarious religiosity” may be compatible with the development of churches shaped by a culture of choice.¹³

I think I understand what Davie means by “vicarious religion.” I lived in England in 1983 and was able to follow debates in the synod that year concerning the ethics of the possession of nuclear weapons. But also on the agenda of that synod was the question of whether all livings ought to be under the control of the local ordinary. There was an editorial in The Times arguing against a change in the policy of letting livings be free of control by the bishop. The editorial noted that of course not having the appointment of clergy under the control of the bishop has led to abuse. For example, atheists could be and had in fact been appointed to certain livings. But the editorial suggested that if all livings were brought under the control of the bishops then that would make the Church of England the possession of those who actually go to church. As a result the church could not be the cultural resource it is meant to be for the nation.

I am quite sympathetic with the position taken by The Times. I am so because I think it important that the church is socially embodied. The problem is how a church in which all livings are not under the control of the bishop can also be a church capable of telling the state that it should not possess nuclear weapons. For it turned out that many of the bishops at the synod argued that the church had to defer to the state to make decisions about what was morally responsible for the state to do in the face of the realities of international politics. The bishops, it seems, unable to distinguish between church and nation, had begun to think like the state.

Of course I am not supposed to be sympathetic with the editorial in The Times, nor am I thought to support the parish system or “vicarious religion.” I am, after all, on record to be against all forms of Constantinianism. I hope I remain determinatively anti-Constantinian, but how I can do so while supporting a national church will take some explaining. The explanation will have everything to do with place. For I hope to show that the parish system can be a form of resistance to the false universals that now represent the transmutations of Constantinianism into secular forms.

In order to know what such transmutations look like you need to look no further than the voluntary character of the American church. More people may go to church in America than in England, but the church to which they go, exactly because it is a church of their choice, lacks the ability to resist accommodation to economic and political powers. The voluntary character of the church, enshrined in the language of “joining the church,” turns out to be a perfect Constantinian strategy. A voluntary church makes it impossible for the church to develop the disciplines necessary to distinguish the universalism of the Gospel from allegedly universal presumptions of a democratic social order.

The rhetoric of Constantinianism and anti-Constantinianism can be quite misleading just to the extent that it can suggest a far too clear alternative. John Howard Yoder sometimes sounded as if the choice between those alternatives was and is clear.¹⁴ In fact,

¹³ Davie, pp. 154-155.

¹⁴ Alex Sider provides an internal critique of Yoder’s use of the language of “shift” or “fall” to describe Constantinianism. Such language, Sider argues, can reflect a “primitivist account of Christianity” inconsistent with Yoder’s more considered views. Such a contrast can also see early Christianity as a contest between martyrs as representatives of Christian exclusivism and apologists who are allegedly representatives of hellenization and acculturation. Sider argues that Yoder’s understanding of the eschatological character of history mandate should have made him more critical of such tropes and dualism. See Alex Sider, To See History Doxologically: Conflict, History, and Holiness in John Howard Yoder’s Ecclesiology (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, Forthcoming). Nathan Kerr also provides a helpful account of Yoder’s understanding of

however, he recognized that even when Rome made Christianity the only legal faith of the Empire there were faithful forms of life that continued to shape the life of the church. Indeed Yoder observes, “The medieval church remained largely pacifist. The peace concern of the medieval church was institutionalized by the designation of holy times and places, which were to be completely exempt from the pressure of war.”¹⁵

Yoder understood well, therefore, that you do not free yourself of Constantinianism by becoming anti-Constantinian. For him the alternative to Constantinianism was not anti-Constantinianism, but locality and place. According to Yoder locality and place are the forms of communal life necessary to express the particularity of Jesus through the visibility of the church. Only at the local level is the church able to engage in the discernment necessary to be prophetic. The temptation is to denounce “paganism” in general or to decry the “secularization” of culture as an inevitable process without doing the work necessary to specify what pagan or secular might mean in the concrete. The church’s prophetic role in Yoder’s words must always be in the “language as local and as timely as the abuses it critiques.”¹⁶

Rowan Williams, I think, suggests something quite similar to Yoder’s understanding of Christology and place in the “Epilogue” to Praying for England. Williams observes that the New Testament testifies to the creation of a pathway between earth and heaven that nothing can ever again close. A place has been cleared in which God and human reality can belong together without rivalry or fear. That place is Jesus. It is a place where a love abides that is at once vulnerable and without protection. It is a place in which human competition does not count; “a place where the desperate anxiety to please God means nothing; a place where the admission of failure is not the end but the beginning; a place from which no one is excluded in advance.”¹⁷

According to Williams the role of church is to take up place in the world, to inhabit a place, where Jesus’ priesthood can be exercised. Such a place unavoidably must be able to be located on a social map so that it does not have to be constantly reinvented.¹⁸ Williams even suggests that the Church of England, a church after having lost much of its substance and which now occupies the shell of national political significance, “is 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.”¹⁹

That Williams provides a Christological understanding of place is extremely important if we are to avoid turning the local into an abstraction. Appeals to locality and/or place can be every bit as destructive as the steam roller of universality that flattens all

Constantinianism in his Christ, History, and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission (London: SCM, 2008). Kerr suggests that by Constantinianism Yoder was naming the temptation of the church to think the meaning of history is to be found in the ordered structure of a given society rather than in God’s activity in the church. pp. 7-10

¹⁵ John Howard Yoder, Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution, edited by Theodore Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker. (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), p. 131.

¹⁶ John Howard Yoder, “The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue,” in The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical, edited by Michael Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. 250.

¹⁷ Rowan Williams, “Epilogue,” in Praying for England: Priestly Presence in Contemporary Culture, edited by Samuel Wells and Sarah Coakley. (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 175.

¹⁸ Williams, p. 176.

¹⁹ Williams, pp. 178-179.

difference.²⁰ The local can not only be parochial, but the local can also be demonic. I am a Texan, which has its own problems, but it is the South which has left its mark on me. I am all too well aware of the perversities of the so-called “local church.” But you do not avoid the perversities of place by escaping to some alleged universal. You can only avoid the perversities of place by being the church of Jesus Christ which, as I now hope to show, the Church of England has by God’s good grace done.

2. Bruce Kaye’s Account of “The Anglican Experiment”

In Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith: The Anglican Experiment, Bruce Kaye provides a fascinating account of Anglicanism that puts flesh on Williams’s suggestive comments about the relation of Christology and locality by focusing on the Anglican Communion.²¹ Kaye’s title rightly suggests that he does not mean to restrict his analysis only to the Anglican Communion, but rather he uses the Anglican Communion to illumine what he takes to be the essential character of the church catholic. That character is determined by our belief that Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnate Son of God making possible and necessary the invitation to all humanity, without distinction of race or circumstance, to respond to the gospel. Those who respond to this invitation do so, according to Kaye, “in the particularities of their personal circumstance” (p. 3). The challenge, therefore, becomes how the personal response to the gospel, responses unavoidably determined by place, can be credited without threatening the church’s unity.

Kaye develops his account of the place of the Church of England with the current controversies in the Anglican Communion clearly in mind. He explores how a “globalized” form of Anglicanism has emerged from a local form, by which he means England, with the result of deep divisions and conflicts dominating the common life of Anglicanism. He does not think, however, that this is a development unique to the Anglican Communion. According to Kaye, patterns of life that now characterize Anglican life were present in the New Testament. By fulfilling the hopes of Israel through a crucifixion of universal significance, as well as the call of the disciples, Jesus laid the foundation for a profusion of local diversity and cosmic belonging. Kaye quotes the second century unknown writer, Diognetus, to give evidence to the necessary relation between Christ’s cosmic and universal reality as the background to make locality not only possible but necessary. Diognetus puts it this way:

For Christians are no different from other people in terms of their country, language, or customs. Nowhere do they inhabit cities of their own, use a strange dialect, or live life out of the ordinary. They have not discovered this teaching of theirs through reflection or through the thought of meddlesome people, nor do they set forth any human doctrine, as do some. They inhabit both Greek and barbarian cities, according to the lot assigned to each. And they show forth the character of their own citizenship in a

²⁰In Religion and English Everyday Life (New York: Berghahn, 1999) Timothy Jenkins provides all the evidence one might need to avoid romanticizing place. His account of the “economy of fantasies” that grip parish life is particularly telling.

²¹ Bruce N. Kaye, Conflict and the Practice of Christian Faith: The Anglican Experiment (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2009). Paginations will appear in the text.

marvelous and admittedly paradoxical way by following local customs in what they wear and what they eat and in the rest of their lives. (pp. 11-12)

It is important to attend to the language Kaye uses to characterize Diognetus's description of Christians. Kaye refuses the contrast between the universal and particular and instead resorts to the language of the personal as a contrast to the universal to suggest why the gospel can only be received in context.²² To be sure the gospel is for prisoners, jailers, magistrates, philosophers, masters, slaves, men and women, but that it is so requires that each person must respond by making the whole of their life subject to the everyday interactions of the community of the church. From the beginning, Christianity has struggled to sustain the creative tension between the personal appropriation of the gospel and the gospel's universal reach. The result has been the creation of a politics that sought not to overthrow the old political order, but to build a new order manifest in each church's peculiar circumstance. (p. 19)

The current divisions and controversies arising from locality that beset Anglicanism, from Kaye's perspective, is nothing new. Local diversity has always characterized Christianity and conflict is thereby inevitable. Kaye, for example, reminds us that Western Christianity is a local tradition within which other local traditions developed creating continuing disputes. (p. 32) That Western Christianity names a "locality" is a nice reminder that all claims to place depend on contrast with another place.

Kaye, therefore, suggests that Anglicanism became identifiable as a place with a distinct history because Bede wrote his ecclesiastical history. For it was Bede's history that created what would become the idea known as England. Kaye suggests, therefore, that Anglicanism is best understood as a regional form of Christianity not unlike the church in Gall.²³ Without becoming any less insistent on the cosmic lordship of Christ the church in England developed a distinctive way to be church by maintaining a resilient call to personal discipleship to Jesus. (p. 36) From Kaye's perspective, Henry VIII is but a later expression of the resistance of Anglicanism to the attempt of Rome to develop an imperial conception of catholicity.

Kaye identifies Anglicanism, therefore, as the attempt to maintain catholicity without leviathan. The fundamental character of our faith means an extensive diversity is required not only within local community, but between communities. Each person and community must respond faithfully to the particularities of their situation yet they must seek, if they are faithfully to be Christ's body, to remain interconnected. The necessity of such interconnectedness is called "catholicity."²⁴ To be "catholic" is to recognize that my particularity must serve to build up the whole. (p.41)

²² Yoder was fond of saying, "The Gospel is not the Gospel until it has been received." I think that is right which means that those who have received the gospel have much to teach those from whom they received the gospel.

²³ Kaye's focus on Bede is consistent with Adrian Hastings contention that ethnicities become nations or elements within a nation at the point "when their specific vernacular moves from an oral to written usage to the extent that it is being regularly employed for the production of a literature, and particularly for the translation of the Bible." *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion, and Nationalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 12. For Hastings explicit account of the influence of Bede see pp. 35-39.

²⁴ The office of the Bishop is an office of hospitality for it is the Bishop's duty to share the stories of particular Eucharistic assemblies to insure that when we move from one parish to another we can have some assurance we are worshipping the same God. That is why the church has discovered that some Christians must be on the move.

Such building up has always been a challenge. Kaye, in particular, calls attention to the ambiguity created by the attempt to impose order on the Anglican reality through the 1662 Act of Uniformity. From Kaye's perspective the Act of Uniformity was an attempt to impose a conformity on the church without respecting the diversity of gifts found in the parishes of England. In Kaye's words "the Act of Uniformity did not serve well the tradition of Anglican Christianity. It narrowed the focus and failed to move the ecclesiastical structures in a direction that served the new social and political realities of the Christian citizens of England." (p.47)

Some seem to think that something like an Act of Uniformity is required in response to the current controversies in the Anglican Communion. Kaye thinks such a response would be ill advised.²⁵ It is ill advised because it would deny the Anglican commitment to live faithfully in their local circumstance even though doing so creates diversity that creates difficulties for those in other places. (p. 66) Kaye is not suggesting that truth does not matter, but truth demands that those whom we do not understand not be cast beyond the pale of fellowship. (p. 73) Anglicans have been committed to the local expression of the faith which means that the challenge confronting its reality as an international fellowship of churches should not be how we can enforce uniformity, but rather how we can be known through our love of one another.

Catholicity is, therefore, that name we give to the priority of the local for the determination of faithfulness that can only be sustained by engagement with other local expressions of the faith as well as engagement with the whole. As Rowan Williams reminded us at the 2008 Lambeth Conference "The entire Church is present in every local church assembled around the Lord's Table. Yet the local church alone is never the entire Church. We are called to see this not as a circle to be squared but as an invitation to be more and more lovingly engaged with one another." (p. 169)

Such engagement, moreover, is crucial if the church is to be an alternative to the forces that threaten to destroy locality in the name of peace. We are in danger of confusing the universality of the cross with the alleged inevitable process of globalization. We are in the odd situation of needing one another in our diverse localities in order not to be subject to the power of false universals. Kaye calls attention to Rowan Williams's claim in the final address at the 2008 Lambeth Conference as an expression of this understanding of catholicity. Williams said, "The global horizon of the Church matters because churches without this are always in danger of slowly surrendering to the culture around them and losing sight of their calling to challenge that culture." (p. 165)

The culture that inhabits us, and by us I mean Christians, is a subtle and seductive one. It tempts us to believe we are free of place. It tempts us to believe that we do not have the time to do what needs to be done so we must constantly hurry. These temptations are often assumed to be congruent with the gospel imperatives to have no permanent home. But in the process we lose the visibility necessary to be witnesses to the One who made it possible to be Christians — even in England.

3. "The Place That Jesus Is"

²⁵ Rowan Williams also seems to think such a response would be ill advised. That he has refused the role of hero or martyr, but rather, in the words of Rupert Shortt, opted to play the role of "patient peacemaker" I take to be a gift to the Communion. See Rupert Shortt, Rowan's Rule: The Biography of the Archbishop of Canterbury (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

I believe the work of parish ministry is crucial for sustaining the visibility of the church in a culture that has no time for time and place. For as Ben Quash suggests in an article entitled, “The Anglican Church as a Polity of Presence,” the very presence of a priest, a presence that often has no use other than to be present, has everything to do with place. Quash observes that “the parish priest is often in the very privileged position of being able to describe what the truth of everyday life is in a particular locality.”²⁶ I think it is no accident that Quash’s essay is in a book modestly titled, Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity. For I think the task of describing “the truth of everyday life in a particular locality” is, in the words of Archbishop Williams quoted above, how “the place that Jesus is” becomes visible in modernity.

To “describe the truth of everyday life in a particular locality” is not easily done. For example Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer and writer, observes:

When one buys the farm and moves there to live, something different begins. Thoughts begin to be translated into acts. Truth begins to intrude with its matter-of-fact. One’s work may be defined in part by one’s vision, but it is defined in part too by problems, which work leads to and reveals. And daily life, work, and problems gradually alter the visions. It invariably turns out, I think, that one’s first vision of one’s place was to some extent an imposition on it. But if one’s sight is clear and if one stays on and works well, one’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. Vision, possibility, work, and life—all have changed by mutual correction. Correct discipline, given enough time, gradually removes one’s self from one’s line of sight. One works to better purpose then and makes fewer mistakes, because at last one sees where one is. Two human possibilities of the highest order thus come within reach: what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one’s knowledge can cause one to respect what one knows.²⁷

“At last one sees where one is” I take to be as good a description as any to describe the challenge of parish ministry. For you do not come to see by looking, but rather one only comes to see where one is, as Berry suggests, by living through the problems the work that is to be done inevitably creates.²⁸ Yet it is love that shapes such clear vision, requiring that we respond to place as it really is rather than our narcissistic fantasies of self-importance would

²⁶ Ben Quash, “The Anglican Church as a Polity of Presence,” in Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity, edited by Duncan Dormor, Jack McDonald, and Jeremy Caddick. (London: Continuum, 2003), p. 47.

²⁷ Wendell Berry, The Art of the Common-Place: The Agrarian Essays, edited and introduced by Norman Wirzba. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), p. 187. I think it not accidental that John Inge turns to Berry in the last chapter of A Christian Theology of Place.

²⁸ One of the challenges, however, facing those in the ministry is how to understand “the work that is to be done” as work and, in particular, the work of their hands. Though seldom noticed everything the priest does depends on the work of their hands at the altar. The knowledges that shape ministry are, therefore, exemplifications of practical reason. If you need to ask how theological knowledge should be applied to the everyday tasks of ministry then you have an indication that a mistake has been made. The ministry is a craft requiring apprenticeship through which wisdom is acquired through example. For a compelling account of the importance of craft knowledge see Richard Sennett’s, The Craftsman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008). In his Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work (New York: Penguin Press, 2009) Matthew Crawford observes, “If thinking is bound up with action, then the task of getting an adequate *grasp* on the world, intellectually, depends on our doing stuff in it.” (p. 164) The “stuff” we do is to worship God which is the end of all work.

have it be. To be in place is a discipline that can remove the self from one's line of sight so that we can finally be where we are. Yet to learn to be where we are, as Rowan Williams reminds us, is one of the hardest things to do.²⁹

Berry observes that the good farmer comes to understand that how to farm well cannot be separated from questions of scale. A farm can be too big for the farmer to pay appropriate attention. Distraction is inimical to correct discipline and, Berry notes, "enough time is beyond the reach of anyone who has too much to do." But he says we must go farther to see that the propriety of scale must be associated with the propriety of another kind: "an understanding and acceptance of the human place in the order of Creation—a proper humility."³⁰ Such humility is born by the seventeen years it took Berry to reclaim a hillside which had been exhausted by over-farming.

Berry is not a romantic. He knows that all agricultural work will erode a place making food production impossible. When we are no longer able to farm life itself is threatened. Human continuity and good farming are, therefore, virtually synonymous. That they are so requires that good farming outlast the life of a good farmer. Farmers, like all of us, die, but it is critical that what they have learned about good farming not die with them. So to sustain good farming a community must exist across time. Such a community is an order of memories consciously preserved in instructions, songs, and stories. Culture is the name Berry gives to the joining of land, work, and community through which knowledge is preserved in place and for a long time.³¹

Quash suggests that nowhere is the significance of such a knowledge of place more apparent than at funerals. For the parish priest at a funeral has the responsibility "to describe the truth of a single life. His presence to the locality and to individuals and families authorizes this kind of description. The clergy describe well because they are really present to the situation they describe."³² "That situation" is, moreover, exactly that place that Williams describes as the pathway between earth and heaven which nothing can ever again close.

In his essay "Presence" in Praying for England, Edmund Newey provides an extraordinary account of the role of the priest when someone dies who may have only a tangential relationship to the church.³³ He observes that the priest's visit to the home of the dead is often a quite awkward encounter because the priest may be seen as but a professional spiritual emissary to give help beyond the usual channels. Yet he suggests, drawing on Robert Pogue Harrison's extraordinary book, The Dominion of the Dead, the very presence of the priest can create for the living the possibility of recognizing God's presence so that we can be "at home" with one another.³⁴

²⁹ For my reflections on Williams remark in his Christ on Trial see my book, The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 2209-213.

³⁰ Berry, The Art of the Common-Place, p. 187.

³¹ Berry, The Art of the Common-Place, p. 189.

³² Quash, "The Anglican Church as a Polity of Presence," p. 47.

³³ Edmund Newey, "Presence," Praying for England, pp. 85-106.

³⁴ In particular Newey draws attention to Harrison's observation that the origins of architecture are to be found in the attempt to provide shelter not for the living but for the dead. The modern penchant, therefore, of separating places that house the dead and the living may threaten our sense of home. For it may be that home is only found through the encounter with death. Newey suggests that Harrison's understanding of the "pedagogy of grief" by which we learn to be at home with the dead can be a pedagogy of hope by which a new home is found in God.

Newey notes that being “at home” with one another does not mean the “awkwardness” disappears. As the family confronts the unfamiliar territory of funeral and subsequent ministry to the bereaved the awkwardness may become more pronounced. Yet through these different moments of ministry to the family and friends of the dead, if they are marked by liturgical hospitality in which people are met where they are, some may come to be “at home” with themselves, their bereavement, and with God. In the process Newey suggests that such a ministry brings all God’s people—ministers and bereaved alike—to the foot of the cross “where the extremity of loss meets the consummation of love.”³⁵

That Quash and Newey direct out attention to the care of the dead as central to the ministry of a parish seems crucial for helping us understand what Rowan Williams means when describing the place that Jesus is. For if the parish is the place where Jesus is, we are invited as Christians, who are never to be at home in this world, to learn to be at home even in England.³⁶ By having our home so established, moreover, we will hopefully discover how important it is that we are connected to Christians across time and place whose differences from us turn out to enrich our lives.

The work of the parish, like work on Berry’s farm, is slow, hard, rewarding work. We can take the time such work requires because we believe we have been given all the time we need through Jesus’ cross and resurrection to listen to as well as care for one another. From such a perspective the question is not whether parish ministry has a future, but rather whether we, Christian and non-Christian alike, can have a future in England and all that which is not England, without the work of the parish ministry.

³⁵ Newey, “Presence,” p. 90.

³⁶ I think, moreover, there is a close connection between how Christians learn to die embodied in our burial rites and what some describe as the social ministry of the church. For only a people who are taught how to die can live at peace. A church that knows how to bury the dead may find the resources to challenge those who would try to secure their existence by possessing nuclear weapons. In his article, “Anglicanism: The Only Answer to Modernity,” in *Anglicanism: the Answer to Modernity*, Timothy Jenkins responds to the question concerning what role or vision should the Anglican church have by noting any answer because the church is embedded and conversational must be worked out on site. But interestingly enough he then suggest that the basic issue has not changed since the time of Bede, that is, “the Church has a crucial role to play in the creation and maintenance of a just and peaceful society, so that people may live ordered, quite, and faithful lives. Its concern is human flourishing, which we call salvation, or the Kingdom of God.” Jenkins acknowledges some emphasize the eschatological element of the faith that he associates with the Kingdom of God which is not simply about human well-being, but he argues it best to concentrate on such an eschatological future in a grounded way that deals with human particularities. Moreover salvation is about such things that the human heart truly desires—such as health, and peace, and company, and dying well—and these must be comprehended in any account of salvation. I would only add that the account of salvation he defends is eschatological. Jenkins comments appear on pp. 201-202.