

PLACE, SPIRITUALITY, AND MISSION

What I would like to do is to look briefly at some meanings of sacred places in Christianity, how such places are experienced, and their potential for mission today.

The role of places in spiritual learning and response

I want to begin with a confession. I've been working on the meaning and dynamics of sacred places, past and present, for over 25 years – and I still haven't cracked it. But we are getting closer. The study of sacred places, and pilgrimage has really mushroomed in the last 2-3 decades – and that is all enlightening, but what really interests me is not so much the facts and figures about sites, pilgrims, routes etc but why holy places have been and once again are so important. Why do human beings search for spiritual encounter and why is it so vital to map meaning on to places, whether as individuals or as communities? How is sacredness identified and then communicated to others? And, central to my own work on this project, what part do the senses play in spiritual learning and response? I have been exploring insights from neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, and geography as well as theology, biblical and religious studies, to see what light they can shed. And what they are saying seems to indicate that we should take the 'physicality of spirituality' very seriously. I do not by that mean that we should go back to the unreformed theology and practice of the medieval church – far from it! But recent work in neuroscience, psychology etc all reiterates the simple fact that sensory experience is not an optional extra in learning and responding; *it is the only way we can do either*.

SLIDE 1 QUOTATION 1

'It is hard to overemphasise the role of the senses in shaping our experience of the world and of ourselves. Our sense of belonging, our emotions, our ways of coping all depend on our senses. Sensory experience is the fabric of the mind and *it helps to fashion who we are* [my italics].' Philosopher Barry C. Smith, *The Uncommon Senses*, BBC Radio 4, March 2017.

Current research also stresses that we are not just talking about 5 senses but possibly as many as 25 or more. Crucially for thinking about sacred places, these include kinaesthesia (the sensation of movement) and proprioception (perception of the position of the body in space), flagging up the importance of movement and action. Researchers also emphasise that the senses should not be viewed in isolation from one another, or placed in an artificial hierarchy which prioritises sight and hearing, and diminishes the role of touch, one of the powerful agents of learning and response. Instead it is vital to recognise how they work together to process data, and combine it with an individual's history, context, beliefs and attitudes. The senses, in combination with emotion, are deeply connected to the formation of memory, and to driving reasoning and decision-making. **QUOTATIONS 2 and 3.** Human interaction with the world, including in the realm of spirituality, is channelled entirely through our senses. Human interaction with sacred places, therefore, is shaped not only by belief, instruction, and group influence, but also by physiology and psychology.

QUOTATION 4

a. The senses, place, and meeting God in the Bible

The Old Testament

We can see this clearly in biblical texts. Both the Old and New Testaments are essentially configured around issues of the presence of God and relationship with him. I've spent quite a lot of time exploring how places fit into this – and how the senses work in terms of learning about and responding to God. And the process of interaction with God portrayed in the Old Testament is more complex and multisensory than we might assume. For example, given the prohibitions in the Book of Exodus indicating that that sinful human beings may not see the face of a holy God, let alone touch him, or they will die, it is surprising how very tactile many Old Testament depictions of God prove to be. He is the Shepherd who carries the lambs in his bosom (Isaiah 40:11); the bird sheltering its young under its feathers (Psalm 91:4); the lover embracing the beloved in the Song of Songs (2:6), the husband who leads his wife by the hand (Jeremiah 31:32); the father teaching his children to walk, taking them in his arms, and holding them to his cheek (Hosea 11:1-11). The very 'everyday-ness' of these images makes them the more startling and powerful in terms of the quality of relationship and intimacy they imply.

However, this promise of intimacy is also nuanced and framed by the structures established for encounter with God through first the Tabernacle, and then the Temple. Both are designed to offer a multisensory, immersive experience of glory and splendour. They are filled with colour, texture, scent, and sound; almost every surface is overlaid with pure gold, possibly not something CFCE would approve today. Both Tabernacle and Temple speak of God's holiness, power, and 'otherness', but also of his willingness to respond. Both offer a means of 'safe' encounter between a sinful people and a holy God, through priestly intermediaries and transactions, including prayers and other offerings. While the Tabernacle and its holiness was portable, supporting the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness, the Temple in Jerusalem provides a model of fixed yet still dynamic sacred space - one we are still working with today. Yet it is clear that God can neither be contained by, or limited to, a human-made structure, however splendid. These are places where he may be sought, but he is also a God who travels with his people and can be met by them anywhere – sometimes to their surprise.

One example is shown in this medieval image (**SLIDE**) portraying the story of Jacob, running from conflict with the brother he has betrayed – and the unexpected meeting with God which happens as he sleeps, providing revelation, encounter and transformation:

'Jacob... dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven ... And the LORD stood beside him and said, "I am the LORD... Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go... Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place—and I did not know it!" And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other

than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven." So Jacob...took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on its top. He called the name of that place Bethel ['House of God'].

There was initially nothing remarkable about the site itself, it is just somewhere Jacob stops to sleep at sunset. However, this encounter provides a narrative which makes it sacred from that point onwards. The site is marked, and named as a holy place - where meeting God has changed an individual through addressing need and offering hope.

The New Testament

The New Testament offers a significantly different response to questions about the relationship between place and experience of God. But it is still highly sensory in its approach to interaction with God and still all about *encounter, revelation and transformation*. The belief that Jesus is God in human flesh means that from birth this incarnate God can be seen, heard, and touched, apparently making the role of place in framing encounter redundant. The shepherds see Jesus in the cradle (Luke 2: 15-20); his mother nurses him (Luke 2:7); he is baptized by John in Jordan (Matthew 3:13-17); he invites people to see, to listen, to eat, to touch, to act; a woman kisses and anoints his feet (Luke 7:36-8); he is flogged and crucified; he invites Thomas to touch his wounds so that he may believe (John 20: 24-29).

Strikingly, the many healings described in the Gospels are often effected through touch, including when the petitioners would have been considered 'untouchable'. Even after the visible, physical presence of Jesus has been replaced by the invisible, intangible presence of the Holy Spirit, this dynamism and intimacy of relationship persist in Acts and the Epistles. But the focus on place has shifted radically, from the earthly Jerusalem to the heavenly city depicted in the Book of Revelation. This alone is now the goal of the believer and so the term pilgrim is applied, not to those seeking sacred places on earth, but instead to all Christian believers en route to their final homeland in heaven, where God will finally be encountered and worshipped fully, without barriers or mediation.

Of course, things didn't stay that way. By the early 4th century, the combined effect of the growth of the cult of the saints, the conversion of a Roman Emperor reared on the concept of holy places, and the responsiveness of believers to the idea that they could find themselves literally 'in touch' with God, prompted the establishment of a Holy Land and then a network of holy places across Christendom. There was opposition from theologians but when theology is ambushed by experience, the latter tends to win out – and the idea of Christian holy places has proved impossible to eradicate ever since. Even the Reformation was not the last word on pilgrimage, and place-related spirituality is once again on the increase. It seems the desire to map meaning on to places is hard-wired into human beings, whether it emerges in the formal setting of church buildings or the now familiar 'spontaneous' street shrines. These are now in fact expected and their form prescribed: candles, prayers, gifts, flowers. It actually looks very medieval but shows that people can't live without meaning or ritual with which to frame their lives and experiences. That, as we know,

puts cathedrals and other churches centre stage. But if we are to encourage wider, deeper engagement, we need to reflect the fact that everything about Christian holy places: architecture, furnishings, liturgy, the way people were encouraged to move around the spaces, has always been designed to make them places of *revelation, encounter, and transformation*, building up faith and evoking a response of the emotions and the will. People respond to places and we need to work with that but also point them further:

a. Revelation: Designed to impart and strengthen belief

Places and objects have always played an important role in confirming Christian teaching.

Places and objects have always played an important role in confirming the truth of Christian doctrine. *Being* in the **Cave of the Nativity (SLIDE)**, *seeing* a fragment of the True Cross, *kissing* the relics of a saint, all served to make the Bible or stories of the saints concrete, tangible. **SLIDE QUOTATION Felix Fabri**. The settings and splendour of great shrines were intended to express God's power and shape spiritual experience. Not only were these places where heaven and earth were believed to intersect – they looked like it. **SLIDE QUOTATION Leo of Rozmital**

b. Encounter: Christian holy places are powerful because they are places of encounter with God. From the early days of Christian pilgrimage to places in the fourth century we find a powerful synergy between sensory experience, liturgy, and mapping meaning on to place. Listen to the Spanish nun **Egeria** visiting the Holy Land (**SLIDE**). Movement around buildings mattered as pilgrims learned through looking, listening, touching, and being led through spaces to where God would meet them. Churches were not built as great silent caverns, characterised by the austere beauty we see today. They would have contained many small spaces, probably full of highly sensory ecclesiastical clutter: multiple altars, brightly coloured statues, wall paintings, banks of flickering candles, and offerings. Churches provoked a sense of awe and wonder but there were also many human-sized spaces where individuals could engage and bring their particular needs, kneel, touch, present offerings, light candles. Probably pretty messy by today's standards (and a verger's nightmare) but very effective in creating relationship.

c. Transformation took place through prayers offered and answered; vows made, offerings given, emotion experienced, memories created. Pilgrims often left something of themselves including gifts, candles, their touch on stone or wood; and took away objects which encapsulated the experience and helped them to share and rekindle it back home.

SLIDE: the meaning of places in the past

Sacred places and mission today

So what of sacred places, especially cathedrals, and mission today?

This afternoon we will be discussing spiritual engagement, both on site and beyond; and also looking at managing, enhancing and connecting spaces, and training volunteers and staff. For now, I want to look at a few headline points **SLIDE**. Our research emphasises the fact that encounter, revelation and transformation are still very much on the agenda.

'People want their lives to be meaningful ... it is through our bodily perceptions, movements, emotions and feelings that meaning becomes possible.' Mark Johnson

'Awe stops us dead in our tracks, and sometime, when intense enough, acts like a reset button on the self. People sometimes emerge from awe experiences with new selves, values, and allegiances.' *Oxford Companion to Emotion & and the Affective Sciences*

'My impression of this place was – wow! A feeling I have never had in this intensity, or in this depth. This cathedral is not only rooted in the earth, but it's at the same time rooted in time. As if the Cathedral was here as a ... what's the word? ... A witness'. A pilgrim to Canterbury Cathedral, 2016

The research also emphasis that it is vital to work *with* our buildings and the way they were designed in terms of movement around spaces, building connection and offering the opportunities for sensory stimulus and active response which remain vital to developing human spirituality. That is true of all cathedrals, old and new, large and small, well-endowed - and less so. We have also seen is how many creative and innovative approaches are being used around the country – though not necessarily being linked up. Our findings show that visitor experience is not primarily about whether people do or don't have to pay to enter but about *how* they are introduced to the building and then *supported* in exploring. So we come back to the importance of invitation:

a. Checking our messages

When we are very familiar with buildings and with worship, it can be so hard to see them as newcomers do. Worth checking what we are actually communicating. **SLIDE** For example, this notice [**The cathedral is closed for worship**] which was seen by a couple of people here today not very long ago. A lot of people could read that basically as 'Keep Out!' if not 'Trespassers will be prosecuted!' which I don't somehow think was the intention.

Notices need to have invitations built in to reassure and encourage engagement. There is a world of difference between a notice stating, '**This Chapel is reserved for private prayer**' and one which says '**You are welcome to use this chapel to enjoy a time of peace and quiet prayer**'. 'Spaces of invitation' need to offer not only permission but *encouragement* to enter. They need to look safe. How many spaces are there in your cathedral where people can try being quiet and reflecting on

their lives and needs, without feeling they are on display? Do your chapels look as they are only for the initiated, are they primarily used for storage, or are they attractive, inviting spaces where anyone could feel welcome? We may need to maximise our human-sized spaces – and create more, rather than being content for people to feel awe at the size and beauty of the building but leave without engaging.

Spaces of invitation also need to offer points of focus. **SLIDE** It is evident that if there are candles, **people will light them** – and invest the action with all kinds of meaning; if there are kneelers they will kneel, if there are prayer cards, they may well explore prayer. If there aren't, they may not, not necessarily because they aren't interested but because they may not know how – or feel worried about doing the wrong thing.

Activity in learning and response SLIDE Canterbury Wordcloud and Pilgrimage Day

b. The value of adjacency – and of just making life easier!

The power of adjacency can be seen in the Middle Ages, for example at Durham, where adding an ambulatory made it possible for pilgrims to visit Cuthbert's shrine *while* the monks were worshipping, and to be touched by the sound of worship spilling out into the rest of the church. So let's not appear to hide away week day services but let people come close to them, not only to see what the building is actually for (so many people ask 'Do you still have services here?'), but to see, experience, and learn from watching others from a safe distance.

Joining in Evensong in a cathedral choir can be a life-changing but also a terrifying experience. On Friday, we were working with York Minster who have bravely decided that one of the most useful outcomes of this project for them is to tackle making Evensong more accessible. Banner addressing the issues which can put people off:

- What is Evensong? – it is a beautiful service with singing, prayers and readings.
- How long is it? – it usually lasts about 45 minutes
- What can I expect? – Most of the service is sung by the choir
- Where do I sit? – the stewards will show you where to sit

We talked about simplifying the language of the introduction (How many visitors, from the UK let alone elsewhere, will be familiar with the terms 'Rubric' and 'Compline?') and provide clear visual cues about what to do. Does it matter if people stand or sit in the wrong places? Perhaps not to us, though there might be some tutting from regular worshippers – but it might matter a great deal to visitors if they spend the rest of the service wishing the ground would swallow them up and mentally vowing never to come back. We talked about enhancing the meaning of the service by providing short glosses on key sections. Question raised 'If we make the service cards too attractive, will people take them away?' Does it matter? – the answer was 'no' – because it could be a very helpful 'takeaway' something which

means they go on praying – or listen to Evensong through a web cast – or seek out services in their local church.

c. It is not only justified but vital to treat everyone as potential pilgrims

In Christianity pilgrimage can be a journey through life, an inner journey, and a journey to a holy place. Everyone who enters a church is on a life journey, with many open to the chance to reflect on it. It is not only justified but *vital* to treat everyone as 'potential pilgrims' who may well find themselves engaging, responding, praying for the first time. Both volunteers and staff who have been around a long time can slip into thinking they can assess people as they enter – and treating and directing them accordingly. e.g. Canterbury: can tell who is a Christian; monitor prayers, not invite people to services or exhibitions -because they aren't the type.' One bad experience (and we have witnessed some disasters), can destroy a potential spiritual response and put people off church for life, just as a sensitive and open response can do the opposite. Use prayers in training.

This is where volunteers can be brilliant or a complete disaster – and a great challenge to support and manage effectively. The increase in numbers in many places over recent decades means you may now be dealing with the equivalent of perhaps two or three congregations, made up of people volunteering for a wide range of reasons, with a variety of needs – not least to be needed – and possibly to feel important – and who historically have not been particularly accountable. Some cathedrals are exploring contracts, name badges, compulsory training etc, mirroring practice in other heritage organisations; but there is as yet no national policy or standard - which could help. One of the repeated requests we have had is to use our research to work with the Church of England on this and it's possible that we could apply for follow-on funding to do so, if that is thought useful.

Providing on-site resources and stepping stones

It is not enough to rely on the building speaking for itself these days because most people do not speak its language. We need to provide faith-centred interpretation

SLIDE – Examples from Lichfield and Worcester.

A key question from a lay cathedral member of staff: 'If people become interested in exploring faith, what are you offering them?' Cathedrals are often described today as being 'at the cutting edge of mission' - and in terms of opportunity you are. Many parish churches struggle to connect with those totally outside their orbit, but millions of people are delivered gift-wrapped to your doors every year and brought within the touching distance of the Christian story. But if they want to explore further, what help, what stepping stones, are being offered? We need to work with their sense of place but not to have them leave thinking God is only to be found in 'special places'. Are there leaflets, booklets, a section in the shop with short guides to exploring faith – or something on the website explaining Christianity and suggesting people might like to visit a church near them? The connection between amazing cathedral and small church around the corner is not one people will automatically make. Not only would this help the many people visiting cathedrals who pause and sense something

beyond themselves, perhaps for the first time; it would also help cathedrals and greater churches demonstrate their unique contribution to supporting the mission of the whole church.

However, we are all too aware of how stretched cathedrals and other churches are in terms of resources – of people, time and money. So Bishop John Inge and others are encouraging the idea of a follow-on project working with the AEC, Church Buildings Division and the national Mission and Evangelism advisors, to bring together all the most effective tools for spiritual exploration available within churches and cathedrals and create a suite of resources, including a website everyone could use. The aim would be to build on existing effective approaches to enhance outreach and spiritual exploration through **(SLIDE):**

- **Providing a range of engaging accessible on-site resources** for exploring faith, which don't assume prior knowledge but do justice to the richness of the Christian story, and invite people from all backgrounds to step into that story and discover it for themselves
- **Providing takeaway resources:** including leaflets, booklets, and an 'Explore' website, with topics such as Exploring Faith; Exploring the Bible; Exploring Prayer; Exploring Pilgrimage – and pointing towards local churches, especially through linking to the new 'Church Near You' website launched today!

Such resources could support cathedrals and parish churches in responding to the growing mission opportunities presented by interest in history, heritage, art, architecture, music – and (more than we may realise) in spirituality. The core resources could be designed so that they could be customised by those wishing to do so.

Many who visit cathedrals – and other churches - are made to pause and sense something beyond themselves – perhaps for the first time. That is wonderful but from the point of view of mission it is not enough. "Surely the LORD is in this place— and I did not know it!" said a surprised Jacob of his unexpected encounter at Bethel - but he then went on to find to meet God at many other points in his journey through life. We need to find new ways to offer that opportunity to those who visit our cathedrals – and indeed all our churches - today.