

HOW AWESOME IS THIS PLACE!: THE PARISH AND THE PRESENCE OF GOD

HACKNEY AND BARNES

‘There are more gun shots discharged in this area than anywhere else in Britain’

So ran the headline of a national newspaper about the street known as ‘murder mile’ in Hackney.

Hackney and Barnes – it’s hard to think of two more different places – but they are both parishes of the Church of England – places with a parish church, a priest and a congregation of Christians seeking to love God and neighbour.

Every parish is unique:

I know one parish at the smarter end of Camden Town, who insisted on describing themselves as ‘Primrose Hill borders’.

And of another where the parish fete is overseen by the Vicar on horseback - wearing a cope (the Vicar, not the horse)!

WHAT IS THE PARISH?

A parish is a wonderful thing.

It means ‘to dwell beside’ or ‘with’.

A collection of strangers finding belonging with one another and Christ.

In a place small enough to know and be known.

For well over a thousand years, the community WAS the parish.

Its origins lie in the civic administration of the Roman Empire, and the integration of the Church into its structures.

The ancient practice of ‘beating the bounds’ by walking the perimeter together, is a celebration of communal identity, symbolising unity in faith and charity.

The parish is still the basic territorial unit of our land – but also of communal belonging, support and fellowship.

In England today there are 12’510 parishes with 15’685 churches.

The average population of each parish is 3’510 souls, and the average size is 3.2 square miles.

It's a shame that the word '*parochial*' has negative connotations of insularity and pettiness – perhaps because too often it is true – but it is rarely the whole story.

In essence the parish is a place of *belonging*.

You don't even need to be a Christian to be a parishioner.

You belong by virtue of your residence - whether you like it or not!

You have a legal right of baptism, marriage and burial.

A priest to pray for you and care for your soul.

You are held in the boundaries of love

'THE LORD IS IN THIS PLACE'

The book of Genesis records Jacob's words in response to his remarkable dream: '*Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it!*

This story that affirms the reality of God in a particular place.

The presence of God precedes Jacob's awareness of it.

This awareness, this revelation, leads to a response – the raising of a stone.

So Jacob makes visible and explicit what was hidden and implicit.

The holiness of place.

The holiness of that *particular* place.

But also of *every* place.

Likewise, every part of this country is part of a parish.

And in every parish, a stone is raised - in the form of a church.

For no place is without the presence of God.

Hackney, Barnes and everywhere else.

Anywhere becomes somewhere when God is there.

WHAT IS OUR PARISH?

But what of our parish?

In the suburbs of London,

In the diocese of Southwark?

In the Barnes Team Ministry?

Well, in the last census around 2600 people lived in it, of whom 58% defined as Christian.

Nearly a quarter of the population are less than 15 years of age, while 12% are 65 or over.

In affluence, it is one of the wealthiest,

in area, it is one of the smallest.

People come to us from far beyond the boundaries of our actual geographical parish.

In a city like London, there are many parishes close together, and people choose their church depending on what is offered and what they need.

In our case, it is something about our distinctive liturgy, our excellent music and the beauty of this building.

Yet, the mission of our church is literally grounded in a particular geographical area, and this gives us a focus and an identity, but those same boundaries are porous, they include rather than exclude.

If you read our Visitors book you will find comments such as:

'I came from Norway to see this beautiful church where my great grandparents were married'.

'I feel blessed to come across this beautiful church. I pray for my sons and daughters, for God to bless them today and forever.'

(And one more) *'What a blessing each time I step into this beautiful church'.*

With Jacob we can say, *'How awesome is this place, it is none other than the House of God and the gate of heaven'.*

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST IN OUR PARISH

These comments tell us, that beyond the bare facts and figures are the lives of people whom Christ is eager to meet.

Jesus sees Nathanael coming towards him, and the Lord already knows who he is.

He shows him a vision where the angels of God are descending and ascending – there is a movement between heaven and earth – and the activity is focused on the Son of Man – on Jesus - who is the presence of God in the world.

Encounters with Christ invariably challenge us to see the world differently and to act accordingly.

A parish is such a place.

Walking around an area,
an estate agents thinks of the price of houses.
A gardener sees the weeds in the front gardens.
A police officer calculates risks and threats.
A Christian may be any of these things and more, but they also see the world
rather differently:
As the theatre of God's activity, where he manifests his presence.
For a Christian, there is no secular space.
The church might be the place where Christ is acknowledged and confessed.
But the world is where he rules, known or unknown.
There is no radical separation, and it is to this truth that the parish testifies..

The parish and John West

If all this seems rather abstract, last week made it come into focus.

The sudden death of John West, until recently our assistant organist, has been a great shock to many – and particularly upsetting because he was due to be with us this weekend, and we had been collecting for a further gift to thank him for his musical ministry among us.

But in the midst of that sadness, it has been a beautiful thing to see a parish do what it should be doing; parishioners comforting, caring and supporting one another.

This was a place where John belonged, and although he had recently moved away, he still belonged to us and us to him. Parishes hold memories and tell stories - and I am sure, that for many many years to come, people will remember and speak about John, as a blessing to us here in this place.

THE PARISH TODAY

At times like this we see why parishes matter, although many people wonder if they still do.

It is a model, relevant and anachronistic at the same time.

We call Banns for couples who wish to marry as if we still lived in a small rural village where everyone knows each other.

One parish priest, attempting to ascertain the required residency in the parish of a prospective couple, asked the groom

'Do you sleep in the parish?'

'Yes sir', came the reply, *'I have slept through several of your sermons'.*

But the anachronism of banns, tries to root people in a place and connect them with a worshipping community where God can be known and Christ encountered.

The anachronism of the parish in a mobile world testifies to our attachment to place.

We may select church more by preference than proximity, but we still desire community.

We may choose our friendships by interest rather than neighborhood, but the parish saves us from a network where everyone is the same as we are.

The parish must constantly reinvent itself, but is always relevant because of the Incarnation of Christ

He saves the whole world, by entering into a particular time and a particular place with a significance for every time and place.

That is why we are the Church OF England and NOT the Church IN England.

We are here for everyone because every place has been reconciled to God in Christ.

In a transient world, the stability and permanence of this parish, embodied in our wonderful building reveals the faithfulness of God.

This is the greatness of what is revealed to Jacob and Nathanel, the reality of God's abiding presence in Haran and Galilee, in Hackney and Barnes, and everywhere else:

'Surely, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!'

With thanks to 'Parish: An Anglican theology of place' by Andrew Rumsey