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TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF PLACE or WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PUT PLACE BACK IN?

Talk given by Celia Kemp at St Mary's Chapel, 1 May 2021

Opening prayer

Psalm 87 read responsively and the hymn 'glorious things of thee are spoken'.

GROUNDING EXERCISE

Stand up, bare feet, on the ground, connect to the earth beneath the floor of the building, the rock below

Now imagine back to the 1970s, the Gaffs here, daily prayers the Gelinau psalms in this chapel, kids living here, the river flowing from time to time, the landscape

Now imagine back 100 years

Now imagine back 500 years

Now imagine back 1000 years, 10, 000 years, 60, 000 years...

Today how to hold this sense of place over time here WITH the ideas in the Psalm and the hymn

TALK

This is the fruit of a lot of thinking and work already done together on this, and it is just a marker on the way, much work needs to be done and it is the sort of thing that has to be done in community.

So I have kept vivid ideas in here and things that are controversial in the hope that they can stimulate thought and discussion and us working together towards a better understanding of what this all means.

I used to be employed in reconciliation work and so was frequently involved in various conversations about Indigenous matters.

I was walking across Campfire in the Heart when someone said to me that there was a cycle that repeated in Central Australia.

There would be the latest great project in Indigenous policy, and it would come with a huge amount of enthusiasm and excitement, money would be secured, and detailed plans drawn up.

Then the work would start, a spade would be put into the ground and it would hit the bedrock of colonialism and the whole thing would fold.

It was a vivid metaphor and it stuck with me and I went back later to thank the person and they said they had never said it.

So I am not sure who I am citing here but I do think it describes a true thing.

Endless idea and projects that do not come to anything because they are not grounded in lived reality.

And it raises the question as to why all these enthusiastic people don't know that they are building on a false foundation?

I think it is because they are not close enough to the ground to see,

Because they believe what is real is best seen from high up and a long way away.

Theodore Strehlow who wrote down many of the Western Arrante songs in his book 'Songs of Central Australia' and he was a fine writer so he translated them into English but wrote them as very good poetry.

Darren Jorgensen wrote an article about this and he said Strehlow's work was a 'floating dreaming'.¹

Strehlow's poetic translations hold a miscommunication built into them, for in their original, cultural and ceremonial context, they are quite simply not poetry or song. Yet here they are as poetry and song, deterritorialised as a floating dreaming.

D Jorgensen
Simulating the sacred in Theodore Strehlow's Songs of Central Australia

Their connection to particular time and place has been cut so they can be read at any time and in any place.

This seems exciting, no? Books, talks, songs, poetry, information, I am very grateful for floating dreamings so I can be in my demountable and access the wisdom of the world.

Also Jorgensen cheekily claims that Scripture is a floating dreaming, I think he is probably right and Scripture is the passion of my life.

¹ The term 'floating dreaming' is one he takes from Jolien Harmsen

And yet the phrase has stuck with as putting a finger on a problematic thing.

We live in a particularly unplaced society in a particularly unplaced time.

We have permanent online connections which mean we can access words and images and sounds from anyplace.

It is normative to move frequently for work and holiday purposes.

It is quite possible to not really be connected to particular place at all.

As our culture strongly pulls us to living in what I am going to call the 'mid-air' here nicking an image from C S Lewis.

There are 2 parts to this:

- 1. Up is better**
- 2. Somewhere else is better**

1. Up is better

There was a worldview baked into my school and university educations which was that the real thing was to rise ever upwards, and solve problems from a long way up.

You would never do aged care work, say, but it was noble to join a management consultant firm and issue pronouncements that could solve ALL the aged care homes at once.

The truest thing was what was generalisable and the truest view was the view from power.

It was all about climbing to the top of pyramids.

I was given much advice from well-meaning folk as I progressed through my varied careers and it included:

- You should never take a job that is a lower salary than the one you currently have
- You should not go and be a chaplain in Alice Springs because you are out of sight of the people that matter and it will hinder your career progression
- You should not do research on something Australian-specific if you want to rise as an academic as you need to publish in international journals.

This worldview has won and we are living in heavily institutional and managerial times.

It is more important to manage the thing than actually do it on the ground, we think that decisions should rightly be made a long way away from the actual work, and our solutions

tend to involve collecting data and then issuing words on paper that control what the people on the ground do.

And that our problems will be solved by generalised solutions issues by experts.

There is an overfocus on credentialing, degrees, policy documents, training.

And words, which are particularly suited to this mid-air living, matter more than the reality.

2. Somewhere else is better

I also absorbed the idea as I grew up that the most important places were somewhere else.

I walked by the Yarra most days for many years but I knew more about the Thames because London mattered more than Melbourne.

The Yarra became especially important to me when I was ill and I spent a lot of time there, and still do when I am back in Melbourne.

I recently read a book about the Yarra² and was ashamed that I knew so little about the history and the current reality, the battles to preserve it and the Indigenous history of, this river I loved so.

I found this often in my church work also.

Although Indigenous theology was valued in theory, in practice, if people weren't concentrating, the solution would invariably be to import something from somewhere more important; a book from England for a liturgical season here, say, or to offer a theology position to an scholar from Oxford.

This is both devastating for Indigenous theologians, who I think are doing the most important work, and also foolish bc we have this amazing stuff right here that they don't have in England.

The risk of living in utopia

As we move upward and ever onward, we can think we are living in every place.

But we are at grave risk of living in no place.

The word utopia literally means no place. It is an idea of a perfect thing that doesn't actually exist. You could waste your life in pursuit of it.

And in the process we lose the particular and everything becomes same same.

² The Comfort of Water: A River Pilgrimage by Maya Ward

It is like a generic office tower with muted colours and a boring art piece in the foyer and rooms up into the air full of computers and documents and a tea room and distant views of the surrounds through glass.

That is like any office in any place.

Indigenous folk

It is not a fluke that this pull to upward and somewhere else disempowers and silences Indigenous people.

I think our disconnection to place is a haunting from our origins, that is a haunting from settler colonialism.

Our recent history is power being exercised by people who left behind their own land and people to come here.

And in order to live both with a concept of themselves as good and the fact of what their arrival did to the people already here, they had to deny the importance of historic or placed based connection to land

So settler-colonial society has a brokenness in the area of connection to place.

Of course we are steeped in ideas that the top people know more AND somewhere else is more important– that the entire colonial mindset.

Indigenous theologians see this very clearly.

This is a quote from Bishop Mark Mac Donald when he was visiting Australia a few years back:

Mission has to become less Eurocentric – it is really about the word of God becoming living and real in every culture, in every place, in every person, in every people. There is an innate translatable-ness...to the gospel. The gospel thrives on translation, thrives on being translated. It's the only thing in life that says the more it's translated the closer it gets to the original. It's the only thing that dares to make that audacious claim.

Mark Mac Donald
National Indigenous Anglican Bishop
Anglican Church of Canada

That is we need to go down.

The other image I hear used a lot in Indigenous theological circles, and that is taught at Wontulp Bi-Buya in Cairns, is the image of the church as a pot plant.

It was brought from somewhere else, and it is watered and cared for, but it remains in the pot.

And to really flourish it needs to be planted in the ground.

That is Christ is like a seed that needs to be buried in the ground and will then come up in that particular place.

This means the history, conditions, people and connections in that place matter.

And the knowledge of those things matters.

Scripture, or any floating dreaming, needs to be planted in the ground and come up to be alive.

So what does this mean for our theology?

I have found it brings both Scripture and place alive.

Wenten Rabuntja wrote a book called 'Every Hill's got a dreaming'.

He says that it matters how his paintings are oriented when it is placed on the ground

If the painting is placed wrongly it no longer says what it is supposed to.

The other thing I know that is like this is Scripture where we are, for instance, often told that things face East and it matters terribly that they face east.

The sun rises in the East

The entry to the tabernacle, and then the temple face East and the end of Ezekiel has a focus on the coming of the prince to the temple from the East.

So it is not a surprise that Jesus is often placed East of the temple, and that we know about it.

Scripture is thoroughly placed.

I thought instead of talking about this in theory would give you an example of what looks like when read place back in.

I have been doing this for a few years and it has been deeply exciting to me.

All my springs are in you – Jerusalem and Simpson's Gap

Jerusalem the place matters hugely in Hebrew Scripture.

Psalms 87 which we read, and the hymn 'Glorious things of thee are spoken' just two examples of the vast literature and focus on this particular place.

But why is God's city there?

It isn't the highest mountain.

It isn't on a huge stream or by the sea.

Jerusalem is there because of a small spring – the Gihon spring.

It was a reliable spring, it is intermittent throughout the day but it flows every day.

The pool of Siloam (or Shiloah) was built to hold the water coming from the Gihon spring.

It meant there was water, even under siege.

And it mattered hugely to the theological imagination.

For instance, here:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day.

Psalms 46:4-5

The Psalm describes chaos raging, mountains thrown into the heart of the sea and waves roar threats but, but God's people need not fear because of this gentle spring – and here the word for stream is *palag* which is like a rill.

Which is gladness, and help.

Or here in Isaiah:

The Lord spoke to me again: Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and melt in fear before Rezin and the son of Remaliah; therefore, the Lord is bringing up against it the mighty flood waters of the River, the king of Assyria and all his glory; it will rise above all its channels and overflow all its banks; it will sweep on into Judah as a flood, and, pouring over, it will reach up to the neck; and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Immanuel.

Isaiah 8:5-8

Rezin and the son of Remaliah are mighty fearful and immediately threatening foreign powers.

But Israel will be ok so long as they trust in the gently flowing waters of Shiloah.

Or in Psalm 87:

Psalm 87

Of the Korahites. A Psalm. A Song.

On the holy mount stands the city he founded;
the Lord loves the gates of Zion
more than all the dwellings of Jacob.
Glorious things are spoken of you,
O city of God.
Selah

*Among those who know me I mention Rahab and Babylon;
Philistia too, and Tyre, with Ethiopia—
'This one was born there,' they say.*

And of Zion it shall be said,
'This one and that one were born in it';
for the Most High himself will establish it.
The Lord records, as he registers the peoples,
'This one was born there.'
Selah

**Singers and dancers alike say,
'All my springs are in you.'**

There is another theological meaning carried by springs.

Jesus didn't make up the idea of living water.

It first appears in Leviticus and it means water on the move, so water from a spring or a river.

And it is critical for the Levitical rituals – for the 'tsara'at' or leper to come back to camp, or for someone who has touched a corpse to become clean again.

That is living water brings purification and healing.

The Gihon spring is living water.

So when God makes springs of water appear in the desert it carries all of this richness – it is home, it is help, it is security, it is purification and healing and it is new life in this place.

And now to hold all this against Rungutjirpa, that is Simpson's Gap.

Simpson's Gap is that rare thing in this place, a permanent waterhole.

It is that way because it is fed by a deep spring.

It was incredibly important to Arrente folk and it served as their back up water for the driest years when all other water sources failed.

It was also important to explorers, and missionaries, their writings are absolutely focused on water or the lack thereof as they cross vast distances surviving from water hole to water hole.

And then whitefellas used it for cattle.

There were cattle there to 1970:



Cattle at Simpsons Gap (Urengetyerrpe) 1960s © Aust. Publicity Council Collection, NT Library

We did not value it.

Even now we don't really.

If you spend any time there you see a stream of people walking in taking photos and then walking straight out.

I spend a bit of time there. It is a place that means a very great deal to me, it is an ancient struggle place and it is alive with that spirit and for me it is alive with God.

I sat in the river when it flowed earlier this year. And thought you could say in one way of looking in it I was immersed in dirty water. I thought it was gold. Or you could say it was liquid light, the reflections on the surface of the water were orange, blue, green, bronze and more, shifting in the ripples.

Dirty water? Golden water? Liquid light? Three views of the same thing.

And going down to a local river to me is like the Naaman story.

There is something transforming about the local water, but you have to be willing to spend time there, Naaman nearly missed it because he couldn't see the point, his own streams far away seemed so much better.

All these metaphors and meanings appear in the story of the healing of the blind man by Jesus:

When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent).

John 9:6-7

This was a humbling solution.

It was also (like Naaman's) a placed solution. The blind man was sent to that particular pool, which had all the significance discussed above, and he went and he was healed. The word used for applying the mud saliva mix is anointing. And the washing has the sense of a commissioning.

So as I hold these Scriptural passages against the history of this particular place, it brings both alive and they say things to me about humility, being grounded, living water flowing at the lowest point, where Christ appears in this place and much more.

Also if we think our local springs have theological significance, and I do, then what happens to our groundwater is a church issue.

And that means the recent grant of a massive water licence up north to a company that wants to grow fruit and vegetables to export, is a theological problem and the churches should be active and outraged.

After Jesus?

But after Jesus things changed.

Psalm 87 contains this subversive idea that all these enemies, these lists of people who belong to the enemy places, will be registered as though they were born in Jerusalem.

That is they become the opposite of enemies, they become citizens.

This prefigures the new covenant where we can all be born again into Christ.

And so Jerusalem becomes less important.

There is no longer one temple and no longer the need to travel to worship in Jerusalem.

As believers from everywhere streamed out from Jerusalem after Pentecost, each a temple alit with the fire of the presence of God, could say no place mattered.

I think it means every place matters.

All the Hebrew Scriptural geography and patterns and rituals and imagery.

All that metaphor and feeling and theology about Jerusalem.

Still MATTER.

But they come alive in the particular place you are in.

The literal temple in Jerusalem was destroyed some decades after Jesus but the temple idea persisted as a:

Temple in the heart

Temple as the church

Temple as the created world

And images such as being planted in the ground, springs of living water, trees planted by streams etc still matter.

They are not images of one great big thing but these things matter in all the places and that bring life to their particular place.

TENSION with floating dreamings

This is exciting.

But is hard too.

The generalisable solutions are neat. 10 steps for fixing your life. People are this category or that category and to be dealt with accordingly.

The particular messes this right up.

I am guessing we have all had that feeling when you talk to a bureaucratic that your stubborn insistence on worrying about what is actually going on is deeply unwelcome as it buggers up their clean solutions.

It is like that.

David Graeber, an anthropologist, who wrote a fair bit about this sort of thing puts it like this:

In practice, bureaucratic procedure invariably means ignoring all the subtleties of real social existence and reducing everything to preconceived mechanical or statistical formulae.

Whether it's a matter of forms, rules, statistics, or questionnaires, it is always a matter of simplification...it is a matter of applying very simple pre-existing templates to complex and often ambiguous situations. The result often leaves those forced to deal with bureaucratic administration with the impression that they are dealing with people who have for some arbitrary reason decided to put on a set of glasses that only allows them to see only 2 percent of what's in front of them.

David Graeber
Utopia of Rules

The particular sits in some tension with the general.

And this is painful.

There are serious tensions holding a placed theology against an unplaced world view.

And actually this is what always happens when we add place back in, whether inside or outside the church.

We used to a church based around floating dreamings, speakers from the States, sermons and liturgy that could be preached in any place, people formed by podcasts and information from elsewhere.

If we add place back in it changes things.

Some of the implications are:

1. If we believe the country matters then will start seeing it and it will speak loudly against claims being made from a long way away.
2. Place is not just landscape. It is also the people of the place.

If each one of your Christian community may be speaking/or their life may be living out the word of God then need listen to each one and they will not say the same thing.

2 Corinthians 3 talks about the living out of believer's lives as a word.

This means that stories of people's lives matter.

(And in June Alex will be running a Streams where we get to hear some stories of people in this place).

Also people both inside and outside the church have true things to say about place.

They may well not be saying the same thing.

All of this will bring tension.

That is paying attention to the realities of your place will bring conflict.

This is because the pathway to true connection necessarily involves conflict.

David Woods from Campfire in the Heart says often in church communities people get just close enough to have conflict and then leave.

If you are placed it means you can't leave just because it is hard, and you will need to work through things.

I think of holding these tensions as holding ropes pulling in different directions; what Scripture says, what the land says, what all my different relationships say, what institutions say, what the people of the place say etc

It is very hard but over time it is also where the living water springs up.

3. It raises the deep (and spiky) theological question: where does the word of God come from?

This place this people this group (that is arises from the ground) OR from higher up/somewhere else?

4. A theology of place increases individual responsibility.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer heard Psalm 74:8 (*They said in their hearts, "We will crush them completely!" They burned every place where God was worshiped in the land*) as applying to sacking of Jewish synagogues under Nazi Germany - Kristallnacht - and hearing Scripture in that way led him to courageous resistance and martyrdom.

This is a hard call. There are less costly alternatives. Donna Haraway talks about the risk of slipping into "disengaged denunciations rather than attentive practices of thought, love, rage and care"³

Disengaged denunciations are a lot easier (social media springs to mind here) but I am not sure they achieve very much.

If place is read back in there is no need to solve all the things at once (if that even is a thing that could ever happen).

³ Healing Haunted Histories

Instead you are called to smaller real work where you are.

5. You start to read the bible with a map noticing names of places (and people) and geographical locations which previously you would have skipped.
6. It matter to be where you actually are. Things like spending time in landscape, with people and hearing stories start to take time that was previously spent on podcasts, online degrees, books from elsewhere (major self-own to me that one and this is an ongoing struggle for me) and holidays somewhere else.
7. Ecotheology is not a fringe concern, it at the centre, and call to reading Scripture in country is pivotal as it brings both alive.
8. Indigenous theology is not a theological option on the edge. It becomes central (and exciting) as it is the theology arising out of this place.
9. It empowers each Christian as they are the people in their place. Their voice, their views, their lives, their perception matters. They are not an undifferentiated mass to be formed by the higher up folk.
10. Stops competition because you don't need one huge river or the biggest tree in the world, you need these things in all the places. It is no threat to Alice that the Yarra river exists, it is like that.

So it is less about this institution v that institution, it is more like many trees or rivers, you need em in all the places, and the unity is that it is *Christ* coming up in all the places.

Tensions built into Scriptural metaphors

There aren't just the tensions of holding the real against the view from high up, and the tensions between all the different voices of the real.

There are metaphoric theological tensions built in to Scripture as well.

1. Up and down

There is this idea we need to be grounded; that springs of living water arise from the ground, we need to look down to see Christ, we need to come down, Jesus is 'gentle and lowly of heart', humility even in our language comes from the word humus which means soil etc

BUT there is also the idea that God is up and we are looking up to the heavenly Jerusalem as our true home (see Hebrews 12 for instance).

I think they are both true.

My image is that when we take our shoes off and are standing in the bare dirt our feet may be on the ground but our head is in the heavens (stars, sun, moon, heavens)

We need to be placed, to be like a tree, to be deeply rooted in the particular real but to be stretching up to the heavens.

That is we need to be smaller and more particular and more placed ourselves, but with a greater concept of God.

Our problem is not too much time gazing at the heavens, in actuality, it is too much time in that office in the 'mid-air' not connected to either where we are OR the heavenly real.

I think we are all planted in something but the risk it is it is something too small and mobile like our career or our immediate family or our CV or some such, and this runs the danger that the rest of the world becomes a sort of backdrop scenery to the main game which is me and my life.

This explodes that.

2. Pilgrimage

We are so restless it is easier not to connect too deeply to the particular place as we are likely to leave it soon enough.

And there is a strong theological concept of pilgrimage.

We may indeed be called to leave. To follow Jesus to somewhere else.

I don't think this removes the call to be grounded.

But what does it mean to be called to connect to place knowing we may be called to move?

It means pain is what it means.

Enduring first the pain of connecting deeply and then the pain of separation.

This is still better than the loneliness and disconnectedness of not connecting at all.

(There leads on to the concept of exile and Ralph is going to take that up in July).

The risks

It is a risky endeavour, to take a floating dreaming, to take your ideas about God and try to hold them against the real.

It can go wrong.

I am going to describe a couple of ways I think it may have gone wrong.

This is controversial.

These people are impressive hard-working people who did/are doing important work (and there are many who would not agree with me that they are wrong).

There is an Earth bible work going on in South Australia.

The bible has been used to justify the violence of colonialism and the widespread destruction of the created world, and their idea is to identify the parts of the bible that seem to justify those things as 'grey texts' (rather than 'green texts') and then to judge them against an external set of criteria⁴. Then 'the challenge involves declaring that the grey texts of the Old Testament are superseded and are no longer valid expressions of our faith in Christ'.⁵ This includes many texts including parts of Genesis 1-3 and Psalm 8.

I think this is back to front and you don't use any sort of current understanding to avoid wrestling with Scripture. Instead you hold those difficult texts against other texts, stay in the tension, and struggle until they are redeemed.

I don't believe the bible in fact justifies those things, and I don't see why those parts should be ceded to the colonial philosophy (and actually those parts are often important for Indigenous theologies as they are about land, kinship and conquest).

A second is the work of Teilhard de Chardin.

He was a genius, a Jesuit, and a palaeontologist, who held his faith against the science of his time and in particular evolutionary ideas.

In the end he came to a place where he thought Christ was acting through evolution and there would be a rise in 'Christ-consciousness', a sort of rise in the collective wisdom amongst peoples, which would fix the problems of the world.

You may have encountered some of these ideas in the concept of a 'cosmic Christ', in Catholic environmental theology in particular, and in the later writings of Richard Rohr.

I think this ignores the 'survival of the fittest' built into evolution, which to me is not reconcilable with a Christian worldview.

Also it only seems at all plausible if things are in fact getting better, and I don't think they are.

I think he dropped the rope that was a transcendent God and the idea of God breaking into our knowledge from outside.

⁴ The eco-justice principles listed in the below article

⁵ Norman C Habel, An Inconvenient test: is a green reading of the Bible possible?

The third person who did this who I think got it right was Bonhoeffer.

He held Scripture and theology against the collapse of the church and the grim reality of Nazi Germany.

Which was a great struggle.

He ended up in jail after joining a plot to kill Hitler, and he wrote this letter the day he found the plot had failed and they were likely discovered:

I discovered later, and I'm still discovering right up to this moment, that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to have faith. One must completely abandon any attempt to make something of oneself, whether it be a saint, or a converted sinner, or a churchman (a so-called priestly type!), a righteous person or an unrighteous one, a sick or a healthy one. By this-worldliness I mean living unreservedly in life's duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities. In doing so, we throw ourselves completely into the arms of God, taking seriously, not our own sufferings, but those of God in the world — watching with Christ in Gethsemane.

Letters and Papers from Prison

Bonhoeffer's wrestlings from his time and place have given life to many people in different times and places.

And I think this is what happens, ironically, if you put place back in it is the lively particularly that will truly give life to all the place.

Because nothing new is born in the middle air (despite institutions best efforts).

New things spring up from the ground.

And this is because being grounded is just another way to describe living in the real.

In Conclusion

This is just a starting effort. There is a lot of work that has been done, and I have drawn from as much of it as I can find, but there is a lot of work still to be done.

My hope is that *Streams* is here to hold a space for it, including for creativity arising from this place, and this is exciting to me because it is the most lively thing I know.

I am going to end this session with a reading from M K Turner, a local and much respected elder, who describes vividly what happens when the bottom line of the powerful in society hovers in the mid-air somewhere above the reality of place:

Arne arlepe used to be everywhere. And their seeds used to be big ones when they ripened and fell off. They're only little ones now, because the Land has been spoiled. Some sort of a creature has stamped the soil down, and they've got some sort of chemical on their feet. Take horses for example. What have they got on their feet? Horseshoe! And they're chasing down the cows when mustering's on. And that's how the Land's soil gets powdered up, by chasing bullocks around. It's all that iron they've got on their feet. And it spoiled the ground, powdering it up and poisoning it with chemicals. And when the bullocks get sterilised, maybe stuff could drip down onto where the food plants grow, the seed plants. And after the bullocks have their medicine given to them, well they go away and eat their food out in the bush, and they drop their dung and the dung flies away and gets onto the plants all around, poisons those seeds. The manure you know, it dries out and gets to be really fine and powdery around the bores, and then the wind comes and blows it around onto all the plants. And into the rockholes as well. And maybe that's why the rockholes become blocked up, and the springs feeling them stop running. Might be like that, I'm not quite sure.

Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM
Iwenhe Tyerrtye- what it means to be an Aboriginal person

