

Beverley Minster

Genesis 28: 11 – 18

Researchers at the University of York are reporting the significance of place, particularly places of pilgrimage, for human flourishing. I guess that doesn't surprise you here in Beverley, and I guess it feels like a statement of the obvious, but on days like today perhaps the obvious should be stated.

So, to begin our thinking about the significance of place, the reading from the story of Jacob tells how one place become important to one person, and then to a whole community.

Jacob is fleeing from the jealousy of his brother Esau. There is a harsh simplicity about the way Jacob takes a stone as a pillow. It seems he has no bedding, few possessions. Like many who flee into exile in our own day the waking world of Jacob was fear, terror, loneliness. These emotions were the parameters of his existence, but the dream will transform all that.

The dream tells Jacob something new: that there is traffic between earth and heaven. The object translated as a ladder is probably something more like a ziggurat rather than a conventional ladder, a land mass formed as a temple through which earth touches heaven. It indicates that Earth is not left to its own devices and heaven has to do with earth. Until that moment Jacob assumed that he travelled alone with his only purpose being survival. God was irrelevant. But now there is new possibility because the earth is not cut off from the sustaining power of God.

So Jacob, awaking from the dream, knew that his world, and his life, had been transformed. Jacob, an exile, a non person, has been transformed by God into a person crucial to God's purposes. And God's promise was dramatic and evocative:

'I am with you'. At one level this is the promise of companionship. The lonely fugitive is not abandoned. God will keep him company. At another level, especially for those of us reading this passage in the light of the new testament, there is a reminder of the freightedness of the phrase. We remember Jesus, recognised as Emmanuel, God with us. There is a reminder too, not least on this Sunday after Ascension of Jesus' last words of farewell at the point of Ascension: *Remember: I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

But more than companionship, God promised protection: 'I will keep you'...and the hope of homecoming: 'I will bring you back'. The experience of exile will end and Jacob will at long last sense he was at home.

And so, through a discovery of the powerful presence of God, through God's promise of companionship and protection and homecoming a life was transformed and a new place was created. The story of Jacob's encounter with God happens on a journey, between places where nothing is expected. It happens between safe, identifiable places where everything is risky. A non place is transformed by God into a crucial place. And Jacob named the place Bethel, 'house of God', and it would eventually become second in significance only to Jerusalem for the people of Israel.

We meet thousands of years later in another place which is well established, where the community tells the story of its own St John, another exile and traveller whose experience of the presence of God long ago created this place.

Over the years following, this Minster has become a church which offers blessing to many, a place which enacts what God promised in to Jacob, a place where folk do find protection and companionship, and therefore a sense of homecoming. It has become a place where newcomers, visitors, can sense something of the presence of God, and find their lives turned around and transformed.

Along with many greater churches and cathedrals, Beverley Minster has the power to convey a sense of the spiritual and sacred even to those who are on the margins of faith, or someway beyond. That is very precious when there is much talk of

secularization on the one hand, and for its own part the church erects such stumbling blocks to those who long to believe.

And churches like these do more than work to transform the lives of individuals, fundamental as that is. They also establish and foster relationships between disparate and different groups within the community and region: they create common ground, or, as a social scientist friend put it, non-aligned public space. That is why it is good to see so many from the political world, and from wider civil society, here.

The naves of great medieval churches were originally used not for worship but for gathering: for meeting and markets and for shelter from the rain and the cold. Recently many churches have rediscovered the significance of such activities and have increasingly discovered how, in a fragmented world, the church can provide the links the bridges and the bonds between individuals and groups which then help to build community. That work is clearly effective here, as we see in the presence of representatives of civil society.

The result of that is that greater churches can be crucial in creating and embodying a sense of local identity. I am very well aware, after about six months in Yorkshire, that this Minster has a very clear sense of place and role in the East Riding, and far beyond.

But there is a warning in the story of the place named by Jacob, Beth El, the house of God. Because thousands of years later its site has completely disappeared. So it is worth heading the warning that this place, the community which gathers around this place, does not have a guaranteed future. Donors and funders may be able to keep the building going, but as in the past, political or cultural events may move against it, Beverley Minster will be able to offer blessing only so long as it continues to be imbued with a sense of the powerful presence of God.

Perhaps that is something we are reminded of at this Ascension tide. For the Ascension undermines what a colleague of mine calls the church's tendency to functional atheism. He is referring to the way thoughts and plans are fashioned as

though God did not exist, that everything depends on our activity and our skill, not on faith and grace. To push that further the church mostly operates as if the universe is closed and operates in much the same way as any other corporate meeting. But the feast of the Ascension is a moment which undermines that functional atheism.

Like Jacob's vision of heaven linked to earth the Ascension is one of a series of events which signify how the interaction of God's work and the world of Christ's followers are interlaced as we await Christ's coming. The Ascension is of the piece with a number of events which are, to Luke, markers of the new age..as in the story of Jacob, there are, in the gospel of Luke and the book of the Acts of the Apostles, angels who come and go, and the voice of God heard clearly. We might no longer be comfortable with the use of the dimension of verticality to link heaven and earth: our age might want to use the image of porosity or permeability but whatever the analogical language we use there are moments when we human beings, human communities, can be, must be, surprised by the impact of God's work and God's glory.

Glorious stones and wonderful spaces can inspire, but in the end it is the powerful presence of God which is foundational, and it is the story of that powerful presence of God, as told by God's followers today, which offers security for the future, for it is that presence and that testimony which truly transformative of individual lives and whole communities.

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