

PLACE AND RETREAT

By BRIAN STONEY

ONE OF THE PREVAILING BLIGHTS in our world today is displacement. Millions of people around the world are enmeshed in homelessness. Refugees and the homeless abound in such huge numbers, cutting across every culture and nation, that *dis-placement*, being *out of place*, being *not at home*, has become part of life.

All too often the nuclear family is separated from grandparents and other close relatives. People are on the move, it is so difficult for them to feel rooted. This applies of course not only to refugees and the homeless; it has become almost a way of life in western society, to be displaced, to feel out of place, to have that very deep, but often unarticulated, sense that 'I don't belong'. Restlessness, anxiety, fear, feelings of worthlessness, inability to become centred are all symptoms of displacement. Suicide is so often motivated by a desire to escape the despair of not belonging in order to find a place where I can belong.

We need perhaps to look at the especially insignificant person, the one who has no claim to be heard, in order to understand and be profoundly converted by the desperate need each human person has to name *my* body and *my* soul in *my* place.

There was an alcoholic woman in her seventies who lived around Central Station in Sydney, Australia. Her bed each night was a particular toilet in the women's rest room on the main platform area. The regulars knew this toilet was Betty's place after 11.00 p.m. She made sure people were aware that this toilet was hers. In reality it was her home: the place where she could rest secure, the place where she could think, feel all that had happened during her restless day, weep, curse, remember—and probably pray. One night a fifteen-year-old street girl, not knowing about Betty, decided to sleep there and she was deeply in a drugged sleep when Betty arrived home at 11.00 p.m. Betty was enraged: her home had been broken into. She felt violated, felt that deep insecurity one feels when one's home is invaded. A violent argument ensued. Betty was savagely bashed and kicked. She died defending *her* place in this world.

Our place then is vital to our living, our growing, our prayer. Place is central to our deepest relationships. Place is intimately related to our naming who we are. We remember places associated with our deepest and happiest memories: places where we first told our husband/wife 'I

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want to marry you'; where we were on the holiday that was very special; a church or a seaside spot where we really felt God's presence. We often go back to places to be able to name who we were and who we have become: our first family home, the street we used to play in, the place we used to go for a walk with our Dad.

In modern western spirituality there is considerable difficulty about Jesus, the one who placed himself in our world. We are *dis-placed* in our relationships, we are not at home in and with our world. In this terrible feeling of homelessness—perhaps physical, but more often spiritual homelessness—we look for a God who will fix us up, make us feel at home. We want Jesus to be a heavenly king, just like the Jews who were feeling so displaced, with no home of their own.

Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus we find it such a struggle to face the Jesus 'who set his face towards Jerusalem', the one who fearfully but humbly was led by his Father to open himself to all that would happen in Jerusalem. With those two disciples we are running away from the place where Jesus really is, i.e. in this world as it really is, in my world as it really is—my place. We are hoping to find a better place where we will meet a better God, a more powerful God, a God who will take us out of the place where we feel displaced. The *stranger* however met these two disciples and revealed to them the truth of Jesus and their own truth. Amazingly after that meeting they were able to run back to the place of their pain, their disappointment, their disenchantment with life. It is truly a resurrectional story.

Perhaps our retreat houses reflect this running away. Perhaps they have become not 'the lonely place to pray' that Jesus often sought, but 'the flight to Emmaus' which Jesus refused to take. They are not places where we might meet 'the stranger', they are places of comfort, places designed to take us away from the world so that we will not be disturbed. They are a far cry from the cave of Manresa. Sometimes our retreat centres are ways for us to control God and they result in a comfortable, 'beautiful music' spirituality. They are rarely the cave of Manresa where the spirits can lock horns with each other and the passions in their rawness can be unleashed to be dealt with by God. Our retreat houses can be a haven for the 'rich young man' but rather disappointing for the reckless disciple who wants to be captivated and desires to 'leave boats and nets behind and follow Jesus along the way'.

And so to the retreat in daily life. Through very careful and sensitive use of place in this very gospel way of praying I can move from being displaced from myself and my world to finding *my* place, discovering my name and my world so that I become one with Jesus who has already

become one with me. Jesus has with the Father made his *home* in me. He continually wants to name himself in my place for he was sent by the God 'who so loved the world'.

It is my personal experience of the retreat in daily life that it can become rather unfocused and superficial unless very, very careful consideration is given to place during each stage of the retreat and in each daily prayer period. In the retreat in daily life there is an ever-present temptation to settle for the attitude, 'Well, that's the best I can do given my commitments, my lack of time'. It is subtly considered a second-best way of making a retreat.

I believe with daring and imaginative discernment of the use of place it can be a very profound way of being named by God and allowing me to name God. To have in the back of our minds that the retreat in daily life is not as profound a way of making a retreat as the more secluded form is rather like the judgement the Church used to make that lay and married life was really good and of God, but not really as good as religious, celibate life. It was an untruth and led to a denial of the way God was working in our world and in people's lives.

Our spiritual journey, our relationship with God, is so often about admitting that I am displaced and about discovering where I am placed by God, where is my place. For the follower of Jesus my place will be in this world, my world, for Jesus has chosen our world, my world, to be his place also.

I propose in the rest of this article to explore ways which will help me and retreatants I share with to discover how places enable me/retreatants to name our displacement and name our place. I invite you to explore with me. What I write is my experience, my searchings. It is vital for you to reflect as you read on *your* experience, to let your imagination run free, to enter your own heart to see how through places you can name your displacement, and name your longing to be who you really are, for that will be Jesus' place; to find ways you can fruitfully and naturally use place in retreats in daily life.

Let us begin with the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius. In Hos 2:15 Yahweh says,

I will make the Valley of Achor a gateway of hope. She will respond to me there . . .

The Valley of Achor was the place where a terrible sin against God was committed by Achan (Jos 7:24). The people of Israel avoided the Valley of Achor, for it was a place of death, a place of national shame. Yet it also happened to be a necessary pass through the mountains. Yahweh says: 'I

will make the Valley of Achor a gateway of *hope*'. You will no longer have to walk through that valley with feelings of shame; your place of shame, the place where you feel so alienated, will become the place where you will know freedom and joy of heart.

Where is my Valley of Achor? Where have I sinned, perhaps sinned terribly? Where is my place of shame? Where is there ambiguity and compromise in my life, a place of deadness where I have to be because it is the only pass I know through the seemingly impassable mountains of life? God promises me it will become a gateway of hope, the place where I will respond to God. I need to go to that place of shame, that place where I feel trapped in compromise, where I cannot see anything of God or I meet a brick wall in my relationship with God.

Perhaps it is my office where I compromise honesty, a place where I can seem trapped into doing unjust things because I do not know what else to do. My office then is where I go to pray because it is in that place I need to say humbly 'Lord, save me', 'Lord, have mercy on me'. I go to the *place* of my sin, the place of my darkness where I feel cut off from God and unable to be open to the mercy of Jesus. Perhaps I need to pray in the shadow of a brothel because that is the place of my sin, the place where I feel unable to move. Or maybe I need to pray inside or outside the home of a person I hate, a person who has hurt me terribly, the person I cannot forgive. Perhaps an actual cesspool or garbage dump expresses how I feel in my relationship towards God. I need to pray there.

The streets of a big city can be a special place to reveal who I am before God. There I encounter people who are very restless, who cannot live at home, who wander about aimlessly seeking escape, who express their inability to name who they are by living anonymously in refuges, in abandoned houses etc., who look for food from garbage bins, who shout or talk to themselves in the streets, who lie about trapped in addiction, who live in constant company with violence or abuse, who feel they are too worthless to have their place in life. The anonymity and homelessness of inner-city streets express so vividly ways in which I cannot name all, or part, of myself. Street people, people who are so obviously displaced, will show me very powerfully how I am displaced in my own life.

In the very place where they were told, 'You are not my people', the Israelites will be told they are 'children of the living God'. (Hos 2:1)

People on retreat can fruitfully spend time on the streets noticing what type of person or situation attracts or repels them. They can sit

with or near that person or situation and wait on the God of mercy who hears the cry of the poor—in this case the person on retreat.

Part of the First Week of the Exercises is also to experience the wonder of God's love. Here again, as I have already shown, we naturally go back to places where we felt love, where we were made to feel special, where we knew a deep sense of belonging. So with God. We spend time in prayer at a place where we have felt God's loving presence, where we knew God to be close, where perhaps we have had some awareness of our goodness, where we were aware in our hearts that God knew us by our own name. It may be the seaside, a forest, a place where we can feel alone and secure, a baptismal font where we received our name, a particular chapel, the house where our closest friend lives.

God is God; I am human. God is the fullness of life; I can only comprehend a tiny part of life. God is all-loving, all-embracing; I am so narrow in my loving, so limited in my seeing and embracing. How does place help me to know this truth?

There is another lady on Central Station in Sydney who has become the person in recent years who has revealed God to me. I often go to the station to contemplate in silence this woman and be moved to an attitude of wonder, praise and gratitude towards God. This lady in her sixties (I do not know her name nor have I ever spoken with her) is small, very wizened and distorted in her features and her body. She is deeply mentally disturbed, alcoholic and aggressive. I have sat for many, many hours near her, watching her as unobtrusively as I can. I find it so difficult to see anything of beauty in her disfigurement, her stench, her aggression, her inability to relate.

Not long after I first noticed this woman and was repelled by her, I suddenly heard the words:

Yahweh, your God is there with you . . .
Yahweh will rejoice over you with happy song,
Your God will renew you by love,
Yahweh will dance with shouts of joy for you,
as on a day of festival. (Zeph 3:17-18)

How far I was from the heart of God! I was moved to great wonder and praise of God for I realized how much need of God I had in order to be able to see with new eyes, to love with a new and a happier heart, to dance a different dance with not duty-bound but boundless feet. I am still in that place and so I return regularly to contemplate 'my lady' who again and again leads me to repentance, to renew my trust in God, to a gentle longing to be placed in the heart of Jesus and humbly to let God be God in my life and in the life of the world.

I would like to finish our exploring together of the First Week of the Exercises by sharing with you how I once directed a retreat in daily life. The retreatant was a minister in one of the Christian churches. I spent the first three interviews listening to where he was free and radiating God and where he was blocked and unfree. I discovered he had a wonderful affinity with Aboriginal people and other oppressed people. When talking about them he showed a gracious, respectful love; he came across as extravagantly generous towards them, very forgiving and open-hearted. I sensed that was sacred ground for this man, a place of consolation where he was at home with God. However, when he talked about his own church and church leaders, a darkness came over his face. He was angry, agitated, hurt, judgemental and arrogant—he could not pray. It was clearly a place of desolation, of blockage, of being thrown around by the demons.

So I sent him to pray at a place where some Aborigines gather every day to drink and tell stories—their meeting-place. It was the place of consolation where this retreatant could affirm with abounding gratitude that he was of God and that God's love was pulsating in and through him. I also sent him to pray at or near the entrance of his church's main office which was opulent, indulgent and forbidding. It was the place where he could sit in his desolation, his Valley of Achor, his place of feeling he had no name, no dignity and the place where he found himself narrow and hard of heart, where he found himself far from the merciful heart of Jesus, unable to dance. There he needed to grieve and to wait for God to lead him to new life and new hope, the place of humility and forgiveness.

The Second, Third and Fourth Weeks of the Exercises just as easily invite the retreat giver and the retreatant to make use of place. Some simple examples may suffice as the principle is the same as was discussed in relation to the First Week.

Jesus turned round, saw the two disciples following and said, 'What do you want?' They answered, 'Rabbi,'—which means Teacher—'where do you live?' He replied, 'Come and see'; so they went and saw where he lived, and stayed with him that day. (Jn 1:38-39)

This gives great scope for the retreatant to go to the places where Jesus lives and stay with him a while. Let us imagine where Jesus lives: my own home, my place of work, the school where my children are educated or play, the place where my enemy lives, a home for disabled children, a centre for drug addicts, a hospice for those dying with AIDS, a nursing home for old and discarded people, a prison—and so it goes on.

The temptations of Jesus also give wide scope for the use of place for prayer. Jesus was tempted to go for power, tempted to be relevant rather than be led, tempted to sell his soul in order to be approved. Where is all that happening in my life? Maybe I need to pray at the place of temptation and then be led out to a real desert place where I can fast and wrestle with God. We need to give careful consideration to these temptations for they are subtle, insidious and very powerful. Praying in places or situations of temptation can help us name our truth.

The Two Standards meditation is geared so dramatically to place. Where in my life and just as importantly where in the life of the world is the camp of evil? One place I find very helpful to symbolize the way evil works is a large insurance office building. To sit in the shadow of that building and pray lets me see the subtlety of evil and the way it traps me under the guise of good: firstly needing security, secondly wanting to be wise and prudent—gradually I become trapped in ‘me’ and I am utterly unable to let God be God in my life. One of the main insurance companies in Australia always finishes its TV advertisements by stating: ‘This is for the most important person in the world—you’. This company actually invites us to St Ignatius’ final stage of Satan’s programme, namely pride—I am number one.

Then we turn to Jesus who calls us to his way. How in my retreat do I find the love-place which will impel me to beg to be poor so that I can be with him poor; to beg for humiliations to be with him humiliated? Maybe I can return to the place of my Valley of Achor which after the First Week of the Exercises would be a place of hope and joy—a place of desire to follow him who has so loved me that in this very place he has named me ‘Beloved of mine’. ‘In that place she will respond to me’ (Hos 2:15). In that place of my sinfulness I am so poor and so humiliated, but it is right there I am so loved, loved so unconditionally that I am overwhelmed by the desire to respond with all my heart, recklessly and without conditions. This is opposite to the way of insurance; it is the way of love.

In this article I have endeavoured to name that our faith and therefore our spirituality is centred on God, who so loved the world that this God sent Jesus to put aside being God and become one of us. Jesus dwelt amongst us. We can come to know him only by embracing who we are where we are. That is where he is. He chose this world, my world, to be the only place he could reveal God to us.

At this time in the world’s history there are abundant signs we are not at home, we are displaced. The attraction of a god who is above this world is very powerful and very subtle, but leaves us feeling disappointed

and never good enough. This spirituality can be so full of illusion. The God of Jesus Christ is never deceitful for he leads us away from our illusions to the truth. We need to face the question, 'Do I want to be good or do I want to follow Jesus?' The incarnate Jesus who took his place with love in the world leads us to be able to name with humility, with gratitude and with gladness of heart that my place is his place.

'My Father, I have made your Name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love with which you loved me may be in them and so that I may be in them.' (Jn 17:26)