Rooms and places

Philip Sheldrake

THROUGHOUT THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES (and in Ignatian spirituality more generally), the themes of 'place', home and journey play a central role. It is possible to trace a thread through the text of the Exercises where 'place' is constantly an important background to the spiritual dynamic. I would suggest that in the Exercises there is a tension between a sense of place, or where we are rooted and 'at home', and a movement to 'elsewhere' or 'beyond'. The retreatant is invited to journey between familiar places and the 'whole circuit of the world' to join Christ in a mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God.

A sense of place and home

'Place', like 'time', is one of the universal cultural categories. Few factors in a culture express its world picture so clearly because 'place' has a determining influence on the way people behave, the way they think, the rhythm of their lives and their relationships.[1]

> Places form landscapes and landscapes may be defined as sets of relational places each embodying (literally and metaphorically) emotions, memories and associations derived from personal and interpersonal shared experience.[2]

Yet it is often suggested that contemporary western culture is going through a 'crisis of place'. A consequent sense of placelessness makes the contemporary quest for meaning so concerned with roots. Our longing for place is more than incidental. Simone Weil suggested that the hunger for roots is fundamental to our deepest identity.

> To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognised need of the human soul. It is one of the hardest to define. A human being has roots by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular expectations for the future. This participation is a natural one, the sense that it is automatically brought about by place, conditions of birth, profession and social surroundings. Every human being needs to have multiple roots. It is necessary for him to draw well-nigh the whole of

> his moral, intellectual and spiritual life by way of the environment of which he forms a natural part.[3]

A sense of 'home' seems vital if human identities are not to be dispersed and fragmented. *The poetics of space*, by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, is one of the most influential books on 'home'. 'For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word.' But 'home' is more than simply where we originate. 'All really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home.'[4] Bachelard's emphasis on home undoubtedly reflects a tendency in the West since the nineteenth century to idealize 'domesticity' as the shaping symbol of a satisfactory life. However, even if we agree that contingent cultural and historical factors shape the strong contemporary emphasis on 'home' and 'roots', these nevertheless represent something critical about 'place' experience.

The particular and the universal

This suggests to me that a theological or spiritual narrative of 'place' must take seriously the vocabulary of the particular. The problem with the culture of 'modernity', that has dominated our thinking over the last couple of hundred years, is that it tends to stress the universal and abstract rather than the particular or vernacular; the anonymous or disengaged rather than the personal. A religion based on the doctrine of incarnation should accord a fundamental importance to the particularities of human history and of everyday life. However, while the stories of the origin of Christianity affirm the world and human history, there has always been a siren voice that suggests that what is fundamentally important lies in a spiritual and eternal realm on the far side of time and place.

However, in Christian terms, a theology of 'place' must also maintain a balance between God's revelation in the particular and a sense that God's place ultimately escapes the boundaries of the localized. Christian spirituality speaks both of the importance of 'place' and of 'placelessness' or, as I prefer, the local and universal dimensions of 'place'. Place is both *this, here and now*, and at the same time more than 'this', a pointer to 'elsewhere'.

The Fourth Week and place in the Spiritual Exercises

This tension between local (one might say, domesticated) places and the universal, is neatly expressed in the First Contemplation of the

Fourth Week. This begins with two places. The focus for the prayer is *both* an empty tomb *and* an imagined apparition of the Risen Jesus to his mother Mary 'in the place or house where Our Lady was, including its various parts, such as a room, an oratory, and the like' (Exx 219ff).[5]

To set this dual sense of place in context we need to return to the First Week of the Exercises. The first 'prelude' of the First Exercise invites the retreatant to undertake 'a composition made by imagining the place' as happens in the preparation for prayer throughout the retreat. In this particular case, Ignatius suggests two place images. First of all, the person praying is to consider 'my soul as imprisoned in this corruptible body'. Then the person is to consider that their total reality as a human being is 'as an exile in this valley of tears among brute animals' (Exx 47). On the face of it, this appears to encourage a disembodied and world-denying spirituality. The language suggests that we are inherently not 'at home' in the material world. As essentially spiritual beings, we exist in a kind of permanent 'displacement' in the world of time and space that is conceived as a place of exile from our true home in heaven.

However, such a simple dualist interpretation of Ignatius' words does not fit comfortably with the very positive attitude to the created order in other parts of the Exercises. Is Ignatius simply confused? Does he hold two irreconcilable world-views or is there more to it than that? Such confusion does not fit with the overall impression that nothing in the Exercises is accidental. What we possess is a very carefully constructed text that embodies a sophisticated spiritual dynamic.

In the light of this perception, I suggest that the vision of exile and displacement in the First Exercise of the First Week can only be understood in reference to the whole of the Exercises. In the first place, the meditations of the First Week follow the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23). In the Foundation, everything 'on the face of the earth' is gift because the earth is God's creation. There has been some controversy concerning the relationship between the Principle and Foundation and the First Week proper. However, whether the Foundation is to be seen as an exercise within the retreat itself or merely a prelude to the retreat exercises, its vision undoubtedly forms a backdrop to the Exercises as a whole. This clearly affirms that creation and salvation are equally part of God's plan and that this plan is manifested in and through human history and the world of places.[6] In this context, the images of the First Week suggest not that we are *inherently* exiles in a foreign land but that sin frustrates God's plan for creation. In that way, if I am out of harmony with creation or 'out of place' in the world, it is because of an

alienation that is brought about by sin. However, the point is that such alienation can be healed and as a consequence I may once again find 'my place' and be 'at home' in a world that is created essentially good and beautiful.

The Second Week, which focuses on the earthly mission of Jesus, also begins with visions of 'place'. In the introductory contemplation popularly known as the Call of the King (Exx 91–100), the place we are invited to imagine is 'the synagogues, villages, and castles through which Christ our Lord passed as he preached' (Exx 91). In other words, it is *within* the particularities of a world of specific times and specific places that the gospel grows and God's purpose is ever in process of being brought to completion. It is *within* this world that we are to respond to Christ's call, 'come with me', 'labour with me', 'follow me' (Exx 95).

In the so-called 'first contemplation', on the incarnation (Exx 101–109), the world of places is portrayed not merely as flawed but also as loved by God and destined for redemption *from all eternity* (Exx 102). We are invited to take a God's-eye view ('how the three Divine Persons gazed on the whole surface or circuit of the world, full of people'). In this sharing, as it were, in God's own contemplation we are to see, at the very same time, not merely the disharmony of the world and of the human condition but also God's eternal desire and decision to save the world of people and places. Our attention is then drawn from 'the whole surface of the world' to see 'in particular the house and rooms of Our Lady'. We move from God's contemplation of the whole to God's attention to the specific and particular. This particular moment (incarnation) and particular place (the house of Our Lady) take on the true, or renewed, meaning of every time and place by a process of intensification and concentration.

The Third Week, the 'week' of the Passion, also begins in a room, 'the room of the supper' (Exx 192). In fact, the images used throughout the week suggest a movement between quite specific 'spaces'. We move from the room of the supper to the garden of the agony (Exx 202), to the house of Annas (Exx 208 and 291), to the house of Caiaphas (Exx 208 and 292), to the house of Herod (Exx 208 and 294), to the house of Pilate (Exx 208 and 295), to the place of crucifixion (Exx 208 and 297) and finally to the place of the tomb (Exx 208 and 298). It is as if the total meaning of existence, of everything, is reduced down to a series of concentrated moments and spaces. The universal God of the cosmos is encountered in the 'little space' of a broken human body. The effect is both intense and at times even claustrophobic.

It is within this broader context that the tension between two senses of 'place' in the first contemplation of the Fourth Week can be appreciated. The motif of the tomb is particularly important. A once-enclosed tomb is now open and empty. Jesus Christ is 'elsewhere'. This symbol portrays how the limitations of localized place are broken open to point beyond to what is beyond and 'always more' – indeed to what is universal. The resurrection, however, does not suggest an escape from the imprisonment of the particular, the specific or the 'placed' into some kind of abstract universal 'no place'. On the contrary. The empty tomb simply pushes the disciple outwards into 'the whole circuit of the world'. However, it is now a world redeemed and thus renewed as the 'place' of God's creative outpouring and (in Ignatian terms) 'labour'.

Following the contemplations of the Fourth Week, the dynamic of the Exercises reaches its climax with a final contemplation, the Contemplation to Attain Love (Exx 230 – 237), popularly known as the *Contemplatio*. If the positive vision of the Principle and Foundation launches the Exercises, the *Contemplatio* forms a bridge between the conclusion of the Exercises and a transformed practice of everyday life. As in the Foundation (but in contrast to the 'displaced' world of the First Week), we are offered a universal vision of cosmic and material harmony. In a redeemed world, we are returned to a state of being 'at home' rather than to a situation of exile 'among brute animals'. The First Prelude suggests that the 'place' of the Contemplation is 'standing before God our Lord'. The 'place' of God, however, is unequivocally at the heart of creation. 'I will consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence' (Exx 235). God also 'labours and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth' (Exx 236). In other words, the empty tomb of the Fourth Week launches us into the heart of a world where not only God is 'at home' but also where we find ourselves at home and in harmony with all things.

'The world is our house'

'Home' and 'roots' may be major preoccupations of contemporary reflection on the loss of 'place identity'. Yet, the Christian spiritual tradition has also witnessed to a prophetic 'religious rejection of home'.[7] The Kingdom of God replaces normal 'home' as the focus of spirituality. Our purely domestic ideals are realigned in favour of an asceticism of a journey away from the known towards 'the other'. This anti-domesticity was sanctioned by New Testament texts such as the

Lucan tradition (e.g. 14: 26–27). Within western spirituality, one of the most striking examples of this anti-domesticity, and an associated emphasis on place as universal and unbounded, is the rule of Ignatius Loyola, the *Formula of the Institute* and the *Constitutions of the Society of Jesus.*[8]

We know that Ignatius Loyola and his secretary, Juan de Polanco, assiduously researched older monastic Rules such as the Rule of St Basil, the so-called Rule of Pachomius (in its Latin translation known as the Rule of St Jerome), the writings of Cassian, the Rule of St Benedict, the Rule of St Augustine, the Rule of St Francis, and the constitutions of the Order of Preachers.[9] That said, the Jesuit 'rule' departed from traditional practice in having no obligatory liturgy in common, no distinctive dress, few visible practices that distinguished members from other reformed clergy and no system of capitular government. All this favoured a spirituality of mission and mobility that contrasted strongly with the traditional monastic emphasis on stable conventual life and common prayer.[10] The fully professed members took a fourth vow to journey anywhere in the world to undertake ministry. Although this has been described as a vow of special obedience to the pope, its specific content is to travel.

> This is a vow to go anywhere His Holiness will order, whether among the faithful or the infidels, without pleading an excuse and without requesting any expenses for the journey, for the sake of matters pertaining to the worship of God and the welfare of the Christian religion.[11]

The early Jesuits assumed that most of them would not reside for very long in the professed houses but would spend most of their lives in journeying. 'One should attend to the first characteristic of our Institute . . . this is to travel,' (*Const.* 626). Ignatius Loyola's other principal assistant, Jeronimo Nadal, wrote a great deal by way of commentary on the deeper meaning of the Fourth Vow of the professed. Thus the 'best house' of the Jesuits was their journeying for ministry and mission.

> The principal and most characteristic dwelling for Jesuits is not the professed houses, but in journeyings.
>
> They consider that they are in their most peaceful and pleasant house when they are constantly on the move, when they travel throughout the earth, when they have no place to call their own.[12]

Again, in the words of Nadal, 'The world is our house'. Jesuit 'place' is the *oikumene*, the whole inhabited world. This was not merely a statement about mobility and the geographical scope of celibate Jesuit religious life in a narrow sense. It has a deeper spiritual resonance with a reconciliatory theology of nature and grace that informs Ignatian spirituality as a whole. The 'place' of reconciliation is not an enclosed and isolated cloister but the *space of the world.* This view permeated not only the writings of Nadal but also the *Constitutions.*[13] This benign theology of a graced world, and of finding God in the *loci communes* or everyday places, is a major theme of the spirituality of the Spiritual Exercises that lie behind the Jesuit *Constitutions.*

Michel de Certeau: the empty tomb and the 'always more'

The work of the great French Jesuit polymath, the late Michel de Certeau offers an interesting gloss on the Ignatian project and in particular on the tension between place and journey, 'home' and mission.[14] Much of his fascination with the transgression of boundaries and rupture, and his exploration of 'otherness', owe their origins to his work in the 1960s in the renewal of Ignatian spirituality. De Certeau proclaimed in many different ways that authentic Christian discourse is always breaking apart. It can never be captured totally in structures – including the structure of domesticated places.

After examining various models, de Certeau seems to suggest that Christian identity lies in practising the age-old tension between discipleship (following), and conversion (change). The believer is one called to follow faithfully and to change. The call of Christian discipleship is to wander, to journey with no security apart from a story of Jesus Christ that is to be lived out rather than fixed in definitions and statements. To be truly evangelical, Christian discipleship must avoid settling in a definitive 'place'.

> The temptation of the 'spiritual' is to constitute the act of difference as a site, to transform the conversion into an establishment, to replace the 'poem' [of Christ] which states the hyperbole with the strength to make history or to be the truth which takes history's place, or, lastly, as in evangelical transfiguration (a metaphoric movement), to take the 'vision' as a 'tent' and the word as a new land. In its countless writings along many different trajectories, Christian spirituality offers a huge inventory of difference, and ceaselessly criticizes this trap; it has insisted particularly on the impossibility for the believer of stopping on

> the 'moment' of the break – a practice, a departure, a work, an ecstasy – and of identifying faith with a site.[15]

Christian spirituality is undoubtedly concerned with how to live within the complex world of everyday events. In a sense, the particularity of the event of Jesus Christ 'permits' the placed nature, the particularities of all subsequent discipleship. There, too, God may eternally say 'yes' to us without condition. The world of particular places is therefore the theatre of conversion, transformation and redemption.

However, one of de Certeau's most profound images associated with discipleship is the empty tomb.[16] In the same way, in the post-resurrection contemplations of the Fourth Week, the symbol of Jesus' 'place' is an empty tomb. Jesus' 'place' is no longer limited to any particular 'here' or 'there'. 'He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said . . . indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee' (Matthew 28:6–7). God in Jesus cannot be simply pinned down to a localized presence in this rather than that. The place of Jesus is now perpetually elusive. He is always the one who has gone before, who transgresses boundaries, who exceeds limits. To be in the place of Jesus, therefore, is literally to be disciples, those who 'hasten after' in the direction of Jesus' perpetual departure.

It is important not to see the movement in the Exercises to transcend particular and local 'place' as a denial of the world or of the value of human history. Rather it points, first of all, to the 'catholic' sense that God's presence cannot be imprisoned in any contracted place or series of places. God occupies the *oikumene*, the entire inhabited world. Discipleship simultaneously demands being 'placed' and yet a movement 'elsewhere' in search of 'the always more'. The Ignatian 'mysticism of practice' offers the language of the *magis*, the *semper maior*, the always greater, the always more, the always beyond, together with the values of movement or journeying across boundaries, always exceeding limit in search of *oikumene*.

> Within the Christian experience, the boundary or limit is a place for the action which ensures the step from a particular situation to a progress (opening a future and creating a new past), from a being 'there' to a being 'elsewhere', from one stage to another . . . A particular place – our present place – is required if there is to be a departure. Both elements, the place and the departure, are interrelated, because it is the withdrawal from a place that allows one to recognize the enclosure implicit in the initial position, and as a result it is this limited field

which makes possible a further investigation. Boundaries are the place of the Christian work, and their displacements are the result of this work.[17]

Conclusion

At the heart of the Spiritual Exercises lies discipleship – the call of Christ and how we may become ever more free to respond wholeheartedly. The driving force is always 'the more' – what is *more* conducive to our purpose as human beings, what points towards *greater* praise of God. It is true, spiritually and psychologically, that humans need to be 'at home', to know where they come from and where they belong, before they are safe to travel. The Exercises suggest a process whereby the initial alienation of the First Week, being in exile and 'out of place', gives way to a sense of being 'at home' in one's own self, in one's relationships, in the everyday world and, even more powerfully, in the sense of being called by Christ to be alongside him. However, this restoration of a sense of being 'placed' and rooted is not a recipe for comfortable domesticity. The impulse, particularly in the Fourth Week, is always to transgress the limits of local 'place'. The disciple is committed to join the Risen Christ who seeks in and through his 'body', the community of disciples, to fill the *oikumene*, universal 'catholic' space, the whole wide world, with the reconciliation of God.

Philip Sheldrake is Vice-Principal and Academic Director of Sarum College, Salisbury and also Honorary Professor in the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, University of Wales, Lampeter. He is the author of a number of books, most recently *Love took my hand: the spirituality of George Herbert* (Darton, Longman & Todd and Cowley Publications).

NOTES

1 A. J. Gurevich, *Categories of medieval culture* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p 94.
2 Christopher Tilley, *Metaphor and material culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), p 177.
3 Simone Weil, *The need for roots* (ET London/New York: Routledge, 1997), p 41.
4 Gaston Bachelard, *The poetics of space* (ET Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), pp 4–5.
5 The references throughout this article follow the standard section numbers in all modern editions of the *Spiritual Exercises*. The English translation of the Exercises is from George E. Ganss (ed), *Ignatius of Loyola – Spiritual Exercises and selected works*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).
6 See for example the comments by George E. Ganss in his edition *Ignatius of Loyola – Spiritual Exercises and selected works*, p 391.

7 See Marjorie O'Rourke Boyle, *Divine domesticity: Augustine of Thagaste to Teresa of Avila* (Leiden: Brill, 1997).
8 For a contemporary scholarly edition in English, see George E. Ganss (ed), *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970). Subsequent references to both the *Formula* and the *Constitutions* follow the standard modern paragraph numbers.
9 See, for example, Chapter II, 'Ignatius and the ascetic tradition of the Fathers' in Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the theologian* (ET London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990).
10 For the most up-to-date scholarship on the foundation of the Society of Jesus, and interpretation of the contrasts with traditional monasticism, see John O'Malley, *The first Jesuits* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1993).
11 *The First and General Examen which should be proposed to all who request admission into the Society of Jesus*, 7 in Ganss, *Constitutions*, pp 79–80. See also *Formula of the Institute*, 4 in Ganss, p 68 and *Constitutions*, 529 and 603 in Ganss, pp 239 and 268. For commentaries on the role of mobility in the *Constitutions*, see Joseph Veale, 'How the Constitutions work', pp 6, 9 and 10, Howard Gray 'What kind of document?' pp 24–25 and Brian O'Leary, 'Living with tension', pp 39–40, all in *The Way Supplement* 61, Spring 1988.
12 *Monumenta Historica Societatis Jesu, Monumenta Nadal*, V nos 195 and 773.
13 On Nadal's theology of nature and grace, see O'Malley, pp 68, 214, 242, 250 and 281–282.
14 See Graham Ward (ed), *The Certeau reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 'Introduction', pp 1–14.
15 'The weakness of believing' in Ward, p 236.
16 See, 'The weakness of believing', *passim* but especially p 234.
17 'How is Christianity thinkable today?' in Ward, p 151.