

SERMON – Locating Ourselves

So today I'm exploring the first of these four fundamental pillars of our traditional human culture essential for a meaningful life. 'PLACE'.

But I want to acknowledge right from off that it's not possible for any of these 4 pillars to exist in isolation from each other. The PLACE we feel rooted and located in will always be intrinsically connected to the people who live with us in these places, and the cultural continuity that is forged from our heritage. The present is always a reflection and the fruit of our past.

So let me start this exploration with the Beatles.

Back in 1966 the Beatles had become 4 of the most famous and celebrated people on the planet. They'd been catapulted in just 3 short years from their humble origins of the working class docklands of Liverpool, to being people who now in many senses belonged to 'the whole world'.

But their music was expressing something of an inner yearning.

They were clearly reflecting on **their place, their people and their past.**

Paul McCartney wrote the song **Penny Lane** which is the name of a street in Liverpool. He sang these words...



"Penny Lane is in my ears and in my eyes." In just one short sentence he captures just how much *a place* not only forms us but how much we carry it with us, wherever life may take us.

John Lennon wrote his own reflection with the song... **In My Life.**

There are places I remember - All my life, though some have changed
All these places had their moments - With lovers and friends, I still can recall
Some are dead and some are living - In my life, I've loved them all

I know this feeling well because I have my own Penny Lane.

I was 2 weeks old when Dad and Mum moved into this place.



73 Severne Rd, and it was our family home until 18 months ago.

I have a deep connection formed through childhood and beyond to this location and Birmingham. I was rooted in the landscapes. My maunga (my mountain) was the Lickey Hills. My awa (my river) was the stream that ran through the park at the end of our garden, and I spent countless hours of my formative years in a deep connection to this land.

I was shaped and formed in Birmingham and eventually came to faith there. Severne Rd is in my ears and in my eyes.



But we all have our own Penny Lane and Severne Rd? So let me ask you...

What's the place, the location, the landscape that has most formed you?

The place, the people and the past that's integral to who you are and you know, that you still carry with you.

This strong connection to our formative location is something I've recognised more and more in recent years. Pre covid we went back to the UK every 2 years to see close family and friends but after losing 4 years to Lockdowns I've now made sure to return 4 times in the past 4 years.

And each time I've felt a strong sense of returning to my roots. So many of my immediate family are still there, and in many ways it still is **my place, my people and my past**.

But I also recognise that things and I - have changed.

In the 15 years we've been here in Aotearoa NZ we've done what so many of you in this congregation have done. *Re-located* to a different place with different people.

We've now created a new 15 year past with a shared sense of heritage and we have no desire to return back to the UK. Our 2 daughters see themselves very much as people of this land. But there's no doubting that one of the realities of this is that I sometimes live with a sense of feeling caught *betwixt and between*.

I wonder how many of you have a similar story.

And there are two other perspectives to consider when we think of being located in our formative place.

Firstly, because we now do live in an increasingly transitory, migratory, individualistic and technological age – realistically, the days of people growing up in one place with the shared identity of one heritage and one story steeped in a cultural continuity ... is becoming increasingly rare.

And secondly, I've had conversations with people who have intentionally left their place, people and past because for different reasons they found it suffocating. They seek out a new start and a new story in a new place.

So if we go back to the contention of Paul Kingsnorth that we are becoming increasingly untethered from these fundamental pillars that have been essential for a meaningful life ...

How does our Christian faith speak into all of this?

The obvious answer is that a Christian community reflects all of those 4 pillars that Kingsnorth contends are being lost in modern culture.

The Church is a **place** of worship located in the local community.

We are a community of **people** with a shared identity *rooted and built up* in Jesus Christ.

We have a spiritual heritage and a **past** with a Kingdom story passed down through the generations.

Which means we have a deep sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves.

And all of this is rooted and centred in a life built on the foundation of **prayer**.

And I can testify to just how much this community of St George's has given me and all my whanau the sense of being rooted and tethered in our own transition from one place to another.

So as I thought through this exploration on *place*, I originally had a strong sense that this is where I wanted to land the sermon. I would focus on the gift of a church community as the answer to Kingsnorth's contention.

**But this is where my exploration got very interesting for me,
because scripture took me into another territory of thought and raised more questions.**

As I reflected more deeply on both the life of Jesus and of Paul... it raised some interesting questions in my own heart about what it actually means to be *located* in a place.

I could see a tension that we as Christians are called to wrestle with – and in this tension, we are pointed to a deeper Kingdom truth.

Because when we look at the life and ministry of Jesus, on the one hand we absolutely see someone who's very much located in his Jewish identity and heritage... and yet, he clearly experiences a sense of dis-location.



In today's passage he explicitly states, "**Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head**". These are very thought-provoking words from Jesus, and I also find them moving. Jesus being vulnerable and acknowledging his own sense of being in a '*place-less*' state.

Especially when we remember that this is how he starts his life. Born in a stable because there's no room in the inn. Then his family become refugees on the run, fleeing to Egypt as asylum-seekers to escape the violence of King Herod. **And isn't this a poignant reflection of so many peoples experience in this world today.**

And we also see many references in the Gospels showing us that Jesus had no permanent residence during His public ministry. He relied on the hospitality of his followers and local communities.

One of the most striking moments of dis-location comes in Matthew 13:57 when Jesus tells His disciples that "**A prophet is honoured everywhere - except in his own hometown and among his own family**". Again, a really vulnerable moment from Jesus. Recognising he isn't welcome or respected in his hometown. Dis-located from his own place and his own people.



And isn't this the same truth we see in St Paul?

Like Jesus, Paul is completely **located** in his Jewish roots and identity but he's constantly on the move. In both 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul describes a life of intense hardship, constant danger and of being '*homeless*'. Not to mention being shipwrecked and in prison.

So Paul also knew what it felt like to feel dis-located from a place and a people.

What both Jesus and Paul clearly show us, (and this was my own mini epiphany) ... is that there's a deeper journey here about what it means for our identity to be truly *located*.

So I want to offer three perspectives of the tensions and challenges we wrestle with, and how they can point us to *the* deepest truth that Jesus and Paul show us.

The first is this. To feel rooted and located in our own Christian identity and have a place and a community we feel tethered to - is without question a gift. But it doesn't mean we won't experience feelings of dis-location. One of the biggest challenges I think we all face right now, is our '*place*' in the world.

The reality is that we are both local and global in ways that our forebearers could not comprehend. We can know, see and feel the world's pain in an instant and it affects us deeply. A distant tragedy anywhere can locate its pain into hearts and minds everywhere.

Our own psyche is intrinsically mixed up in the world psyche, which is why I believe we are witnessing so many people talking of how they are feeling anxious and disorientated.

How many of us - have times when we wonder if the world is slowly descending into a place of insanity?

We watch the news around us and can't help but feel that we are becoming untethered from the moral norms we've come to expect. It's disorientating and it's dis-locating. And it's definitely not conducive to a spirit of peace.

And this introduces a second challenge for all of us on what it means to feel *healthily* located to a place people and past

There is such a thing as an *unhealthy* desire of becoming *too* attached to a place, people and past. History shows us clearly that we can turn our natural desire for identity and security into a toxic spirit of separatism or nationalism, tribalism and isolationism. And I would ask isn't *this* one of the most concerning aspects of our cultural moment?

Now on one hand it's all very understandable. The more we feel untethered, (as if we are being cast adrift in an ocean of confusion and threat) – the more we are tempted to make a grasp for that which offers certainty and security.

This might be a good place to pause and ask the question... **Do you recognise this temptation anywhere in your own heart?** A desire to retreat into your own comfortable '*place*'. A desire to seek out identity and security in something other than Jesus Christ.

Because the lessons of the past show us that Christianity and Church aren't immune to this inclination and seduction. Church communities have and still do retreat into their own versions of separatism and isolationism. Christians can be equally guilty of an Us v Them mentality. But as Paul warns in today's passage... **8 See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition**

They're important challenges to acknowledge, because apart from anything else it's not the Jesus Way.

In today's passage, Jesus and His messengers are rejected by the Samaritans purely on the grounds of their *identity*. Samaria versus Judea. Jesus is not from **their place**, so they close their hearts and minds to his presence and his kingdom message.

As we see, the disciples James and John (who haven't yet quite grasped that the Kingdom message is one of love) ... ask Jesus if He wants them to **"call fire down from heaven to destroy them."**

Jesus' response is very telling for all who follow Him. He rebukes them for having the wrong spirit in their hearts.

My third and final perspective is the biggest wisdom truth we are given by Jesus and Paul And in terms of us feeling the tethered, rooted and located in ways that give us the deeper peace, this is the crucial one.



Whatever the earthly circumstances of Jesus and Paul, their ultimate sense of identity and rootedness is *always located* in the most important *place*. Their union with God.

Jesus is rooted and tethered in a union with the Father and the Spirit. Think of John 14:11... **"I am in the Father, and the Father is in me."** And verse 26... **"The Father will send the Spirit in My name."** It's the security of this sacred relationship that transcends all earthly uncertainties and the transitory nature of things.

For Paul, his whole inner life is anchored, rooted and built up in His union with the Risen Christ. Although he has no permanent earthly home or place – and his life is characterized by constant movement and hardship - his identity and security are exclusively rooted in Jesus Christ.

And for you and I ... this must be our ultimate guiding wisdom and truth.

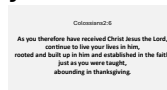
I completely agree with Paul Kingsnorth that to live meaningful lives that are emotionally and spiritually healthy, we need these four pillars of place, people, past and prayer.

I also believe that belonging to a faith community is how we nurture a deeper sense of identity, hope and peace in this uncertain world.

But there is an important wisdom distinction of *how* we do this.

We don't come to this *place* of St George's to make *this* our identity and security.

We come to this *place* so that we can be pointed to the ultimate truth of our where our true identity and our true home lies. As Paul says in his letter to the Colossian church community.



6 As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, 7 rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.



My final thoughts.

There is much in this world that that can leave us feeling disoriented and dis-located. But the central truth of our faith is that we are called to be a people who live in the *place* of the **Kingdom Way**. And as such we will always be in the place of the **betwixt and between?**

Yes, as Jesus declared, the Kingdom *has* come (and as John captured so beautifully last week), the Risen Christ is in every circumstance of our everyday lives.

But the final consummation of the Kingdom and the fullness of God's Shalom is yet to come. So as kingdom people we do live in the **place** and the tension of the **Now** but **Not Yet**.

What Jesus and Paul show us - is that they too lived in this tension.

But whatever their earthly circumstances, what kept them tethered to the **Kingdom place** was their union with God. And this is our calling and our challenge too.

To live joyfully, hopefully and purposefully within this tension. Centred in a life of prayer.

But that's for the 4th week of this sermon series so I'll leave you with these thoughts to ponder as the music plays quietly

REFLECTIONS

- What in the world is most causing you to feel a sense of dis-location?
- Invite God's presence into the interior and exterior places of your life that are feeling untethered.
- Pray that like Paul you can be anchored, rooted and built up in Christ.
- Let your union with God transcend all your earthly uncertainties and the transitory nature of things.