

Along the track

A Sense of Place

A new road is to be built to by-pass the town near where I spent my childhood. There are several plans on the drawing board but the most likely options mean that the old house where I lived will be demolished - if not, it will be the old school on the opposite side of the road and the other few neighbouring houses.

It was a great little community - just a few families, fourteen students at the primary school, no General Store or Pub, a Post Office run by our family. Five of my brothers and sisters were born in the front room of the old house, my mother died there and my father was born in a one room cottage next to the old house and he died beside the road out the front. Childhood and family memories of this place are very precious. Despite the fact that the house and the original farm is no longer owned by our family, it will be hard to see it go.

I have not lived there for sixty years but it is still very much a part of me - I loved and still love the hills, the fog and the rain. I loved the nights by the fire, the long summer days, the creek beds and the bush, but also I love the place because so many of my formative memories lie there.

This quote seems appropriate:

‘We leave something of ourselves behind when we leave a place, we stay there, even though we go away. And there are things in us that we can find again only by going back there.’

— Pascal Mercier, *Night Train to Lisbon*

Place leaves its mark on us. And we leave our mark too. We sometimes speak of ‘knowing your place’ or sometimes even feeling ‘out of place’, even putting someone in their place. Where we have come from, the places where significant milestones in our journey have occurred, the places we have loved and even hated, the places where we have been ‘at home’ (or not), at peace with ourselves have all made their mark on us. Place is the ‘where’ of our experience of God.

Jesus obviously loved Galilee. He spoke of it often - the trees, the birds, the flowers in the paddocks, the farms, the barns, the buildings, fishing. He ‘went aside’ there often, to refuel, to take stock, to be close to God. He went aside to his beloved Bethsaida, to the Sea of Galilee and even into the wilderness - he went there to find refuge from the pressures, the pressing crowds and demands of his ministry, to take a long look at what was happening and to reconnect with God who loved him.

Sometimes he took others with him but mostly he went alone. In this place he was close to his Father.

I wonder why it is that some places, some paintings or pictures of places, draw us into a reflective space and invite us to pause and be there in the moment? Why is it that some places seem to readily evoke memories, reflection and storytelling? Are these what are called our ‘thin places’? In traditional Celtic and the later Christian spirituality, thin places are said to be places where the sacred and the worldly or profane are very close, where the separation is ‘thin’. If we are open to it, such places lead us to sacred moments of encounter with mystery in the midst of everyday life hence the idea that these were Thin Places. Encountering mystery means that Thin Places call us to stop, to reflect, to wait, to celebrate them, to pause, to reflect and reverence them, knowing that the God of graciousness is always there in these places, immanently present, active, drawing us into a deeper relationship, be we present to them now or be they in our memory. These places can be special gateways to the sacred – it is there that we can often find God and, more importantly, where God finds us.

A thin place is not necessarily a place of grandeur or a shrine or even breathtakingly beautiful - our old family home certainly wasn’t that! Rather it is one that invites us to remember, to reflect; such places no matter how mundane and ordinary can invite us into go deeper into the mystery of life, they invite transformation. A thin place may not always be a peace-filled or tranquil place, or even a beautiful one but it is a transforming place as they can help us see more clearly both the past and the present. That’s why the writer suggests that ‘there are things in us that we can find again only by going back there’. When we return to our memories, to these special places in our own story, they do not simply allow us to recall past events and feelings but they can give us clarity about today, they can give us hope for the future - in doing so they can heighten our desire for God.

Regards
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