

The parable of the mustard pot: the significance of 'parish' in contemporary mission and culture

What does a jar of mustard matter? Earlier this month, parent company Unilever announced that its famous Colman's mustard factory in Norwich, England, is to close, after 160 years of production, with manufacture dispersed to various sites at home and abroad. Unions and media rightly highlight the threat to valued jobs in a provincial city, but many others will be aware of another cost to such uprooting – something harder to express or quantify, but with profound significance for all of us: a loss of place.

A generation ago, the sociologist Anthony Giddens contended that the 'disembedding' of social relations was a distinctive feature of late or 'high' modernity, as he labelled the present age.^[1] Indeed, the modern era could be defined by this progressive detachment of experience from time, space and tradition, as global relations became ever more extended, especially with the advance of electronic communications. For Giddens and other social theorists in this era (Frederic Jameson, especially, and the British geographer David Harvey), this process – of which the Colman's closure appears to be an example – was the inevitable outworking (the 'cultural logic') of capitalism, always inimical to local or societal constraints. The market aspires to transcendence, and has long sought to be boundless.

Yet despite modernity's remarkable conquest of space-time – market-driven or not - human culture inevitably falls to earth. As Tim Marshall has demonstrated in his important recent book *Prisoners of Geography*, the shape of contemporary geopolitics arises from inescapably local features – a range of mountains, for example, or access to oil reserves – which condition how nations perceive themselves and thus relate to others.^[2] Global shifts, whether in commerce, conflict or climate, are always a local matter. Moreover, it is clear that our hubristic detachment from place has the paradoxical consequence of fuelling demand for at least the appearance of locality (witness the proliferation of micro-level businesses, 'craft' produce and so on), as societies reckon with nostalgia - literally the 'longing for home' - on a global scale. Because liberals and neoliberals alike, being children of modernity, are temperamentally unsuited to coping with the political fallout, reactionary, populist movements have stepped forward to claim the territory.

Yet while there can be no 'return' to embedded societies or lost landscape (whatever shade our passports become), there can and must be new, hopeful forms of place able to reconnect us with *settlement* in its fullest sense. The dilemma for liberal democracies is similar to that faced by Unilever in England: we want the benefits of locality without its restrictions – 'Colman's of Norwich' on our lid without too costly a commitment to Norfolk. In such unsettled times, 'parish' is an unusually potent concept, and one with great significance for the present mission of the church. On the one hand, its deep territorial associations make it susceptible to being a sneer-word – 'parochial' summing up all that is blinkered and insular – yet, on the other, it remains a small-batch brand of undeniable power, an icon of belonging.

As a civil term (its origins are in Graeco-Roman government, the *parochia* being resident aliens – literally those 'beside the house') steeped in nearly two millennia of Christian practice, the

genius of 'parish' consists in its combination of sacred and secular spheres: its insistence that a church can never be a church unless it is also a small patch of the world. Parochial Christianity thus resists modernity's preference for separating 'Christ' and 'culture' (an abstract and overworked dualism that still conditions the way that local churches draft their mission statements[3]), embodying instead the New Testament idea that if anyone is 'in Christ', by baptism into his saving death and resurrection, they already inhabit a new kind of place – the 'heavenly' place that Christians believe to be the world's true destination. The vocation of the local church is thus to anticipate this new place in the midst of the old - and its principal testimony to the renewal all things will be the kind of 'little world' that it makes. Their claim that such New Jerusalems are both conceivable and deliverable is underwritten by the work of the Holy Spirit, whom, we believe, makes all kinds of local transformation an inspiring possibility.

The recovery of 'parish' as a missional concept also makes a clear, if contentious, case for the social desirability of settlement over dispersion and mobility. The new localists value time, tradition and terrain as key ingredients in the formation of community and in the accompanying charitable commitment to one's neighbour. They are interested in shaping a local ecology that takes land and landscape seriously and sees social welfare as deeply connected to the welfare of our earth, which is why secular environmentalists were among the first to seize on 'parish' as a primal way of framing sustainable community[4].

Because parochialism is an ancient, patient practice, it has often been slow to respond to social change – for example, in response to the rapid growth of urbanisation during the nineteenth century. This can certainly be a weakness, especially when such conservatism is yoked, as in the English case, to secular, landed power. Likewise, the inherent *boundedness* of parochial communities, unfashionably highlighting the limits of neighbourhood, can make them appear, if anything, 'out of place' in the motile, multi-layered geographies of the early twenty-first century.[5] Nevertheless, the very antiquity of the parish idea means it is able, not only to supply its own internal critique (of, for example, too heavily-circumscribed communal boundaries – a consequence of modern mapping more than missiology[6]), but also to offer a radical corrective to the dislocated, market-driven models of church that abound in high modernity.

Any congregation can be parochial if it is committed to the formation of neighbourhood, to the renewal of secular life and to the rooting of both in the 'new soil' of Christ, the second Adam. Interestingly, these attributes seem to have abounded in Jeremiah James Colman of Norwich (1830-98), whose small family firm experienced astounding growth under his tenure and transformed its workers' welfare and the education of their children, grounded upon his conviction that Christianity should be, in his biographer's words, 'a living force in daily life'. To achieve this, they had to stay where they were. Every mustard seed needs a field in which to flourish.

[1] See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), 21-45.

[2] Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography* (London: Elliot and Thompson, 2015).

[3] See H. Richard Niebuhr's classic typology in *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951) and Stanley Hauerwas' critique of this approach in, for example, *A Community of Character* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[4] For example, Richard Mabey: *The Common Ground: a place for nature in Britain's Future?* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1980), 36ff.

[5] See Doreen Massey's excellent study *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005). For a theological consideration, see John Reader and Christopher R. Baker (eds.) *Encountering The New Theological Space: Blurred Encounters of Faith, Politics and Community* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[6] Considered in my recent book *Parish: An Anglican theology of Place* (London: SCM Press, 2017), chapter 5.