

Spring-Source



A Broad Place

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A Broad Place has been shared with many individuals and groups within the Church in Wales. It was also presented to the six cathedral Deans in Wales by the Very Revd Alun Hawkins (then Dean of Bangor Cathedral, 2004-2011) when the role of cathedrals in England and Wales was being much discussed.

He bought me out into a broad place ... because he delighted in me.

Psalm 18: 19.

Cathedrals need to be broad places. They need to embrace that openness which has characterised their nature for almost a millennium. People often enter them with a certain confidence, people who may have little direct affinity either with the Church or with its protocols. They enter them, with confidence, because generally speaking, cathedrals being broad places, do not over-code themselves with all the paraphernalia of congregational possession.

On the whole, there is always a certain passivity about such sacred spaces. They are rarely possessed either by cultic cliques or powerful factions, but are essentially clearings where the human and divine come to presence. People recognise that presence as a powerful confluence, one where they may become one of the melding streams.

There is a certain casualness at their thresholds. They are not hard impermeable boundaries that have about them the harsh arbitrariness of human arrangements. They require people neither to sign up for membership, nor to

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demonstrate active signs of faith-adherence. They display a relaxed confidence in God's ability to meet His people on His own terms, without benefit of constant interventionist assistance from His earthly representatives.

Most places of public gathering are heavily coded by the signs of their purpose. Supermarkets, restaurants and chain-stores contain and focus their purposes in an efficient and remorseless fashion. There is little tolerance of ambiguity. All that does not serve the end of commercial transaction is relentlessly excluded. There is little confusion about what a supermarket is. It is specifically a place to buy things with money. But cathedrals are notoriously ambiguous places. Why is that?

There is a sense that cathedrals maintain ambiguity in order to honour the unknowability and transcendence of God. The God with us is the possible immanent God in the broad place of meeting. They do not heavily lay down who that God is nor the conditions of any possible relationship. In that sense, they foster an openness that recognises the unique interface between the person and God.

The presence of prayer boards, for individual petitions, betrays the secret congregational presence of those who do not appear on the official Cathedral timetable. These low-key, transient, quiet people would be completely unknown, were it not for the evidence of their existence, residing in their prayer-requests. It is the openness of the door that allows them to come in and be there. But, there is more to openness than a door that is open.

Cathedrals are not merely old. They are rooted. Their enduring presence draws together the history of a people, not as a record in stone nor as inscribed monument, but in the way that they gather. Cathedrals have a way of dwelling. Many people are not allowed to dwell on this earth, they are forced to survive instead. Cathedrals can teach the difference. To dwell on the earth is to be rooted. To be rooted is to have a claim that goes beyond merely seeking or enduring shelter. Many people enter cathedrals seeking shelter and what they find there, is dwelling.

There is an authority about cathedrals which does not find its provenance in 'performance criteria'. In a sense, cathedrals have eluded the glamour proffered by the world of correctness, validation, accountability, performance; certainly it touches them, certainly they have to deal with it, but it is an awkward interface

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and one that lacks conviction. Why is that?

Cathedrals have the nature to avoid being totalised. This is not simply the product of administration, planning, foresight or nimble footwork, but rather arising out of the nature of cathedrals themselves. Almost nothing has the power and authority to subsume a cathedral under its dominance. Why is this?

Arising out of time immemorial they point to an uncertain future. Anyone stepping into a cathedral, modern or otherwise, is stepping into a place of peculiar authority. Some people have sensitivity to feel this, to sense this. Maybe that is why they keep visiting and returning. It is an elusive quality, but one that is palpable. What might this be?

A cathedral is a place that is not easily claimed, and yet one that is immediately available. Churches that have become congregational possessions require membership of a community as a pre-requisite. Therefore, there is a pre-claim upon that which lies beyond their threshold. Cathedrals do not have this and people spot this at once. People do not have to earn their presence within them, they do not have to deserve being there. They do not have to accumulate anything in order to bring it forward for approval.

In some sense, cathedrals are now stark. They stand out. In their strange passivity they resist and challenge much that appears around them. Maybe even those who administer cathedrals, who are responsible for them, are confused and uncertain about what it is, that is under their charge. Perhaps one of the greatest temptations is to look beyond the precincts in order to seek signs of authority from without; signs that might serve to validate what is going on within. This would be a great mistake.

Cathedrals already have their own authority, an authority that resists being totalised from without. This needs to be recognised and honoured so that the inherent freedom that this gives is enabled to be released in all the multifarious ways that a cathedral connects with that which surrounds it.

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