Epilogue

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1

All societies have maps; they give you messages about where you are, in relation to each other and in relation to the landmarks that are scattered around the territory of social life. Learning how to belong unobtrusively in a society is learning how to pick up these messages and identify these landmarks. And societies become confused and fragmented when they have lost the art of communicating and receiving such messages. The maps may still be there, but people have lost confidence in accessing them and understanding them. They become suspicious that others see more than they do themselves and so are able to manipulate them. And if some aspect of the map is forgotten, if some historically inhabited territory is forgotten, there will be a diffuse but deep awareness of being somehow deprived.

British society at the moment is not doing well in its cartography. There is the uncertainty about landmarks that shows itself in our complex attitude to celebrity; the persisting resentment about class divisions, which reinsert themselves in contexts where we thought they had disappeared; the anxiety over what ‘really’ constitutes British identity; and much more. Significantly, we are aware of a tension not very easy to articulate around religion: the recognition that, among the historic landmarks of our social life,
the monuments of Christendom largely jostle against the insistent reminders that we cannot take for granted any specific religious foundation for national belonging, public morality or policy-making. Language about our ‘multicultural’ character continues to cause confusion and sometimes anger; and the use of Christian imagery or mythology to reinforce what is seen as a threatened national heritage is a deeply uncomfortable symbol of how tangled various threads have become here (think of the odd phenomenon of the revival of the cross of St George in the past two or three decades as a mark of aggressive Englishness).

And for those in our society who still care about — and even practise — the Christian religion, the confusion is not noticeably less. For some, the whole question of what is meant by the Christian responsibility for the nation is to do with the need for more and more vocal and targeted advocacy for Christian morality in the public sphere, most often in relation to matters around family and sexuality; though also raising a voice about what is perceived as blasphemy. Others are prepared to let the public sphere look after itself, so long as the religious community itself grows and thrives in its own terms. Others again insist on the vital role of the Church as a guardian of social capital in the widest sense, irrespective of its actual numbers or of the measurable difference it makes. Most of us probably exhibit more than one of these responses at various times. But what they all lack — and what the essays in this book have tried to supply — is a coherent account both of what the map of our society really looks like and of where the Church’s territory is; and they seek to respond by directing our attention to the theme of priesthood.

So, if we try to draw out a bit further how this works — these discussions take for granted some basic presuppositions about religion in human society. They assume that the Church exists because there really are two dimensions to the reality we inhabit, and there really is a need to understand and cope with the question of how we appropriately and consciously live in both. Or, to put it another way, the Church exists because the relations that define who we are are not confined to what we can see and control in routine ways. This is simply to say that the Church exists for all the reasons that any religious repertoire for speaking and acting exists — but, as we shall see, there is something distinctive about the Church over against other such repertoires. In general religious terms, human beings need to develop the skills to orientate themselves properly in that unseen frame for their lives to which they are in fact already related, whether they know it (or like it) or not. And the articulation of those skills and the responsibility for passing them on in the most effective way have been among the factors creating a priesthood, a body of designated interpreters of the tradition and animators of communal ritual; people whose task it is to inhabit the two levels or registers of reality and move between them so that they don’t jar against one another destructively. A human community that loses or blocks out the sense of how to relate appropriately to something that is prior to and greater than its own preoccupations is one that will not know how to limit or control its anxiety, its rivalry and thus, ultimately, its violence.

2

But Christianity has, from the first, had complex ideas about priesthood. Priesthood works, classically, through the supervision of sacrifice, the processes by which peacemaking gifts are offered to the divine so that sacred order may be restored, so that the two registers of reality ‘fit together’ again after the various sorts of rupture that make them jar. The Christian narrative announces that there is one moment in human history that so unites the different realities in relation to which human beings live that there is never again going to be a need for any ‘priestly’ mediation
between them; all future crises of disjunction are foreseen and included in this event, and resolved with reference to it.

Priesthood is over and sacrifice is now unnecessary. That is what the Christian gospel says, at first sight: Jesus has offered his life 'once, only once, and once for all,' and the distinctive anxieties of religion are behind us for ever. More specifically, this is what the Reformation reaffirmed, with some violence, in the belief that the Church had in effect reinstated a system of priesthood where none was needed, thus compromising the uniqueness of the action and suffering of Jesus in his crucifixion.

But in fact this represents a damagingly limited reading of the gospel. It is not that the categories of priesthood and sacrifice have been evacuated of meaning: they have been drastically reimagined. It is true that the action of Christ on the cross becomes the pivot of the whole of human history and so defines, once and for all, what priesthood is. Heaven and earth are reconciled not by an anxious negotiation over what might count as an adequate propitiatory gift but by an act of self-displacement in which the ultimate source of sacred power declares itself free to restore any and every breakage of relationship, irrespective of what human beings try to do to mend things. 'Priesthood' as exercised by Jesus incarnate and crucified is about the history of a life that moves towards one focal moment in which the divine relinquishes claims against humanity and the human accepts the full consequence of divine presence in a violent world. It is about the coincidence of two acts of self-displacement performed in and by one agent, divine and human at once.

To try and spell this out a bit: in the crucifixion of Jesus, God, by accepting the defeat of extreme dereliction and mortality, defines his love for the world as one that cannot enforce any claim, cannot triumphantly resist or overcome any rejection. The God who is seen on the cross is one who refuses to defend his 'territory.' And he is present in this supremely paradoxical way in and through a human life that likewise refuses to defend its territory, a life in which God is free to pervade every moment, thought and action – a life surrendered to God. The cross is what happens when there are no barriers between God and humanity; when what has been called the 'kenosis,' the self-emptying, of both is at its most unreserved.

The effect of this, says the New Testament, is to create a pathway or an open door between earth and heaven that no turn of events in the world can ever again close. A place has been cleared where the act of God and human reality are allowed to belong together without rivalry or fear: the place where Jesus is. It is a place where human beings have only to be open to what is offered and where God demands nothing and imposes nothing but simply abides in unceasing love, a love that can only be imagined in the human world and human language in terms of vulnerability. It is thus a place where human competition means nothing; a place where the desperate anxiety to please God means nothing; a place where the admission of failure is not the end but the beginning; a place from which no one is excluded in advance.

What has opened this place or doorway – variously imagined in the New Testament as a place in which to live and as a journey to travel – is the action of Jesus; and as something that reconnects alienated worlds, the sacred and the fallen, damaged or compromised, it can be spoken of as priestly, and as priestly in a way that no other action can ever again be priestly, since it marks the end of all anxiety about how reconciliation is to be achieved. In the sense that no person will ever now be a priest in the sense Jesus is, it is true that priesthood is over. But – and it is a massive qualification, regularly overlooked or misunderstood – what the New Testament plainly says is that the effect of this priestly action is to bring the community united with Jesus into the place he occupies, so that they can be called 'priestly' (1 Peter 2.9 and Revelation 22.4 are two of the most unambiguous texts on this).
The role of the community in the world is to inhabit the place where Jesus' priesthood has been exercised; their style of life, action and prayer becomes the channel by which priestliness is made real and accessible in the world. The Church, then, as the historical Body of the one High Priest, occupies the place where competition and anxiety and violence are exposed as meaningless, as the acting out of destructive and compulsive fantasies; the place where it is possible to fail, to need, and to let down defences.

3

Thinking about religion in general (never actually a very sensible idea, but it has to be done sometimes) brings us up against the apparent unavoidability of a place on the social map where people are reconnected with the sense of a prior and larger order of reality, a reconnection that regularly appears as involving cost (sacrifice). But the proclamation of the Christian good news tells us that this place on the map doesn't have to be constantly reinvented or cleared afresh: it is a secure place, both in the sense that it is indestructible and in the sense that it is safe for the most vulnerable. The task of priesthood, the task of mediating between orders of reality, is now something that has to be witnessed to rather than performed anew or independently; and it is a task committed to those who have come to be at home in the place marked out by Jesus. For human beings, priestliness is now bound up with faithfully occupying the area where divine and human action decisively overlap in Jesus and making sure that the human world knows that there is such a place.

So where the priestly people are to be found is where there is a certain kind of space for human beings, a space that does not belong to any sub-section of the human race, but — because it is first the space cleared by God — is understood as a space where humanity as such is welcome. It is not defended against anyone; it exists because of the defencelessness of God in the crucified Jesus. Those who occupy it are not charged with marking it out as a territory sharply defined over against territory that is the property of others; they are to sustain it as a welcoming place. This is not to say that it is simply a neutral spot where nothing happens; on the contrary, those who enter this space expose themselves, knowingly or not, to a radical realignment of their relations to their familiar reality because they are being introduced into a new relation with the sacred, with the love of God. In that sense, it can be an unsettling, even a frightening place in which to be, where love and what the New Testament calls 'wrath' may often be indistinguishable — where there is a burning abrasion between old habits and the new reality. But it is not the job of the priestly people to 'administer' this, only to hold the door open.

The Church as a human community and the actual physical places where it is regularly encountered (usually but not exclusively church buildings) provide the room for those aspects of human experience that will not fit anywhere else — a formulation I owe to a former student Gillean Craig. The dimensions of humanity that are disadvantaged or ignored in the world where what matters is managing relations that are always potentially threatening and patrolling territories that are always threatened — these are the dimensions that are accommodated in the life of the Church, in the territory that is not defended or patrolled but claims to be potentially everyone's. And for the Church to make this credible and effective requires of the Church a rigorous collective self-displacement, a readiness constantly to question itself as to how far it has yielded to the temptation of territorial anxiety. Not that it is a community or a set of practices that have no coherence and limits; more that those limits are there to conserve the radical character of the welcome offered: because without the central commitment to the inseparable divine and human action that clears the space, none of this would really make sense. But the only kind of anxiety that is proper to the
Church is what prompts careful self-scrutiny as to whether we have begun to take for granted the map offered by the contemporary world, a map in which there is finally no place free from rivalry and thus potential violence.

All this is a laboured attempt to 'locate' what the essays in this book have been about. Some describe what it is like to find yourself, not by any conscious decision but because this is how the world works, carrying the otherwise unbearable grief and shock of a community living with trauma — with a child's murder, to take the most challenging example — where there is no other body that can meaningfully accompany a community's suffering, and indeed the suffering of certain individuals within it. Others speak, directly or indirectly, about the Church as the only community that has the experience and authority to offer to its surrounding culture words for repentance, words for a shared grief over a past that can never be anything other than a record of failure or betrayal, yet which is somehow located afresh by being named honestly for what it is by people who are not ashamed of naming failure. Others chart the way in which belonging in the Church is and is not like other sorts of radically celebratory ways of human sharing. All assume that the mixed and not always edifying history of the Church of England's relations with the national culture in which it is set curiously draws out in its pastoral ministry something crucial about the gospel: it outlines a territory that is in some respects coterminous with the limits of the community itself and yet which cannot now be seen in the ways it once enjoyed and sanctioned, as a guarantee of unifying ideological loyalty. The most paradoxical but most insightful accounts of the Church of England in this book are those which suggest that a church occupying the shell of national political significance but having lost much of the substance is peculiarly well placed to communicate something of the central vision of an undefended territory created by God's displacement of divine power from heaven to earth and the cross.

And what these essays also and so very importantly affirm is that this priestliness in respect of the society we inhabit is focused in the persons of the Church of England's priests. From the Church's point of view, the ordained ministry exists to remind the Church what it is, to tell it daily by the recital of the word and the performance of the sacraments that it does not exist by its own resolution and does not define its place for itself and by itself. The ordained ministry is there to speak of the Church's transcendent origin and horizon, to witness to the nature of the space that God clears. It is necessary to the Church because of our innate drawing towards what I earlier called territorial anxiety; it is the servant of the Church's honesty (its repentance, its gratitude). But this means that from the point of view of the society around, the ordained minister, the person who embodies the particular kind of priestliness that is the heart of the Church's calling, shares in the public perception the same important unclarity that hangs around the Church of England's identity: the same vulnerability to dismissive or derisive perception on the one hand, the same vulnerability to endless and shapeless demands on the other.

Priesthood in the Church of England as exhibited here is crucially to do with the service of the space cleared by God; with the holding open of a door into a place where a damaged and confused humanity is able to move slowly into the room made available, and understand that it is accompanied and heard in all its variety and unmanageability and emotional turmoil and spiritual uncertainty. And as at least one of these essays also spells out in harrowing detail, it is a priesthood that may be nourished on the soil of your own emotional turmoil and spiritual uncertainty; the faithful carrying of the traumas of a community is not something that can be learned without some degree of faithfulness and patience in the place where you
yourself learn that there is room for the unmanageable grief of a love that feels helpless and defeated.

But in case anyone might suspect that the heart of priesthood was simply an emotional wasteland in which the ordained priest did nothing but carry the load that society can't bear, we are also reminded here of the one irreplaceable action that makes the priest what he or she is: the animation of the believing community's thanksgiving, its corporate acknowledgement of where it has been brought, its appropriation for itself in constantly changing circumstances of the fact that a place has been opened for humanity where Jesus stands. What priests do is to secure the opportunity for the priestly people to announce who they are — to themselves, but also to the world around; they are trustees of the time and space for worship that can be characterized as the action of the whole of the believing community, not just of a group of individuals, whether large or small. We are so used to rejecting indignantly the idea that all clergy do is 'take services' that we are in some danger of forgetting that if they don't do this they are not doing what they are asked to do. For them to be servants of the space cleared by God, they must be at the service of the community's need to express its common gratitude in a shared language, in a time that is given up to this and nothing else. The traditional Anglican and Catholic obligation to say the 'daily offices', Morning and Evening Prayer, is the tangible sign of the obligation to see to it that the community's worship happens — and happens in such a way and such a style that it declares plainly something of the nature of the place Christians believe they occupy. To be a liturgist — a person whose skills are directed towards making or letting the corporate action of the community at worship happen with integrity and depth — is not an optional extra for the priest. The priest keeps open the space human society needs by taking the responsibility for inviting the believing community back again and again into this space, so that the society around can see that it is still, indestructibly and non-negotiably, there.

4

Being a priest is not first about 'leadership' — though that is not an irrelevant concept if it is properly understood as identifying the differences that can and need to be made in a community, and seeing that they happen. It is not primarily about the role of organizing and administering, but neither is it in any simple sense just the role of what one Christian tradition calls a 'teaching elder'. The teaching, like the leadership, happens only as and when the priest has learned what it is to inhabit a place and to speak from that place into the community's life — the believing community but also the wider human community. The lifelong commitment that has been regarded as a necessary aspect of priestliness in the Catholic and most of the mainstream Protestant tradition is to do with this awareness of being called first of all to live somewhere and to become a native of this place. This book has been about how the Christian gospel claims its location on the map of human societies — not by setting up a distinctive territory that has to be defended by any means possible against others, but by announcing that there is space for humanity to be itself and to receive what it needs to grow and be healed, a place where God's initiative in Jesus' life and death and resurrection has decisively made room for the human creation so that there is no more anxiety, no more negotiating, no more struggling to find the currency for mediation between earth and heaven. The fragile and often confused exercise of the pastoral ministry in an established church with an ambiguous history shows itself to be unexpectedly well equipped to witness to this insight about the place of Jesus as every place in the human world and no place in the human world: every place because there is no territory firmly marked in rivalry with others, no place because it cannot be mapped onto any plan that we can conceive. The priest remains the celebrant of what will not fit anywhere else, in the name of a
divine act that refuses all self-justification, all successful ways of managing the relation between divine and human. That relation has been taken up once and for all into the inseparable oneness of gift and sacrifice in Jesus. And the priestly ministries narrated and reflected on here proclaim just why and how this is good news for faithful and non-faithful or unfaithful alike.

+ Rowan Cantuar:
Lambeth Palace, Christmas 2007

Four Poems

David Scott

A Priest at the Door
I sit at the door of the church and see who comes in and who goes out. They don’t hand anything in like they used to, animals or grain. I don’t have to receive anything to put on the altar, or pass anything to my assistant to be slaughtered and the blood drained and flung. I am grateful for that, not having been brought up to it. Instead they get books and papers snippets of news, and the magazine. Somebody else does all that. I have no ephod to divine the truth, no incense to burn, no curtain, to close behind me. I have only the agony of knowing I have little, and the slow job of resisting any attempt to make it more, because in my mind’s eye I have the eye of the needle, and how easy it is for even licked thread to miss getting through.