

St Martin's Conversations No 4: Revd. Dr Jeremy Law

Pilgrims – Religious Tourists?

Basic proposition: *The pilgrim comes not to consume (an experience – to be entertained) but to be transformed (to see things differently once one has returned).*

Time and space are not uniform: they are determined by what 'fills' them: need a [kairological](#) concept of time and a corresponding ecological concept of space.

Could give a perfect scientific description of this space: located at longitude and latitude, of so many cubic metres, composed of bricks of such and such a composition: we would not have understood it at all!

Experience of classic car: car may be exactly as it was in every respect, but the experience of owning it and driving it is irreducibly changed by the context (space) in which it is used. Its meaning has shifted; it has been transformed by the place it now occupies (even as it links you to a remembered past). And because its meaning has changed – so has its reality!

There is no meaning without interpretation. *Interpretation is not an added (external) extra to reality; it renders reality accessible, capable of being experienced.* Cf the triadic notion of sign, object and interpretant ([Charles Peirce](#)). We are symbolic animals – so adept at handling [semiotics](#) that we no longer notice it.

The business of interpretation includes historical context. *Knowing the history changes reality!* That's why a car once crashed, even when a perfectly repaired, is experienced differently.

There's a process by which *space becomes place* (e.g. making a house into a home)! This is essentially a process of meaning-making.

Humans are not trees; they are inherently travellers. They learn to interpret the meaning of one space through the lens of another in an ongoing, cumulative process (realist, but non-foundational - It is *not* the case that any interpretation will; there emerges a mutually correcting network of interpretations that are tested over time). Through imagination we can also be mental travellers: every book in this sense is essentially about travel – inhabiting a different world, or more modestly different standpoint.

But what of God? Isn't God beyond, space, beyond boundary, omnipresent and thus indifferent to any particular space?

OT perspective: [Genesis 28:10-19](#) Jacob's ladder: arbitrary stopping off point is revealed as a 'thin place' between earth and heaven; a place of communication.

NT perspective: [John 1: 43-51](#) – *Jesus is the ladder* connecting heaven (the realm of God's unambiguous presence) with the earth (and the present). More generally, the [incarnation](#) suggests God is not indifferent to space, it is not alien to God: more, that the material, spacious, world can become the mediator of the God's presence and glory (basis of sacramental thinking).

All space holds the potential of disclosure of God in Christ, but not every space is equally experienced as such.

In Trinitarian thinking, the Persons mutually indwell one another; they provide living space for one another ([Moltmann](#)); there is perspective (shift of meaning with space) even here since the Father is not the Son, is not the Spirit etc...

The tourist is the consumer: a seeker after an experience which is enjoyed, used up and then done with. This is about entertainment to 'fill in' (but not to essentially change) time. The pilgrim travels for the sake of the return, for the sake of what comes after, for what will be a (hoped for) lasting change – the discovery of new meaning about oneself, the world (including others) and God.

We cannot help other pilgrims unless we are pilgrims ourselves in this space; allowing the complex of space and interpretation to change us. What visiting pilgrims need is access to transformative (helpful) interpretation.

JTL 15.5.11

QUESTIONS

- 1) In what ways have you experienced space (eg house) become place (eg home)? What made the difference?
- 2) Where have you had your most profound experiences of God? Is there any pattern to be discerned here?
- 3) How has your own connection to Canterbury and its story affected your faith? What strengths do you draw from it or how, if at all, does it get in the way of your relation with God?