

# Towards an Urban Theology of Land

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## Introduction

Last March I moved to the Church of the Good Shepherd West Derby, into the nascent team ministry also embracing St Christopher's Norris Green and Christ Church Norris Green. And one of the first questions I asked myself on arrival was, how do I get to know my new place?

My growing interest in contemplating an urban theology of land has emerged from the programme I undertook in trying to answer that question. It is a programme with two strands:

**Active listening** on pastoral visits, in places of contact, during involvement in community groups, to representatives of agencies active in the area;

**Parish walks**, using various methods and routes, sometimes alone, sometimes accompanied. Around the area covered by all three parishes together, quite a large area of outer estate embracing most of Norris Green and some of Croxteth. This I regard as *active walking; mentally engaged walking*, with the intention of recording my observations and impressions gained en-route, to help build a picture over time, of the parish and the relationship of the people and the place. A foundation for theological reflection.

In both cases I journal my observations, in the case of walks I use my website [www.johndavies.org](http://www.johndavies.org) to share what I've seen, inviting readers' comments back.

In football parlance, what I want to present to you today is a *talk of three halves*. For the first ten minutes I will read to you a transcript of one of my walks, from last summer; then move into the area which I would roughly call methodology - talking about some of the people who have influenced my approach to urban walking and resourced my reflections on the walks, and then to move on to investigate some theologians working in the area of *land* and *place*, which are closely linked, and offer some proposals about the directions in which an urban theology of land might go.

I should point out now that this is a presentation at the start of a process, so I will be offering signposts, pointers, suggestions rather than finely-honed theories today. But I anticipate a creative discussion in the second part of this morning as we tease out some of these things together.

## 1. A Parish Walk - Bringing in the Bacon; Saturday, July 24, 2004

(Adapted from original walk)

[http://www.johndavies.org/parish\\_walks/parish-walks-4-bringing-in.html](http://www.johndavies.org/parish_walks/parish-walks-4-bringing-in.html)

Saturday afternoon - perfect for a stroll around Broadway, the area's main (some would say only real) shopping area. I'm doing a figure-eight, out along Broad Lane and back along Lorenzo Drive.

It's fairly warm but blowy. Which has brought the children out: two little girls making games for the teddy which is as big as them, at the front of a house with the door wide open to the living room, and an older boy slumped alone at the base of a wind-blown tree, playing with

his fingers. Further on a woman helps her grandson take his first wobbly journey on a bike with stabilisers.

As the road sweeps upwards round the back of Norris Green Park it is obvious why this is called Broad Lane; though it is not the original ancient route. This stretch of road came in with the new estate in 1930. Some of it appears to be ready to wind up its history altogether. The nearer the centre of the figure-eight, the roundabout where Broad Lane and Lorenzo Drive intersect, the more empty houses there are and the more nature has begun to reclaim the land.

This indicates the edge of the present-day City Council's failed experiment in the Boot Estate, a sorry story of urban mismanagement. Gaps between the houses to the right, all along here, show a wild green vastness where not long ago whole communities had been. Some hold on to the hope they will be relocated there again: the adverts are up for new houses, though there's little sign of building work beginning as yet.

The roundabout is overlooked by St Christopher's - the Children's Church: built with the help of over £3,000 raised by the youngsters of the twelve Rural Deaneries of Liverpool Diocese. On the Broad Lane side of the church bold red iron gates protect the lovely Children's courtyard between the sanctuary and the hall; if we had our way (which we might) this would be an open cafe area on future summers days like this.

Signs by the church hall: SLIMMING WORLD MONDAYS FROM 10 - 5.30PM. McCabe Chemists. Langbank Medical Centre - Dr M.N. Metha, Dr S. Muthu, Dr N.M. Patel, Dr A. Arain. A woman passes struggling with a wheelchair: "Ar ey Laurice, ang on, I can't push ya."

Just past the Private Day Nursery is the back entrance to Sayers bakery. My question about who round here can afford private childcare seems to be answered - I guess, those who work at Sayers.

The Co-op is busy, and as Broadway approaches, as expected, things look up. The local economy is solvent, it seems. Pevsner's description says: "Completed in 1929, two-storeyed, on a curve, and punctuated with gables. Poor detail of the shopping canopy". Broadway's fifty-or-so establishments seem to be dominated by bookies, florists, card shops and chippies.

Smell of vinegar, paper swirling around (recalling Bill Bryson's wry observation on alighting from Lime Street, "The citizens of Liverpool are holding a festival of litter.") But the main impression - people; all sorts and ages, alone and together, mostly at ease, mainly at leisure. I stop to talk to a couple of parishioners, he, terminally ill, determined to take the afternoon air. And then to watch a car doing a terrible job of reversing into a rare parking space, to then discover that it is my neighbour, who is a long-distance lorry driver. Broadway feels good; I sneak down Back Broadway to take notes, where all is razor wire. Clubmoor Conservative Mens Club hides behind strong wire here: TETLEY, intercom entrance, hardly welcoming.

Out onto Utting Avenue East where the corporation builders in 1930 created a pleasant residential crescent and where today this is punctuated by a building site, for a Sure Start centre. Out of one front doorway spill four women, family, four generations chatting and laughing together. I turn right at the lights onto Lorenzo Drive.

This is a famous Liverpool road, but it's not clear who Lorenzo was. In 1796, city father and slave trade abolitionist William Roscoe published his *Life of Lorenzo de' Medici*. Florentine

statesman, sportsman, musician, patron of the arts, his contemporaries called him Lorenzo the Magnificent (il Magnifico). However he was a failure at business. Unsuccessful banker and bad debtor - odd that it is on the road named for him (perhaps) that Norris Green's largest employers are based.

Whistlers Farm looks anything but rural. A large brown corrugated shed behind cast iron railings, revealing nothing about the purpose of its business. Except two small signs, carrying identical messages. In a language I later discover to be Danish, which roughly translates,

TO ALL TRANSPORTERS - POLICE AND RESIDENTS COMPLAIN ABOUT NOISE.  
THEREFORE DO NOT PARK HERE OVERNIGHT. PARK IN A DIFFERENT SPOT AND COME  
BACK 0630 TOMORROW MORNING. THANKS WHISTLERS FARM.

It turns out that Whistlers Farm (est. Dec 1998) moved to Lorenzo Drive in February 2000, a purpose built unit formerly owned by Clarks Quality Meats. They are meat wholesalers and number amongst their customers Weddall Swifts, Towers Thompson and - here we are - the Danish Bacon Company. Denmark being the world's biggest exporter of pork.

In my mind I connect Whistlers Farm with Sayers, the famous Liverpool bakers, whose factory is next door. For, if you put these companies' produce together then one of life's loveliest treats is formed: bacon butties. In the middle of Norris Green I am at the epicentre of Yum.

Nothing outside Sayers' shoddy-looking factory reveals that they are now a subsidiary of Lyndale Foods, one of Britain's three largest Bakery chains (behind Greggs and Three Cooks), which, according to a trade report, is expanding well. *50 of the company's shops have been rebranded with a bright new corporate image*, it says. I'm left wondering why such a successful company cannot think to 'rebrand' the flaky frontage of its flagship factory.

Detour on the home stretch - avoiding the easterly Lorenzo Drive (the original Broad Lane) I cut a course through Broad Square (which is named as it is shaped) from Circular Road West to Circular Road East (ditto). And on the playing field at the heart of Circular Road West, a municipal vision epitomised - the wonderful sight of a group of small children playing football between corporation-maintained goalposts, overlooked by their families' tidy homes. I sense this is a place of security for them. An urban planners dream realised. Rare and lovely to feel.

Circular Road East encircles an *adult* playground - The Circular Road Bowling Club, surrounded by a tall hedge. Forbidding externally, inside its green and gardens are well-maintained. Surprising to see it all locked up on a summer's afternoon, nevertheless it is another well-intentioned municipal experiment which has survived well over seventy years.

Broad Square School, on the other hand, is a sign of a different time. A new building looking like a pharmaceutical factory, with the school sign behind high metal fences displaying a public-private partnership: The City of Liverpool and Jarvis: The Headteacher (Mrs Spencer) and the Emergency Contact (Jarvis Helpdesk). I don't know the school so can't comment on how this partnership is going. But in the physical centre of this municipal dream the contrast is sharp.

I return home to discover on my map that a straight line connects Broad Square School (education in thrall to capital) with Croxteth Hall (old money, absentee lairds) via the site of Norris Green House (built by Arthur Heywood in 1830 - slave trade banker family, now subsumed into Barclays).

Before that, though, the walk's end. Where Circular Road East meets Lorenzo Drive a mum teases her little son about how far he's ridden his new trike today: "Fifty-four miles," he insists. And a young man helps his young lady into his vehicle; out together for the day in the works van.

## II

### Getting to know my place

I've just shared one of the walks with you; I'd next like to introduce you briefly to some of the influences on the methodology behind them, and then to go on to discuss the possibility of utilising this body of material to begin to tease out what it might mean to develop an urban theology of land.

#### Common Ground and local distinctiveness [1]

For some years I have been fascinated by the work of Common Ground, who work in the arts and the physical environment, focusing on the positive investment people can make in their own localities, championing popular democratic involvement, and inspiring *celebration* as a starting point for action to improve the quality of our everyday places. The activities of Common Ground have a mostly rural focus, but my instinct has always been that much of their work and approach overlaps usefully with our urban situations. Particularly around their concept of *local distinctiveness* - that which is special or unique to a particular place.

*The concept of local distinctiveness ... is characterised by elusiveness, it is instantly recognizable yet difficult to describe; It is simple yet may have profound meaning to us. It demands a poetic quest and points up the shortcomings in all those attempts to understand the things around us by compartmentalising them, fragmenting, quantifying, reducing.*

*Local distinctiveness is essentially about places and our relationship with them. It is as much about the commonplace as about the rare, about the everyday as much as the endangered, and about the ordinary as much as the spectacular. In other cultures it might be about people's deep relationship with the land. Here discontinuities have left us with vestiges of appreciation but few ways of expressing the power which places can have over us. But many of us have strong allegiances to places, complex and compound appreciation of them, and we recognize that nature, identity and place have strong bonds.*

*We sometimes forget that ours is a cultural landscape. It is our great creation: underpinned by nature, it is a physical thing and an invisible web. It is held together by stonewalls and subsidies, ragas and Northumbrian pipes, Wensleydale sheep and halal butchers, whiskies of Islay and Fenland skies, bungalows and synagogues, pubs and the Padstow Obby' Oss, round barrows and rapping, high streets and Ham stone, laver bread and Devon lanes, door details and dialect.*

- to which, of course, I would add the Broadway shopping precinct and the no. 14 bus route for starters. And you will have in mind images of your own parish's cultural landscape.

*Places are process and story as well as artefact, layer upon layer of our continuing history and nature's history intertwined.*

*... everyplace is its own living museum, dynamic and filled with sensibilities to its own small richnesses. These are places we know when we are in them. Meaning is entrapped in the experience of change, symbolisms and significance cling to seemingly ordinary buildings, trees, artefacts... Places are different from each other.*

I find great richness in this approach - and the endless possibilities it offers for investigation of an area. It's an invitation, I think, to look at your place *more closely*, to look at your place *more deliberately*. Which is what I set out to do on these parish walks. The parish walks are deliberate attempts to be jolted into observation.

Common Ground's genesis is in rural lore and activity but, as I said earlier, their work does translate usefully into urban situations.

*Local distinctiveness is not necessarily about beauty, but it must be about truth.*

This connects with biblical imperatives towards truth-seeking; and in this project I have found some unexpected fellow-travellers who take up their notepads, pocket cameras and walk around urban spaces recording their observations in search of their truths, whose various approaches to this task inform mine.

### **Iain Sinclair [2]**

A celebrated contemporary writer. His subject is London - to his novels and his travelogues he brings a lifetime of intense observation, often about the less beautiful side of the city and its inhabitants. In the mid-nineties he published *Lights Out For the Territory*, where he walked the 'territory' he had made his own, the streets and rivers of inner London, exploring their hidden associations and connections. He followed that up in Millennium year with a more challenging, less immediately attractive - but actually, incredibly fascinating - project: *London Orbital*, in which he set out to walk the vast stretch of urban settlement outside London, by tracing on foot, counter-clockwise, the land immediately around the M25 motorway.

To give you a sense of his style, his descriptions of the minutiae of neglected English life he observes, here is an extract from a morning spent on the industrial outskirts of Watford. Among the sheds of scrap metal and recycling merchants Sinclair discovers a fine place to eat:

*Our breakfast, in the Mad Max kingdom of these war lords of waste, is a treat. A caravan, an awning, white plastic tables. Strip-lighting on the strobe. A large lady with big gold rings in her ears. And a face as featureless as a satellite dish. Eggs in their dozens, ready to break into the pan. Pink and yellow notices with handwritten specialities of the house: TOASTED SANDWICH VARIOUS FILLING FROM £1.50. In France this vehicle would have appeared in half a dozen movies. In California it would (as a replica) have its own gag-a-minute TV series.*

*We swill our mugs of near-coffee, lick our plates and congratulate ourselves on being somewhere we'll never find again; a morning epiphany among stacked containers, long sheds. The best of England: close to a canal path, close to allotments, close to a football stadium, faces deep into a (£2.50) 'big breakfast' in a culture that only does breakfasts.*

Sinclair's approach seems to agree with Common Ground who encourage us to appreciate the edges, those places where different habitats meet,

*... in town some streets are dominated by small Indian shops and others by big chain stores, the area of greatest fascination may well be where they overlap.*

And this and Sinclair's prose also echoes Roger Deakin who has written,

*At the "margins", the connections between people and place are most evident and easily discernible. [3]*

Seeing the margins not as risky or unattractive places, but rather as the best places to go to find truth, I think resonates with Jesus' approach to the places he chose to walk in, and encourages me on my walks and subsequent reflections to seek out hidden, rejected and unexpected routes.

#### **Patrick Keiller [4]**

Architect turned filmmaker who turns his camera onto hidden parts of England making unusual connections between economics, politics and culture, which, again, reveal much. His 1997 film *Robinson in Space* is a journey through England, from Reading to Newcastle upon Tyne, which takes in many industrial sites and dockland areas and features a narration which with gentle irony reveals a lot about these places and the culture in which they sit:

*The day we arrived in Derby, Rolls-Royce announced half-year profits up 43 per cent to £70 million, though the chairman would not rule out more job losses, and the shares fell 8 per cent.*

*'The English are acknowledged world leaders in fetishism and S&M,' Robinson read in the paper. 'The only company in the world that makes latex sheeting suitable for fetishwear is based in Derbyshire...'*

*We wanted to visit Robin Hood's Well, near Eastwood, but the wood had been fenced off by the owner.*

What I learn from Keiller is the value of researching the place's economic circumstances which can reveal all manner of things ... and to permit idiosyncrasies, to allow humour and failure to inform the act of observation.

The important thing is that the walk is always a conscious act of observation. I love the quote of Oscar Wilde which Keiller uses:

*It is only shallow people who do not judge by appearances. The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible...*

... which I suggest, sits well with incarnational theology.

#### **Psychogeographers and provocative walkers**

In 1984, **Bill Drummond** [5], then manager of Echo and the Bunnymen, organised a day of Bunnymen-related activities in Liverpool including a hike around the city centre following a route which Drummond had determined by tracing the outline of a rabbit - Echo, the band's symbol - onto a map of the city centre, the manhole cover at the bottom of Mathew Street serving as Echo's navel.

Drummond is a walker whose often idiosyncratic on-foot activities search after truth. He remembers this walk as being one of the day's "apparently meaningless, if entertaining, events. Of course, to me they weren't meaningless; each event dripped heavily with ritualistic symbolism."

This served as my introduction to a field of activity I later understood as being part of the practice of *psychogeography*. Walking purposefully-prescribed routes connecting aspects of the walkers' memory or experience, or the place's history, for instance, to the ground being trod. Being determined to make connections, find meanings along the way, and being entirely open to the consequences of anything that may happen en-route.

Psychogeography has a serious, sometimes academic, spiritual and for some practitioners, occult side, but it does not preclude seeking truth or having fun. To me it sits alongside the recent revival of interest in labyrinths, not least in Christian circles, which also utilise a prescribed journey as a means to spiritual discovery. And it can be seen to relate to more populist pursuits such as guided city tours for tourists and local enthusiasts.

Connected to that in my mind is the work of Liverpool-based artist **Jean Grant** [6], whose Pool Project is an exploration of Liverpool's tidal pool, one of the city's lost routes. She writes:

*The pool is the reason for the city's being, the emotional, geographic, and historic heart of Liverpool. The tidal pool's course still delineates the city's structure, its movement patterns and spatial qualities. It is however concealed from both the view and the consciousness of those who travel its route.*

Jean launched *The Pool Project* with a walk which traced the underground waterway, stimulating debate and triggering further activities to recover a part of the city which has been hidden for many years. The immediate appeal for me is that this is a Liverpool project; underlying that is the encouragement to look at the historical connections in the city between natural features and human land use, and how the shape and quality of the land still impacts on today's urban experience.

And finally, a word about **Wrights & Sites** [7], an artists alliance based in Exeter, who have produced what they call the **Exeter Mis-Guide** [8], published in 2003, which rightly describes itself as "like no other guides you have ever used before."

*Rather than telling you where to go and what to see, a Mis-Guide gives you the ways to see your town or city that no one else has found yet. A Mis-Guide is both a forged passport to your 'other' city and a new way of travelling a very familiar one. An essential part of the toolkit of any 21st Century urban survivor.*

*A Mis-Guide takes the form of a guide book. It suggests a series of walks and points of observation and contemplation within a particular town or city. It is no ordinary guide book. It is guided by the practice of mytho-geography, which places the fictional, fanciful, fragile and personal on equal terms with 'factual', municipal history. Author and walker become partners in ascribing significance to place.*

The Mis-Guide in particular, suggests methodologies for approaching parish walks. Their suggested methods include allowing a dog to take you for a walk; drifting (following your feelings or a repeated system - first left, second right, first right etc); following a compass course; allowing a child to take you for a walk; going to extremes (from the lowest place to the highest place, the ugliest place to the most beautiful place, the saddest place to the happiest place, etc); beating the bounds. All potentially wonderful ways to imaginatively approach the task of mapping an urban parish, of observing urban land and its uses.

### III

#### **Observations and questions raised**

Influenced by these writers and (often urban) explorers I have undertaken a series of walks with a number of guiding principles including:

- the aim that eventually every part of the parish will be covered, with particular concern to include the less obvious or more easily avoided routes;
- a commitment to an aesthetic which puts truth over conventional ideas of beauty;

finding creative ways of walking and recording walks, sometimes in company so that the observations of colleagues, local children, elderly or disabled, community figures, are recorded over time (eg, we have a community poet and a couple of local historians); being accountable to colleagues and local people for my output and encouraging feedback - a prime tool for this is the www, I post my walks online and people can, and do, use the comments facility to add their own observations or make constructive criticisms.

The sum of these walks so far is a fairly humble 37 web pages, but it is an ongoing work. Since the winter drew on the frequency of the walks dropped a bit and I have begun to turn my mind towards this question: *having begun to discover what is distinctive about this place, how this slice of land is regarded and used, how then to begin thinking theologically about it?*

It struck me from the beginning of my time in the parish that land may be a key concept with which to understand this area:

I arrived at The Good Shepherd just in time for the church's centenary celebrations and it struck me how radically the church's relationship with the land has changed in that time - from being a daughter church of St Mary's servicing the spiritual needs of the farmers of the surrounding fields and the estate-workers of Croxteth Hall, to becoming one of the few providers of community amenities on a vast residential estate with very little social provision;

The development of the vast estates of Norris Green and Croxteth in the middle decades of the 20th century were the consequence of massive changes in municipal housing policy which maybe signalled radical changes in the city's culture or, equally likely, *provoked* such changes;

The rise and fall of heavy industry affected the economy and lifestyles of the whole city of Liverpool, and some of the key sites were located in our area, GEC, Plessey and others on land now given over to urban wilderness or speculative commercial developments;

The ongoing saga of the Boot Estate is a major identifier of past and present realities for the people of the area. That story is all about the management of land;

Changes to the urban landscape continue to loom: particularly along the East Lincs Road corridor which borders our parish, including plans to build the biggest Tesco's store in Europe, plus the development of the first-phase Mersey Tram line which will criss-cross the parish en-route from West Derby Road to Kirkby.

And other, incidental but fascinating discoveries provoke an interest in the significance of land here: such as reading that Liverpool is the largest of a number of English towns and cities which were built on common land. In Liverpool's case it was built on common land belonging to the parish of West Derby...

Housing, commercial and industrial developments in the area are all rooted in the people's attitude towards land use. The history of the land says much about the shifting balances of power between people, local authorities and commercial concerns; says a lot also about hopes and aspirations, injustices and provocations. Says something about the interface between the material and the spiritual. Any serious engagement with the life of the parish must involve an understanding of these issues - it seems to me that any serious theological engagement must invite an understanding of land use and abuse.

Alongside this it has increasingly struck me how land is a key scriptural motif. Whether we're thinking about land as an actual physical entity or place, or in symbolic terms, it is every-

where present in scripture, is the foundation for the entire story of Israel - and of course is still vibrant in the present-day situation of the Jewish people.

We think of wilderness, we think of sojourn or asylum, we think of the promised land, we consider what kingship did - and does - with land, we contemplate exile and rebuilding, we reflect on *jubilee*... all of these key scriptural categories, all directly linked to land. And much of the detail about the people's relationship with God and the land is, or can appropriately be interpreted as, urban: from Babel to the new Jerusalem the scriptures meditate often on urban land use.

So in beginning to search for directions to go in this subject rich with possibilities, I have begun to seek out theologians who have already done some work in this area. Texts which will be of great value in this line of study include Norman Habel's *The Land is Mine: Six Biblical Land Ideologies* [9], published in 1995, and John Inge's *A Christian Theology of Place* [10], which offer rich models for interpreting scripture through the lens of land and place, terms which can hold specific meanings but are often interchangeable.

But in particular I want to share an outline of Walter Brueggemann's *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise and Challenge in Biblical Faith* [11], first published in 1977, recently updated, which seems the most fruitful starting-point for this area of investigation. In the time remaining to us I would like to outline some of the areas he touches on in that book, and offer some tentative suggestions as to where they might lead us in relation to the specific area of an *urban* theology of land.

### **Brueggemann**

Brueggemann's work is rooted in a concern to address what he regards as a pervasive aspect of contemporary culture: the sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless. "The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit," he writes. It is experienced by people from all sectors of society and even those who appear to be well rooted and belonging can experience profound dislocation.

"This, of course, is not a new struggle," he continues, "but it is more widespread and visible than it has ever been. Nor is this sense alien to the biblical promise of faith. The Bible itself is primarily concerned with the issue of being displaced and yearning for a place. Indeed, the Bible promises precisely what the modern world denies."

He suggests that land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith. "Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging." He suggests that the urban promise of freedom and self-actualisation has failed, that it has not fed the human hunger for a sense of place, which is a primary category of faith.

By *place* Brueggemann is talking about specifics, as, he argues, scripture does.

*Place is space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny. Place is space in which vows have been exchanged, promises have been made, and demands have been issued. Place is indeed a protest against the unpromising pursuit of space. It is a declaration that our humanness cannot be found in escape, detachment, absence of commitment, and undefined freedom.*

So biblical faith is not to do with a history of a people in random space; it is to do with a particular history of a particular people in a particular place. "If God has to do with Israel in a special way, as he surely does, he has to do with land as a historical place in a special way."

Brueggemann identifies some scriptural themes which help draw us closer to the interface between God, people and land. Some obvious, some less so.

*Israel as God's homeless people - as sojourners*, as embodied in Abraham, Isaac and Jacob on the way to a land whose name they didn't know; as wanderers in the wilderness with Moses and Aaron where they are at their most vulnerable; and as exiles, displaced in Babylon, alienated from the place which gave them identity and security;

*Israel as God's landed people* - as embodied in Joseph, where Israel settled in the land of Egypt - a complex story where security and prosperity gave way to oppression and slavery; and also as embodied in the monarchy which ran its course from Solomon to Jehoiachin, where kings behaved as kings do and had their way in the land.

In a particularly stimulating essay titled *Land: Fertility and Justice* Brueggemann notes the suggestion offered by the linguistic link between Adam (humankind) and adamah (land), that in the same way as women and men are in covenant relationships together, we are in covenant relationship with the land. And having linked sexuality and economics in this way he goes on to identify three biblical themes which relate to both: *the right of enclosure, the command not to covet, and defilement*.

In his discussion of the *right of enclosure*, Brueggemann describes Israel's land theory as one where land is a covenant gift of trust or inheritance; and contrasts this with alternative theories which regarded the land as a tradable commodity. Proverbs 22 and 23 speak covenant language as they appeal to the powerful in the land *not to move landmarks*, ie, not to use their legal powers to adjust property boundaries in their favour to the detriment of the 'have-nots' in the land;

In his discussion of the *command not to covet*, Brueggemann reclaims the tenth commandment from being "a purely psychological matter concerning jealousy and envy" to being a text needing "to be understood in terms of public policy and social practice," particularly land practice: do not covet your neighbour's field'. Such covetousness is illustrated by "the rapacious land policies of the monarchy (as in 1 Kings 21)" and is condemned by Micah and Isaiah, the two prophets, he says, who "most consistently critique the royal apparatus in Jerusalem, which is to be understood, among other things, as an embodiment of land surplus, if not monopoly."

Brueggemann finds *defilement* the most difficult category to handle: ritual defilement of the land. Difficult, he says, because ritual defilement is a notion quite alien to us today. He references Deuteronomy 24.1-4 in which a woman returning to her previously-divorced husband is 'an abomination before Yaweh' which bring[s] guilt *on the land*'. Jeremiah utilizes this text when he presents an argument about how land is lost, in Jeremiah 2 and 3, in which Judah is the wife who has strayed into alliances with Egypt and with Canaanite religion - 'you have polluted the land with your vile harlotry!' - and where Yahweh is prepared to put aside the judgement of the Torah to restore the broken relationship in the land.

Brueggemann also begins to articulate a New Testament theology of land, around the opposition between *gift and grasp*.

Israel had learned that the problem of land and the possibility of land consisted on the one hand in grasping with courage and on the other hand in waiting in confidence for the gift. In the period of the New Testament ... there was a mood of grasping in the form of urbanized syncretism that had oppressive implications. The movement clustering around Jesus,

enigmatic as it is, appears to be a restatement of the theme of waiting in confidence for the gift.

Israel, from New Testament times through to today, is caught up in the tension between waiting in faith for the gift of land or seizing it through military assertion. And Christians live in a related set of tensions introduced by Mary in the Magnificat, and Jesus in his kingdom teaching: the "poetry of inversion" in which the land-holders will lose what they have and the landless will gain: *the meek will inherit the earth*.

Brueggemann is keen to encourage readers not to *over-spiritualise* New Testament texts, and to consider Paul's writings on law and faith, and his texts regarding our reception of Abraham's inheritance as relating keenly to our life in the land. And finally he draws quite stimulating parallels between *crucifixion* and *resurrection* on the one hand and exile and the land of promise on the other. In the person of Jesus both histories of Israel are enacted, he suggests. The movement from being a landless people to the land is equivalent to resurrection (Gen 12.1-3 > Josh 21.43-45); the movement from being a landed people into landlessness is crucifixion (Judg 2.6 > 2 Kings 24.14-15)

It is the third history announced by Jeremiah, Ezekiel and especially Second Isaiah that comes to dramatic fruition in Jesus, the utterly homeless one who is given dominion.

Brueggemann argues compellingly that "it is the history of *gift and grasp* that concerns the church."

It is a radical affirmation in the New Testament, but an affirmation that Israel surely learned: 'Kings who grasp lose. Pilgrims who risk are given.' And Paul affirms what the whole history of land is finally about: 'What have you that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?' (1 Cor 4.7). It is not what one would expect. It is not how it seems with land. But it is the case nevertheless. Coveting yields nothing but anxiety. The meek, the ones claiming no home and living with homelessness, do indeed inherit the land. That scandal announces the absurdity of all alternative ways in the land, even if they seduce us.

#### **4. Conclusion**

You can see how these themes are rich in possibility in attempting to uncover an urban theology of land. I'm at a stage now where I can begin to interweave them with the raw material I've been gathering on my walks, to see what emerges:

- to ask to what extent *identity and belonging* are linked with land and property on our estate which has a history of disruption and discontinuity;

- to contemplate who are the *homeless* in our place: those sojourning, in anticipation, those *in the wilderness*, in deep struggle, and those in exile, here but with their minds and hearts elsewhere, on other pieces of land;

- to look closely at the commercial deals being done over land in our area with scriptural imperatives in mind - who is doing them, who benefits, what will they do to the land and the people on it, to the boundaries and covenants, are they likely to liberate or diminish, celebrate or pollute?

- to consider what happens to people who are *settled* in the land - Brueggemann warns that "the land, source of life, has within it seductive power" - the temptation "to reduce covenant place with all its demands and possibilities to serene space apart from history, without

contingency, without demand, without mystery." To what extent is that happening where we are?

- to question whether the biblical language of covenant is valid or use-able in our setting today - will we be understood if we use terms like *covet or defile*, are these translatable in our context?

and more fundamentally still, to consider what we urban Christians truly believe about land - is it possible for us to regard it as God's gift, to think of the earth we tread as Christ's footstool as medieval theologians did, or are we too much the children of the industrial revolution to really accept such perspectives?

There are many other questions as well, and for me this work is at a very early stage. It may be that some things I have said will have resonated with your own experience, or perhaps clashed with your perspectives, and it will be good to spend the rest of our time together opening up these themes in conversation.....

#### NOTES

[1] Clifford, S, King, A (eds): *Local Distinctiveness - Place, Particularity and Identity*

[2] Sinclair, I: *London Orbital*

[3] Deakin, R, A Local Habitation and a Name in Clifford, S, King, A (eds): *Local Distinctiveness - Place, Particularity and Identity*

[4] Keiller, P: *Robinson in Space*

[5] Drummond, B: 45

[6] Grant, J, : <http://www.site-sight.demon.co.uk/>

[7] Wrights and Sites : <http://www.mis-guide.com/ws.html>

[8] Mis-Guide : <http://www.mis-guide.com/>

[9] Norman C. Habel: *The Land Is Mine - Six Biblical Land Ideologies*

[10] John Inge: *A Christian Theology of Place*

[11] Walter Brueggemann: *The Land - Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*

#### **John Davies**

Working life has included engineering apprenticeship, welder, draughtsman, volunteer in an outdoor pursuits centre, unemployed, civil servant, computer programmer, community worker, and now a Church of England vicar on a Liverpool housing estate.

#### **Walking the M62**

During the months of September and October 2007 John Davies took a walk across the north of England following the route of the M62 motorway east to west from Hull to his home back in Liverpool.

*"I was hoping to find it and I hope that is what readers of the book will find – the spirituality of the everyday life."*

**Walking the M62** is available from

[www.lulu.com](http://www.lulu.com)

<http://www.lulu.com/content/1454947>

We are grateful to **John Davies** for kind permission to host this work on [aughty.org](http://aughty.org)