A practical theology of #stayathome

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Introduction

From the late 1990s to the early 2000s, I was the associate minister at St John's Anglican Church, East Sydney, which covered Kings Cross and Darlinghurst and comprised a large percentage of inner Sydney's street-involved population (for example, homeless people, street workers, dealers, those living with mental illness). Eight years as a youth worker, followed by three years living in Los Angeles, had offered only occasional glimpses of the plight of the homeless. Now I was on a steep learning curve. "Radio John" was a well-known and much loved character in the life at church and became one of my first—and most important—teachers from the street. During my first three months in the parish, I presided over the 7pm congregation, an energetic and eclectic mixture of people. Quite a few people had PhDs, while an equal number were functionally illiterate. About half a dozen were journalists from radio, news, and TV, with an equal number more likely to feature in the news than to report on it. There was a growing number of people moving to the inner-city to live in its apartments and enjoy easy access to pubs, public transport, and employment. A contrasting group had

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drifted to the Cross because they had lost jobs, houses, or relationships and stayed for the easy access to social services and boarding houses.

The Sydney 2000 Olympic Games were on the near horizon and people sleeping rough were under pressure as various levels of government made efforts to clean up the city. Each Sunday night during those first three months at church, John made the same announcement about his homelessness project, with the same request: "please talk to me". Radio John lived on the streets, earning his nickname from the ghetto blaster that was always on his shoulder on the main strip of Kings Cross. John was an older man with a mild mental illness and somewhat notorious for his abusive outbursts. Not all his contributions were welcome. At church his regular announcement was met with polite indifference. Eventually, I decided to accept John's invitation, announcing that we would meet upstairs in my office at the conclusion of the service, to hear about John's homelessness project. With my endorsement and encouragement, about 6–8 people began gathering in my office when John said, matter-of-factly, "before we all sit down and get settled I'm assuming everyone knows that homelessness is not about whether you have a roof over your head? It is about a home—a place to belong."

I recognised immediately I needed to listen and learn from this dishevelled-looking man, with a mental illness and an eighties ghetto blaster. Throughout my decade long friendship with John, I learnt more about the human dimension to homes and homelessness than I have learned through reading and research. I also came to understand that the people in my congregation who had the most insight into the biblical injunction to walk by faith were the people who were never sure where they were going to sleep that night. I hope this article honours their legacy and what they taught me because, to paraphrase Radio John, the human longing for home is not about a roof over the head, but about a place to belong.[1] Home speak of roots and identity, safety and encounter.[2]

Living graciously in 2020 has been a challenge on the home front in two dramatic ways. First are those who have lost their homes due to the summer bushfire crisis, those whose homes were under threat, or those for whom home is no longer a safe place. Second, are those who have been in lockdown in their homes because of the COVID-19 pandemic and find that home is a place of limited and virtual encounter. Tragically, there is another group for whom home is not a place of safety because of the unsafe encounters at home. Their plight is hidden and continues silently in our

midst, limited by neither bushfire seasons nor pandemic restrictions. This article is also dedicated to the silent sufferers of domestic and family violence (DFV; less commonly called Intimate Partner Violence) for whom staying at home remains a living hell.[3]

The word *home* has a broad range of meanings. On a personal level, it can refer to our immediate and physical place of residence; this may be a house, an apartment or a studio, boarding house, student housing, retirement community, backpacker or hostel accommodation or even, like Radio John, on the street. Home can also be descriptive of our roots: the place where we grew up; our town, city, state or country of origin. Homelands expresses the unique relationship with the land held by our first nations people. Many Aboriginal people know the birthing and burial grounds of their ancestors dating back tens of thousands of years. Quite apart from the physicality of a place, home can describe the welcome and embrace of close friends or family members with whom we have a shared history, captured in the expression "home is where your heart is". For others, home is descriptive of something that they long for; either that which they once had and desire to re-create, or that which they have never experienced but deeply desire. Over two decades, Australia's discussion and debate about refugees is a tragic reminder that hundreds of millions of displaced people have no place to call home.[4] Whatever definitions we use, our experiences of home, both past and present, are deeply formative and worthy of theological reflection. Again, I wish to highlight that for some readers—perhaps most—home conjures up warm, secure memories of the past, is good, and promotes well-being in the present. For others—most of whom will never read this essay—thinking of home raises past, painful experiences, a reminder of what one never had, or does not currently experience. The last five years in Australia have witnessed greater awareness of, and better ways of responding to, DFV in our neighbourhoods and churches.

Whether the reality of bushfires destroying a home, the destructive impact of family dysfunction within homes, or restrictions to stay at home and/or work from home (or, the loss of employment from the pandemic and resulting economic struggle), the year 2020 has put home at the forefront of our attention. Within the home, some people become gracious and hospitable, while others have become greedy and harsh. How has the home become a site for living graciously (e.g. donating to bushfire appeals) or greedily (e.g. hoarding toilet paper)? Practical theology is a valuable tool for reflecting on

the home as an everyday aspect of life and enables an exploration of these differing responses to the home throughout the crises of 2020. This article is a theological exploration of the fortunes, fragilities, and future of home.

Longing for home? The primary functions of home

Christian theology understands the longing for home to be an eternal, as well as temporal, desire.[5] Throughout the New Testament, the Christian's home is portrayed with God, by emphasising a future heavenly dwelling (2 Cor. 5:6–8), conceived of as the Father's house (John 14:2), citizenship (Phil. 3:20), and so forth. Before 2020, many Australians might glimpse these transcendent longings at the beach or in the bush, away from church and home. For example, Tim Winton, one of Australia's most celebrated authors, writes books deeply rooted in the Australian (usually the West Australian landscape).

In an interview, he connects the natural with the supernatural, bringing heaven to earth:

> Yeah, the natural world is crucial to my spiritual life . . . this is lifelong but better understood as I get older. Like a lot of Australians I've been inspired by the revival of creation theology . . . I like the ancient idea of the created world as properly infused with God's love and presence.

What has 2020 made of these longings? For many months, Australia witnessed a constant stream of news footage of the Australian bushfires: of people huddled on beaches and in boats under smoke-darkened skies escaping the flames; of brave firefighters driving through walls of flame to assist; and, of tearful survivors who had lost loved ones, houses, stock, pets, and possessions. Throughout these months, the alert—*leave if it is safe to do so*—was a chilling reminder that home was no longer a safe-haven. During March, as the final fires were extinguished with late February rainfall, the pandemic was emerging with a new alert, enforced by new biosecurity laws—stay at home!

The first—and primary—function of home is as a place of safety. A basic human need for personal and communal territory is found in the ancient lands we now call Australia, often referred to as *homelands*.[6] The Graeco-Roman history of western civilisation records a different account of safety. In that worldview, when personal, communal, or national space

is violated, then all kinds of relational dangers arise. These include violence that make personal space unsafe such as home invasions or domestic and family violence. Communal and institutional spaces become unsafe through instances of child abuse (in our churches), or harassment and bullying (in our workplaces). National—even geopolitical—spaces are unsafe because of bushfires, terrorism and ward. What is new and different in the year 2020—not experienced since the second World War—is an unsafe planet because of the global reach of the pandemic. Some commentators rightly observe the climate emergency is a similar, or greater, global threat to the safety of our common home.[7] Home, in its range of meanings from the family home to the planet as our common home, represents the human need for places of retreat and solitude, rest, and security.

The second function of home is as a place of encounter, an easily overlooked and neglected function because humans need more than safety to flourish, but also need personal and communal relationships. When God observed that the human was not to be alone (Gen. 1:18), the creation story includes the Genesis 2 account that humanity was created for welcome and embrace, relationships and community. Once again, these ancient traits have been observed in our first peoples. Pioneering anthropologist in the Northern Territory, W. E .H. Stanner, claimed that, at its core, Aboriginal belief is about *abidingness*:

> one of the most striking things is that there are no great conflicts over power, no great contests for place and office. This single fact explains much else, because it rules out so much that is destructive of stability . . . There are no wars of invasion to seize territory. They do not enslave each other. There is no master-servant relation. There is no class division. There is no property or income inequality. The result is a homeostasis, far-reaching and stable.[8]

The contemporary Australian experience of inequality, instability, and inconsistency in relationships at home couldn't be more different to the ancient relationships that Stanner describes. The current restrictions forcing people to stay at home have compressed and concentrated these differences. The hoarding of toilet paper in the first wave of the pandemic was a tragic illustration of the greed and indifference toward neighbours that lies in the paradoxical soul of contemporary Australia. Generosity first

emerged through a summer of bushfires, when record donations were made. But this was quickly followed by greed and the infamous scarcity of bog-rolls. More generosity has now emerged through the sacrifice of frontline hospital and aged-care staff, essential workers and small neighbourly acts of kindness. How does practical theology help make sense of this paradox? How can home equally function as a place of safety and encounter? Are Australians increasingly willing to sacrifice the latter for the former? If, as is true for some, home is a place of unsafe encounters, what does living graciously mean in practice?

A practical theology of home

C. F. D. Moule's Christology: God with us and God for us

Charlie Moule's theology is rarely cited in the twenty-first century despite his prescience for addressing contemporary themes such as the place of retribution, an overtly relational understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation, and a sturdy ethic of obligation. Rowan Williams attests to the significance of his influence on successive generations of theologians who sat in his "rooms":

> I am only one of scores who found their way to his rooms in Clare on Tuesday evenings to discuss the sort of issues in New Testament studies that preoccupied us and to discover that so much of what we were struggling and arguing about could be held within a calm, prayerful perspective, within a hugely bigger intellectual and spiritual world that Charlie lived in.[9]

The significance of Moule's contributions are reflected in this posthumous collection that incorporate his academic contribution to New Testament studies, particularly the origins of Christology while attentive to the practical and public implications of theology. Moule is an oddity as an Anglican cleric within the New Testament academy as he sought a wider audience than the academy. He often wrote for practitioners—such as prison chaplains—about theological issues. The essay volume, "The Treatment of Offenders," reflects his influential distinction between retribution and restoration, making it essential reading for parents and pastors, not just police and parole officers.[10] Moule's theological foundation was the New

Testament which developed a Christology that placed equal emphasis on the death and resurrection of Jesus so that neither displaced the other (e.g. "The Good Friday Story,"[11] "Holy Saturday,"[12] and "The Resurrection of Jesus"[13]). This had two important implications. The first is in highlighting Jesus' role as the *mediator* between God and humankind. The second is in making Jesus the locus of God's reconciling activity: God for us. Moule contended that more than being a mere a spiritual teacher or exemplar of redeemed humanity, "Jesus Christ, crucified and raised from among the dead, actually is, or constitutes that ideal society: he is the ultimate Adam, to be incorporated in whom is to belong in the renewed society."[14] Moule incorporated Jesus' person, his words and works, his status as the mediator between God and humanity, and his locus of God's reconciling activity in the world, in his Christological vision. It is Moule's commitment to interpreting the unity of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that enabled him to observe the wider theological and practical import of Jesus. Moule argues first that "the whole life of Christ, powered by absolute love going all the way to death, is the output of what it takes to heal an alienation. It is the absolute offer of forgiveness by Christ as one with God" (On the Cost of Reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19)).[15] He then demonstrates that "the historical figure who lived and died" is, in New Testament thought, continuous with the "transcendent Lord" particularly in Luke's account in Acts. Moule's Christology seamlessly combines the twin emphases of the New Testament, that in Christ, God is with us and God is for us. Both aspects are needed for a theology of #stayathome and for living graciously. I now explore God with us and God for us for a practical theology of #stayathome.

God with us: #stay@home for encountering God

Jesus ministered and proclaimed in the marketplace, synagogue and temple, yet his favoured place of ministry appears to be the home. The accounts of Jesus' meals in Mary and Martha's home or Zacchaeus' home are favourites for many Christians. Jesus' "choice of their home as a primary site of teaching and ministry is consistent with his incarnational mission; no longer was the presence of God confined to the temple, mediated by priests, but it was now the immediate and daily experience of all . . . and that presence was encountered in the most ordinary settings, the home included. Spiritual encounters take many forms".[16] Banks observes the role of the home in all of this, a fact hidden-in-plain-sight for many Christians:

In the New Testament God was encountered and responded to through healing and deliverance (Mt 8: 14–17; Mk 2: 1; 5:3, 43; Lk 14:1–4); worship and prayer (Mt 2:1; 26:6–13, 30; Lk 1:39–55; Jn 12: 1–8; Acts 2:1–4; 12:12); and, through hearing and receiving from God (Mt 1:20; 2:13; Lk 2:638; Jn 19:19–23; Acts 2:1–4; 9:11). Significantly all these happened in the home.[17]

The New Testament evidence that our homes are a primary place for encountering God indicate that home is more deserving of sustained theological reflection.

God with us: #stay@home for refuge and healing

The New Testament focus on is mainly as a place of hospitality and encounter.[18] Importantly, there are several instances where the home provides safety and refuge from outside demands (Matt. 6:6; 8:14; Mark 5:38–43; Luke 1:24, 56). Every home must also be a place for the healing and well-being of those within because various seasons of life provide unique challenges and demands. Before the year of living graciously these were illness, pregnancy, newborns, and small children, or, significant times of individual/household stress (e.g. major exams). At times like these the home must serve as places of refuge, withdrawal, healing, comfort, and solitude.

God with us: #stay@home for personal and faith formation

When one considers, as we have, the range of significant events to which the home played in Jesus' life and teaching–the commissioning of the disciples, the last supper, the resurrection appearances, Pentecost, the opening of the church to the Gentiles, the blossoming of the early church–it is hard to deny the home its role as a place of God's gracious and transforming presence. During COVID restrictions on larger church gatherings, many are rediscovering the New Testament house church model and re-conceiving the home as a primary place of encountering God. The closure of church buildings, with church gatherings relocated to within the family home, via Zoom and recordings, is a potent reminder that God is with us, even when we stay at home. Before these innovations were forced on the Church, most Christians did not recognise and respond to the presence and call of God in the home, nor experience the solitude and relationship of the home–the reality of God with us.

God for us: "leave if safe to do so" for friendship and community

Contemporary culture values independence and privacy. Australians are fond of saying the home is a castle. The late 1990s film, *The Castle*, first satirised, then sanctified this culture of the home. A growing challenge for a theology of #stayathome during restricted gatherings in the home, is for Christians to provide hospitality and welcome to neighbours where we live. The gospel's call to friendship was witnessed during the summer bushfires with an outpouring of generosity, particularly by local churches in communities directly affected by bushfires.

God for us: "leave if safe to do so" for mission

The call to friendship is also the call to mission. The church, during restrictions, is at risk of becoming more fortress, than friendships, which privatises faith more than it promotes the gospel. The symbol of the open table, where all are welcomed and where grace is freely available, must not be replaced by a password-protected Zoom-room, Youtube channel, or Facebook livestream. The home, in the year of living graciously, needs to creatively adapt to continue to be a place of ministry and mission. Sadly, during lockdown, many homes became places for hoarding toilet paper, not places for hosting traumatised people. In the gospels, Jesus provides clear directions to the seventy-two on leaving homes and hometowns (Luke 10:3–11). These instructions actually begin a chapter earlier (Luke 9:1–2), where "Jesus called the twelve together and gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal." Proclaim and heal. Mission and mercy. Action to transform the world, compassion to heal the heart. Then, as if Luke knew the history of leaving homes would be a history of tearing apart what must be held together, he repeats it again (Luke 9:6) "they departed and went through the villages, bringing the good news and curing diseases everywhere. Bringing good news and curing diseases." Jesus provides four theological markers than make leaving home for mission and ministry safe for all: vulnerability ("do not carry your baggage"—physical, emotional but particularly cultural baggage); power ("don't take any bread or money" because food and finance has always pointed to where the real power is); without tunic/robe (Jesus indicates that those on mission/away from home should adopt the clothing of the host culture, and not the other way around); and, remain, or stay awhile (sadly, the history of Christian mission, which

did the right thing according to Jesus and "stayed awhile" too often made a new home and stayed as settlers, not as guests).

Where possible, we must still use our homes as places for exercising hospitality to others, particularly the homeless. While not everyone is able to have a guest room available to any who may need it, those who can afford to do so can provide one as a tangible sign of their welcoming attitude to others.

Conclusion

As we examine the role of the home in the New Testament, two realities emerge. Jesus, in his life and teaching, parables and miracles was God with us. Jesus is God with us in physical form, to be touched, seen and heard. Jesus embodied the concern of God's kingdom for the here and now. Jesus presence in various peoples' homes was not mere background to his incarnation but a tangible expression of God with us. Equally important in the New Testament, however, Jesus Christ is God for us. In John 14, Jesus promises to prepare a place for those who believe, a home with many rooms:

> Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2).

This passage is the selected gospel reading in the Anglican funeral service and it is easy to understand the reason: Jesus' promise are words of assurance. Our resurrection is connected to his resurrection, our future beyond death is linked to Jesus' presence with the Father. In the face of death—at the threshold of what we know—Jesus' image of his Father's house—an eternal dwelling place—is one of the great promises in the Bible: God is for us. In the person and work of Christ, as C. F. D. Moule understood so well, God is with us and God is for us. God with us and God for us enables us to live graciously in a year of bushfires and COVID. God is with us when we are forced to stay at home. God is for us when we leave homes and, through Jesus' death and resurrection, promises an eternal homecoming. It is somewhere between these two realities that the year 2020 calls all to live graciously.

Endnotes

1 Natalia Maradiuc, *The Goodness of Home: Human and Divine Love and the Making of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) is the most recent to make such connections but in Christian reflection this can be traced to Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Edna H. Hong and Howard Hong (Port Washington: Harper Perennial, 2009 (1962)), 34–57.

2 Steven Bouma-Prediger and Brian J. Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 41–55, discuss the problem and necessity of boundaries. See further, Caroline A. Westerhoff, *Good Fences: the Boundaries of Hospitality* (Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1999), 81–106, where hospitality must be closed and open.

3 Bouma-Prediger and Walsh, *Beyond Homelessness*, 67–68, capture this with their discussion of the "ambivalence of home."

4 Robert Manne, "Sending them home: refugees and the new politics of indifference," *Quarterly Essay* no. 13 (2004).

5 Geoffrey R. Lilburne, *A sense of Place: a Christian Theology of the Land* (Abingdon Press, 1989) 30–34.

6 Bruce Pascoe, "Dark Emu : Black seeds agriculture or accident?," *Dark Emu*, (Sydney: Magabala Books, 2014) makes this stunning observation about ancient Aboriginal homelands: "in all the archaeology and all the investigation done to date there has been no time identified when those trade routes were used for wars of possession. The Grecian and Roman frescoes and ceramics feature war and torture as an element of dominion but while individual acts of violence are depicted in Aboriginal art there is no trace of imperial warfare . . . This absence demands respect, and the skills employed to bring about the longest lasting pan-continental stability the world has known must be investigated because they might become Australia's greatest export."

7 Pope Catholic Church, *Encyclical letter Laudato si' of the Holy Father Francis: on care for our common home*, (encyclical letter), (London: Catholic Truth Society, 2015).

8 W. E. H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essay*s, (Collingwood, Vic: Black Inc., 2009).

9 Rowan Williams, "Sermon for the Life and Work of the Revd Prof C. F. D. Moule," in *Christ Alive and at Large: the Unpublished Writings*

of C F. D Moule, ed. Robert Morgan and Patrick Moule (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

10 C. F. D. Moule, "The treatment of offenders, " in *Christ Alive and at Large: the Unpublished Writings of C. F. D. Moule*, ed. Robert Morgan and Patrick Moule (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010).

11 Moule, "The Good Friday Story."

12 Moule, "Holy Saturday."

13 Moule, "The resurrection of Jesus."

14 C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

15 Moule, "On the cost of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19)."

16 Robert J. Banks, "Home," in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity: an A-to-Z Guide to Following Christ in Every Aspect of Life*, ed. Robert J. Banks and R. Paul Stevens (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997).

17 Ibid, 489. See also Michael F. Trainor, *The Quest for Home: the Household in Mark's Community* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001).

18 John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1985).