

Mark Betson, Graveyards and the Rural Church

Sandra:-

We're going to move a little bit and have a little look out the window for a moment cause we get to slightly move outdoors and think very differently about the spaces that we have as well and to help us do that. We've got Reverend Mark Betson with us. This is actually Mark's work environment right here because Mark is the Church of England's rural officer, national rural officer, and his office is right here on this site at Stonleigh. So he's come the shortest distance. He's at work. He's at his home place here and we're delighted that you're going to share with us this morning something about churchyards. Okay. Thank you.

Mark Betson:-

Thank you very much everyone. It's a privilege to be here. I want to be here to try and advocate to you some of the work that graveyards and churchyards do in particular for individuals, for families, and for communities.

They are important places for each of these groups of people for different reasons, but they all have their significance for them.

Also I would like to talk to you a little bit about the role these places have with the nature that they contain. They are, as Sandra pointed out, green spaces, and this nature that they possess is an important feature in the way that they support these communities.

I'll summarize and mention some of the opportunities that these places present and give you a few resources to look at if you want to when you go back to your parishes and if you speak to anyone else who's got a churchyard, and encourage them to do so as well.

I mentioned that they are significant places. I've done some research both in literature and by going out and asking people about the role that they play for individuals. One comment I came across was from Nigel Cooper who works in Ely Diocese. I'll just read it to you in case you can't actually read it on the screen there.

"There is a sense in which ancestor worship is alive and well in the English countryside. Come a Sunday, probably more people will visit graves in the churchyard than will enter the church building for an official service. Villagers will often visit several relatives' graves going back at least two generations. They will expect to follow their parents in due course. Some even bothering to reserve plots to be near relatives. It brings a mindset quite different to that of the cosmopolitan person, if one knows where one is to be buried."

Now, I don't know if that's your experience in talking to people around churchyards. Certainly I've encountered many people around churchyards, most of whom will say that they're not in general in church on a Sunday. So I can vouch for the fact that quite often, you'll see that there are more people who visit the churchyard than actually going into the church on a Sunday.

I've come from a rural perspective and it's very true for rural churches, but it's equally true that graveyards and churchyards are significant spaces in urban and suburban areas as well.

For civic authorities, for parish councils and district councils, they'll often classify these spaces as green spaces when they're doing things like neighbourhood plans for example. However, they are not just gardens or parks to people. They offer a very particular ministry to them which is quite different to these other types of green spaces and needs to be recognised. For those who go on their own to these places, they can be opportunities to spend time in contemplation and in particular they offer a space to think about some of the big questions of life.

For families, they are places they can come to on a regular basis and of their own choosing to remember, particularly if they have loved ones buried there, and if they have a specific connection to the place. Above families though, they also represent places where communities come to remember their corporate history. They are places which hold the long line of families and the villages and also their stories that they have.

However, churchyards are not always in the best state of repair. Another quote from Nigel Cooper where he says, "Churchyards naturally receive all sorts of projections about death. In some villages, death seems to have overcome the local community. This may be where there are disproportionate number of incomers who do not relate to their new community or to the village population, or the village population is ageing or shrinking. Here, nearly all care for the churchyard, apart from a few graves, has been abandoned and the grasslands tumbling down to scrub." How many of you have seen that case in a churchyard where it is overgrown and unloved and is that a representation of the community or lack thereof around it?

It is potentially a symbol of the health of a community, about the state of its graveyard, its churchyard whether it's cherished and loved or whether it's left to go to scrub as mentioned by Nigel Cooper.
Example shown here.

They are, as I mentioned, places of a huge potential for nature. They are places which, for example, hold the largest numbers of meadowland species across the country of any other resource. The Church of England nationally probably has more meadow lands than anyone else, through its churchyards. Nature has a value for those people who are visiting their churchyards and contributes to their wellbeing. There's been a number of studies about the value to people's wellbeing that nature has, and I'm going to present to you, as well, some research that I was part of which looked at its value in connection with churchyards and the way that people experience it.

However, as you notice from that image that I showed you beforehand, it requires the churchyard to be cared for. Nature cannot be left to care for itself in these places because they are places for people and engage with people and need to be managed as such. So they can be a source of conflict as well, where nature is left to go on its own. The work that I'm talking about is a project that I did a few years ago called The Nature of God's Acre. It was a study to explore the relationship between the spiritual and natural value of churchyards to people.

I was based in Sussex at the time and I used a random set of 25 sites across Sussex trying to take in a variety of different contexts, some were urban, most were rural. Some were open, some were closed, some were sites of natural scientific interest, some were churchyards that were very plain. In total, we

got 175 responses back from people based on a questionnaire that we put out. Those responses contained our answers to questions with a five point scale, so in other words from strongly disagree to strongly agree and also contained personal reflections. We asked people to make their comments on why they value the churchyards.

We followed that up with a number of interviews with people and some of those interviews were quite revealing about why people value churchyards or why people felt that the nature in the churchyards was supportive to them or perhaps why actually they felt it was a negative feature.

The work took place over about a year and we spent the time reflecting on the results to produce a booklet. Miles King, who is one of the researchers that I worked with, took the comments that people made and the words used in some of the interviews and looked at the most common words used by people. Now this is a common technique used in most newsrooms for example, where they'll pick out the words that are mostly coming up on social media to generate what your news is, for example.

In this case we looked at what the most common words were that people were using to describe their experience of churchyards. In particular in relation to nature as well. Commonly the word 'peace' or 'peaceful' came up. Now that's actually quite a common thing whenever you ask someone about their experience of being in a churchyard or even in a church sometimes. Peace and peaceful comes to the fore.

However, it isn't the full story and you don't get very much for theological reflection just on the word peace or peaceful. So we dug down and went down to the second level and asked what was the second most common word that people use along with peaceful. They were still talking about peaceful, but then you start to get more of an idea about why people value these places. This is called a 'Wordy' by the way. My colleague, Miles King, developed it. Developed this particular Wordy for the project and you can see from this, the second most popular word. You can see that some other features are coming through about the churchyard. You see the issue to do with beauty, issues to do with history, and contemplation comes in there as well. And if you go down to the third word most commonly used, you start to get a lot more information through about why people value these places.

So one of the key questions we asked people about the churchyards that we were doing the survey with, was 'do you value the presence of wildlife when you're visiting the churchyard for reasons of contemplation and prayer, for example'? Well, on the scale of things, 73% of people said they agreed with that statement, that they agreed that they valued the presence of wildlife when they're visiting the churchyard. 42% strongly agreed that it was important for their contemplation and prayer when they visited those places.

For those who are visiting the grave of a loved one, 67% valued the presence of wildlife there, but 44% strongly valued having wildlife presence in the churchyard. And for those enjoying a peaceful moment, most people, 91%, value the presence of wildlife. 66% strongly valued it. But I mentioned that we went not just for statistical results. We also got the comments from people and I've got a few of the choice comments that I've picked up here, which gives a feeling for the reasons why people value these places.

"It makes me realise that I am part of nature. Part of something larger than myself. I feel in awe of the scope and breadth of the world around us and grateful that I have the senses to enjoy it. You can be alone away from the noise and other distractions and not feel isolated and lonely. Wild flowers, birds,

butterflies can give hope and lift spirits. A sign of life. If I sit in the churchyard for thoughts and contemplation, I enjoy the church art as I feel I am not alone, although I am. I like to watch the wildlife as it lives on and just confirms that life goes on even after death. Both my husband, who is not a church goer, and I want to end up here and there is something peaceful about this place. It's a typical rural churchyard. There is nothing commercial here unlike some Crematoria I've been to."

These are comments from people who are, as you gather, not theologically trained. However, there is a lot of theological content in their comments. You can see how people value these places and that it actually is aiding them with contemplating some of the big questions. It also, interestingly as well, when people can go there on their own and not feel lonely.

However, it isn't universal that churchyards and wildlife go together for some people and there is important reasons for this. There were other comments that people made. For example, "I love all aspects of wildlife but feel there is plenty of countryside without the use of graveyards. You used to be tidy and got lots of comments from visitors. Main area's very well kept. The lower area called the conservation area is a disgrace. Totally overgrown with brambles and anthills. It's disgusting. There've been snow drops and the sign of a cross there, which had been coming up for over a hundred years now, and they are covered in brambles."

I actually went and interviewed that person who made the last comment and it was a very interesting interview that I had with him. His feelings were that he was someone who kept the churchyards and maintained very carefully the grass that was around certain graves. He felt that having the conservation area, having lots of wildlife present in the churchyard, was a threat to some of the gravestones and he was worried that when his time came to be buried in the churchyard, that his stone would be left to go to scrub, as I mentioned beforehand. And underneath the brambles and the nettles and everything else, that he was going to be forgotten and not cared for when his time came, as he had been caring for other people throughout his life in the churchyard.

So there are some very deep reasons why some people have issues with wildlife and that gives importance to the way that we manage our churchyards. You can both manage the churchyard sensitively to help and encourage wildlife, which as I mentioned before, is an opportunity to further engage with people and to help with whatever they're thinking about in terms of the big questions, to support families as they're grieving, and also to give communities pride both in their history and in their future.

This an example from Sussex where areas have been cut to allow access to graves, but there are still areas which have been left wild, which enable people to enjoy the wildlife.

As I mentioned, graveyards are significant resource for people. They are something which people value greatly and if you wish to do work on a churchyard or do anything with a churchyard, it will be, have ... the name of the conference is Circles of Impact...the circles of impact will radiate greatly throughout the community, not just within the church community, but far beyond that. They are places, as I said, where people can contemplate the big questions. My interviews with people focus very much on the cycle of life that they contemplated in these places and they took time to do so when they visited. And as the results from the survey point out, the nature they contain significantly can help them to do this.

So my argument here is that churchyards, graveyards as well, are an under-used platform for us to engage with people. There are more people who visit our churchyards than visit our churches and there is an opportunity to engage with people. Sandra reminded me yesterday of an incumbent who had held a service in the churchyard which welcomed quite a few people who wouldn't normally attend their church. That's one example, but there are people who are accessing our churchyards all the time and what it looks like, what it contains and how it's managed, gives us a platform to engage with a wide variety of people.

They are places to support people who grieve. That is one of their principle roles. That they are places where memorials are permanent and people can have access at any time to visit them, so they must be considered in this way.

They are also places of community resilience. There was a report published by the theological think tank Theos, which was talking about communities in the northeast. Part of the struggles of those communities was having pride in themselves and there were opportunities from different areas to give them back that pride. Care of a churchyard, I would argue, is an opportunity to give back pride in a community, an opportunity for a community to remember its history, an opportunity for our community to come together in its care and maintenance and for it to have a shared memory. For those who are incomers, for those who have been there all their lives, there is an opportunity here.

There are a number of resources you can call upon to help with the management and care of churchyards. The Church of England website, particularly Churchcare. If you look up that and then search for graveyards or churchyards, you will come up with a whole suite of resources offered by the church, which gives you some of that practical advice that you need when tackling churchyards.

I was an incumbent of a parish with two open churchyards. I'm well aware of the regulations that go on with churchyards. What requires faculties, what doesn't require faculties, what's allowed to be put on there in terms of flowers, what's allowed to be put on there in terms of stones, and all of those other bits and pieces. Having a background knowledge of that is absolutely vital when trying to tackle issues like the maintenance of churchyards.

They're not a bar to doing things. They are the guidelines which we work with and if you have a knowledge of the guidelines then you can take advantage of the opportunities. Do also though, check your diocesan guidelines and guidance. There are slight regional variations in the guidance which is given to the management of churches, so do check your local guidance in that respect.

There are other resources. I work at the Germinate Arthur Rank Centre, which is based a couple of hundred yards over there and if you go to our websites at germinate.net, there are a number of resources on churchyards. Again, put churchyards into the search and you'll come up with the different resources which are available. As it happens, today marks the beginning of 'love your burial ground week', which was most convenient.

Hang on. I'm missing a slide? I've got it down here. That's it. That's the one. There we go. Lovely.

Yes, today marks the beginning of 'love your burial ground week'. There is an organization called Caring for God's Acre, which has a long history of supporting management plans for wildlife and churchyards. As I mentioned, as part of the survey, we discovered the importance of wildlife for people in

churchyards, so I do commend their work in terms of offering plans of management for successfully encouraging wildlife that supports people with these places. There's their website. There is some information available on our stand and if you'd like to know any more about it, I'm very happy to talk to you later on. Resources for 'love your burial ground week' are through their website.

Thank you very much.