Remembering our future

'Little Imber on the down; seven miles from any town'. Like its better-known counterpart in Dorset, Tyneham, the 'lost' village of Imber was permanently evacuated in 1943, to provide a training area for US troops preparing for the allied invasion of Europe: one community's quiet sacrifice for the war effort. Deserted and overgrown, today Imber is a kind of ghost village, about as deep into Salisbury Plain as it is possible to be.

Adapted as a stage set for army manoeuvres, with the well-preserved parish church of St Giles as its centrepiece, Imber has also become something of a pilgrimage site for thousands of visitors who flock there during the twenty days each year access is granted. What draws them in such numbers? Abandoned places retain a unique fascination and Imber is, for many, a potent symbol of lost community - what the writer Georgina Boyes called 'the imagined village'. In this idealised and deeply nostalgic sense of place, the Anglican Church plays an almost iconic role – when the bells of St Giles toll, we are recalled to a longed-for common life.

The loss of place is perhaps the most powerful motive in modern social and political life. Globally, more people than ever before are uprooted from their home, by war and disaster; across the United Kingdom we are deeply unsettled and – whatever our allegiances - view the coming months with profound concern. Like the Psalmist, who writes 'in time of national humiliation' that 'we do not see our emblems' – the symbols of our belonging - as believers we are called by God to remember our future. Called back to the Lord's faithful provision in former generations and forward in hope to the place assured for us – won for us – in the Lord Jesus.

Everyone is, by different routes, seeking this way forward. As an enduring sign of faith, hope and communal resilience, our parishes and churches once again have a crucial part to play in signalling and settling the nation. In Christ is our way back - and our way forwards.

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