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We know that a 'house' can mean a 'home', and that the two words are not the same, but in some ways they are. I want to suggest that the tension between these two words is similar to the Christian desire to have *earth as it is in heaven*. A home is something of the Kingdom of God; a home is a stunning example of the provision that God desires for each of us. I also want to suggest that in exploring the ground between a 'house' and a 'home', we will enrich our vision of what might be achieved by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Housing, Church and Community – particularly in relation to social housing.

On earth as it is in heaven

A *house* may mean shelter, it may mean security, and a place to be less lost than we actually are. A *home* is perhaps not a physical space at all – it joins more easily with the heart, and warmth, relationship and hope. A house may be broken into, it may be an unbearable financial burden, an enclosure where walls are too close, and doors are too often closed. A home cannot be forged or offered by human hands: instead, it is woven together by hands of love, often elusive – a gift of God.

The difference between a house and a home is demonstrated vividly throughout Tolkien's epic tale *The Lord of the Rings*. The story depicts the courage of Frodo, a hobbit who embarks on a dangerous and transformative adventure, and the Christian symbolism throughout is rich and remarkable, as powers of darkness and light clash. As Frodo's journey away from his home – the Shire – commences, Tolkien builds the themes of housing and home, and in doing so provides a landscape for a theology of home to emerge. For the hobbits, the Shire is a place of safety and comfort: a 'firm foothold'. After leaving the Shire, they find themselves in many houses, and often under precarious forms of shelter, with only occasional glimpses of 'home'.

Descriptions of outside dwelling draw strongly on notions of homelessness, and the lived reality of insecure accommodation:

'...they came on the huge hulk of a tree: it was still alive and had leaves on the small branches that it had put out round the broken stumps of its

long-fallen limbs; but it was hollow, and could be entered by a great crack on the side away from the road. The hobbits crept inside, sat there upon a floor of old leaves and decayed wood...'

This brings to mind the clusters of tents found in the woods bordering towns and cities, and behind factories and places otherwise desolate. It is not difficult to learn of the deep sorrow, isolation, fear, and danger found in these settings: tents being set on fire, belongings stolen, kicked in the night, no possibility of work – the hardships are impossible to list in full.

This is juxtaposed against a welcome found in Woody End:

'There is a fire in the hall, and food for hungry guests,' said an Elf standing before him... There the green floor ran on into the wood, and formed a wide space like a hall, roofed by the boughs of trees...In the middle there was a great wood-fire blazing, and upon the tree pillars torches with lights of gold and silver were burning steadily.'

Food, warmth, relationship, a sense of safety – these things change everything. The transition is not wholly physical – that is to say, it is not *housing* that enables the place to become a *home*. Inside or outside, the key characteristics of home are much more:

'As they walked up the green path from the gate no light was visible; the windows were dark and shuttered. Frodo knocked on the door, and Fatty Bolger opened it. A friendly light streamed out. They slipped in quickly and shut themselves and the light inside.'

At Crickhollow, Tolkien draws us down green paths into a place of peace to show us something of home that is not linked explicitly to a building, or special location. Before we jump too quickly to Psalm 23, it is worth looking more closely at the characteristics Tolkien has highlighted for us: *food, warmth, relationship, and a sense of safety*. These are prominent themes throughout the whole of Scripture: these are the provision of God, the offer of Christ, and the hope of the Church for all. A Christian vision for housing is never going to be enough if the possibility for home is altogether absent.

On earth as it is in heaven



Loneliness and loss are recurrent themes as Frodo ventures further away from home:

‘They stood for a while silent on the hill-top, near its southward edge. In that lonely place Frodo for the first time fully realised his homelessness and danger. He wished bitterly that his fortune had left him in the quiet and beloved Shire. He stared down at the hateful Road, leading back westward – to his home.’ [pp. 183-184]

Home is a place of love and calm, that which is ‘anti-home’ is hate, isolation and danger. Here we can begin to perceive the fundamental flaw in building for the sake of shelter alone. Home is a place of the heart and the realisation of peace: ‘There my heart is; but it is not my fate to sit in peace’. The Christian call to love and peace perhaps can begin to actuate when the housing we advocate has *home* as its goal.

On earth as it is in heaven

As the Commission develops its theology, its vision must stretch far beyond basic housing and into the hope of home. This means that *food, warmth, relationship, and a sense of safety* must all be firmly on the agenda. Basic shelter is of course necessary when disaster strikes, though this is not the basis of our theology of home, even if it is the immediate point of need for many. We must not settle for buildings and places, but for security, for peace, and for relationship. These are Christian hopes and dreams.

As Professor Tim Gorringe puts it, ownership must be reconceived. A collaborative community approach to housing involves, ‘consultation and creativity’. In practice, this might look like long-term and secure tenancies, safeguarding affordable housing, or ensuring that building projects are driven by the vision of the communities that we seek to serve and be in fellowship with.

On earth as it is in heaven.

Revd Sophie Cowan is a curate in the Peterborough Diocese. Before her call to ordained ministry, she grew up on an estate in Corby, studied history at the University of Leicester, and worked in social housing for the local authority. She trained for ordination at Wycliffe Hall, completing the Oxford BA in Theology. Her academic studies continue alongside curate training, as she focuses on areas of deprivation for her MTh in applied theology. Sophie has a husband and two children, and a heart for estate ministry. Sophie curates @estate_ministry on twitter.



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