

What makes a 'Good City'? A Christian Perspective

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The Christian Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. In the Garden of Eden Adam and Eve lived in harmony with God, with one another and with their distinctly rural environment. But that harmony didn't last for long; disobedience led to broken trust. As Adam and Eve left the garden, behind them an angelic guard with a flashing sword made certain that there was no way back (Gen.3: 24).² Instead, the only way was forward, towards the city.

Whatever else a city might be, it is not naive. Cities, as we find them in the Bible, are concentrated humanity. They are made up of the best and the worst that people are capable of, and much in between. The biblical movement towards the vision of a city, the 'new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God' in the last two chapters of the Bible (Rev.21 & 22), is a movement in which selfishness and broken trust are healed and restored. There is no pretence that this selfishness hasn't happened, or that it doesn't really matter. Rather, the account is of God's costly engagement with us to bring all the nations of the earth to a city about which is said, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them' (Rev.21; 3).

What, then, is the 'Good City' from a Christian perspective? The Hebrew and Greek words that are translated 'city' in English occur more than a thousand times in the Old and New Testaments. But we need to be careful about trying to simply read off from the pages of the Bible a political, social, economic or cultural manifesto for Birmingham at the start of the 21st Century. The Hebrew word in the Old Testament often translated 'city', *ir*, for example, can also refer to settlements that we would not call a city today. When we come to the New Testament, its documents were written and collected together in a mostly poor and powerless community which existed on the margins of the Roman empire and which had other things on its mind than post-modern urban planning.

Nevertheless the Bible does have important things to say about the good and the bad city, the Bible has shaped the way that Christians have looked at the city over the last 2000 years, and it continues to speak to the new challenges of our cities today. In this paper, I want to look at three themes from the Bible and how they have shaped Christian thinking about the cities.

The Good City is the City of God

Great is the Lord,
and greatly to be praised
in the city of our God!

This quotation from the beginning of Psalm 48 is a song of praise to God who is present in the city and gives the city its name. The psalm affirms that 'God talk' is not just something private that believers must keep in their homes and worship spaces. Rather, those who pray the psalms rejoice that God knows the city from the inside and cares about what goes on here. This is part of a much wider affirmation throughout the Bible and is most clearly seen for Christians in Jesus Christ, the human face of God, who has entered into our world and shared our experience of it.

Christians want to affirm God's deep involvement in the city and God's ultimate authority over it, while at the same time stressing that God's power is exercised in a radically different way from human rule. When Jesus entered Jerusalem hailed by the crowds as Messiah, the city's rightful king, he came humbly, riding on a donkey, not on a war-horse. Within a few days, Jesus had been arrested and taken before Pilate, the Roman military ruler of the city. When Pilate asked this strange prisoner if he was a king, Jesus' reply was telling: 'My kingdom,' he said, 'is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight...' (John 18: 36). Pilate was at a loss to know what to make of this kind of king or this kind of power.

Jesus' answer brings together two kingdoms and two ways of ruling. They reflect the two kinds of cities that we find in the Bible. One kind of city is built of stone and brick - human cities such as Damascus, Athens, Rome or Jerusalem. These are cities built, named and ruled by people. They are often great and beautiful, with good people living in them; but they are also too often places of violence and injustice. Two of these human cities, Jerusalem and Babel, also become the other kind of biblical city, the symbolic city. Jerusalem becomes the archetypal heavenly city of God and city of peace, the 'good city'. Babel, on the other hand, is symbolic of the city of insecurity and arrogance which sets itself up against God (see Gen. 11 & Rev. 18). The biblical narrative wants its readers to engage deeply with the stone and brick cities in which we live, what we call the 'public domain,' and to do with the perspective of the symbolic city.

These two kinds of cities come together in the Psalms. The Psalms both celebrate and lament the complexity of the human city. They celebrate the joy of the lonely wanderer in 'desert wastes' who finds a way to the 'inhabited town,' (Ps. 107:7,36) the public order represented by well run 'thrones of judgement' (Ps. 122: 5) and public celebrations of singing and dancing (Ps. 87:7). They are also acutely conscious of the darker side of the human city: 'I see violence and strife in the city. Day and night they go around it on its walls, and iniquity and trouble are within it;

ruin in its midst; oppression and fraud do not depart from its market place' (Ps. 55:9-11).

Psalm 46 particularly is set in a context of violence and insecurity, but holds that reality together with the reality of the symbolic city, the city of God. When there is trouble and insecurity, when the very mountains seem to be shaking, the Psalmist declares, 'There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city; it shall not be moved' (46: 4-5). As Eugene Peterson, who made *The Message* translation of the Bible comments,

This city of God is not a blueprint for the future, not a hoped-for aspiration and not a promise that just might be enacted with the right legislation. It is here. NOW. God dwells in this place, this world. God is not an occasional tourist to our shores. He has set up habitation here, not as a camper but as a citizen; there is a *city* of God. It is in the same world where the violence is, which means that we need not go off looking for God in a quiet, secluded glen.³

Peterson here is drawing on St Augustine of Hippo, the great North African theologian who wrote the classic treatise, 'City of God.' Augustine, like the writer of Psalm 46, lived in a time of great insecurity. It was the year 410, and Alaric the Goth with his barbarian hordes had just ravaged the city of Rome. Augustine wrote of two cities, the heavenly 'City of God' and the earthly city: 'The one city loves its own strength shown in its powerful leaders; the other says to its God, 'I will love you, my Lord, my strength.'⁴ Yet the two cities, as Christians experience them now, are 'intermingled.' The Christian is a citizen of both, praying and working for the good of the earthly city while retaining ultimate loyalty to God, even if God is not acknowledged by the earthly city's rulers.

The Good City is a City of Justice and Peace

Oscar Romero, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of San Salvador, said in a sermon shortly before he was assassinated by a gunman while presiding at Mass on 24 March 1980, 'It is the poor who tell us what the city is.'⁵ It is those who are marginalised from the life of the city who really understand how it works. And it is only when those people participate fully in the life of the city's structures of wealth and power, that the city will be a good city, a city of justice and peace.

The exclusion of people from the life of the city is not new. Archbishop Romero stood in a tradition that goes back to the biblical prophets, and it is consistent with this tradition that the question, 'Who is the good city for?' is asked repeatedly on the pages of the recent Church of England sponsored report, *Faithful*

Cities. If we do likewise in Birmingham, we will find ourselves speculating whether ours is a, 'Cinderella city, where there are a whole host of people who do not have access to the centre, the exciting bits, the wealthy bits'?⁶ However, the prophetic tradition is not a rant against the city as such, but a more nuanced critique of urban elites who hold onto their power at the expense of justice and peace.

Jesus stands in this prophetic tradition. He grew up and worked as a carpenter, or 'construction craftsman,' in a rural area that was dominated by new Roman cities which were being built at the time by the local ruler Herod Antipas. Recent scholarship has shown how this new urbanisation came at a high cost for the peasants who lived in the surrounding villages of Galilee.⁷ They were often pushed into a poverty that rendered them ritually unclean because they were unable to fulfil their religious obligations. Into this situation Jesus came, quoting the Prophet Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk. 4:18,19).

The movement of Jesus' ministry was towards the urban centre of Jerusalem. As he approached the city, he wept over it, 'If only you had recognised on this day the things that make for peace!' (Lk. 19: 42) These 'things that make for peace' were contained in the good news that Jesus had been preaching: that God had come to his city in the person of Christ to offer forgiveness and healing for all who would turn and embrace his alternative 'upside down' Kingdom where the 'first would be last and the last first.' (Lk. 13:30) Jesus had been living and demonstrating what he had taught: he embraced those considered 'unclean', invested in the unlikely and exposed the self-interest of those in positions of status and power. That this was 'good news' could be seen in the faces of poor widows as well as the rich but crooked collaborator and tax collector Matthew and his friends who found a joy that they could never have known in their old selfish way of living (Matt. 9: 9-13). But Jesus' message was deeply subversive of the urban based power structures, so it is not surprising that the final showdown came in the capital, Jerusalem. There, in the city centre, Jesus was tried, tortured and sentenced to death. Afterwards, he was taken outside the city walls to be crucified.

The liberating message of Jesus in an urban world dominated by oppression and exclusion has spoken to, and has been taken up powerfully by many who find themselves 'outside the walls,' excluded from the good things that the city has to offer: wealth, security and justice. Bishop Joe Aldred, in his new book, *Respect: Understanding Caribbean British Christianity*, argues that the experience of Black people in Britain has too often been one of exclusion by both White churches and the

wider society. 'Respect,' he writes in contrast, is about 'looking again... a deliberate act of taking an interest in knowing, through spending time in the company of someone...'⁸ In an echo of Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, where racism, other kinds of prejudice or simply laziness prevent people and communities from looking beyond themselves to recognise the gifts of their neighbours, the city is robbed of the things that 'make for peace.'

The Good City is the City of Hope

If a city is not to be overwhelmed by past and current failures or the massive challenges of an uncertain future, it must be a city of hope. The biblical narrative for Christians, as we have already seen, ends with the hope of a new city, the heavenly Jerusalem (Rev.21,22). This vision is a type of biblical literature known as 'apocalyptic.' It is designed to be read symbolically rather than literally. This heavenly city is vast, 'fifteen hundred miles across,' its walls and streets are transparent, pure and breathtakingly beautiful. Its gates stand always open, and a river flows through the middle of it, with trees on each side whose leaves are 'for the healing of the nations.' The 'kings of the earth' and the 'peoples' bring to it, 'the glory and honour of the nations.' Above all, it is a city in which God dwells and reigns. There is, significantly, no temple in the city; everywhere is sacred. In striking imagery, the 'Lamb of God' is seen as the key to the city's good. The Christ who was slain, who knows injustice firsthand, occupies the throne of the city. But the human relationship with the divine goes far beyond ruled and ruler; the city as a whole, is described as 'the bride of the Lamb.' It is Christ's sacrificial death that has restored and deepened the intimate fellowship that was lost in the Garden of Eden.

It is important that Christians as well as people of other Faith traditions are up front about their hope and vision for the city. Martin Luther King spoke famously of his dream that his children would grow up in a society in which 'they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.' When he did so, he spoke publicly to the nation not just as a Black American, but as a Baptist minister with a vision deeply grounded in the Christian scriptures. Inderjit Bhogal, a former Conference President of the Methodist Church, picks up Luther King's vision and re-articulates it for the multi ethnic and multi cultural context of Britain's cities. 'God's respect and God's embrace,' he writes, 'desires life for everyone... In Jesus, God shows us ways to end the strategies [that exclude] so that all may sit and eat together at the Table for all.'⁹ As he articulates this, his vision, he is clear that he is speaking as a Christian and as a Methodist minister. Others from different Christian viewpoints, different Faiths or no Faith may well object to a vision in which Jesus is held out in this way. But if Christians believe Jesus to be the hope for the city, his followers 'bear false witness' if they do not say so publicly.

As I finish this paper, looking out of my window in a Sparkhill vicarage, I am

acutely aware that 'What makes a Good City' is not simply ideas or words. Bible and theology must be lived out. Birmingham is changing fast, and it is going to take much love and work to keep it a good place in which our children can grow up and thrive. Our century-old church on Woodlands Road stands opposite a mosque which is a quarter of its age and draws four times its weekly congregation. When we last hosted a funeral on a Friday afternoon at the same time as the Congregational Prayers, it was a friend from the mosque and local business leader who stood with me on the street to help mourners out of their cars and direct the busy traffic. A little further down the Stratford Road the Sikh community is investing thousands of pounds in rebuilding their Gurdwara, but we are aware at our local school of a number of families from different communities who have moved away from the area because they want to bring up their children elsewhere. Meanwhile, new languages are spoken on our streets. Our local Salvation Army citadel has been taken over recently by a thriving Ghanaian 'mega church', Afghan and Iraqi refugees sell a bewildering variety of international phone cards, and Asian shops stock 'Polski Produkti' for recent arrivals from central and eastern Europe.

The Prophet Jeremiah once wrote a letter to his people who had been driven as captives from their homes in Jerusalem to the city of Babylon. It had been a traumatic experience, but the Prophet's word to them was, 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare' (Jer. 29:7).¹⁰ It is often the outsider who holds the keys to the city's future, whether for good or ill. A truly good city is good for everyone. We find our own good in what is good for each other.

Notes

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² Quotations from the Bible are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, a translation made by a team of scholars from the original texts. In this paper, I use the term 'Bible' to refer to the Christian scriptures. These are made up of two collections of writings. The first, which Christians share with Jews is the *Tanach*, commonly called the 'Old Testament.' This was originally written mostly in Hebrew. The second collection includes the Christian gospels and other writings, is commonly known as the 'New Testament' and was originally written in Greek.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *Where Your Treasure Is: Psalms that Summon You from Self to Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p.75.

⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, Book 4, Chapter 28.

⁵ Oscar Romero, 'The Political Dimension of the Faith from the Perspective of the Option for the Poor,' in Oscar Romero, *The Voice of the Voiceless: the Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements*, ed. by M.J. Walsh (New York: Maryknoll, 1985), p.177, quoted in *Celebrating the Saints*, compiled and introduced by Robert Atwell (SCM, 2004), p.159.

⁶ The Commission on Urban Life and Faith, *Faithful Cities* (Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing, 2006), p.61-62. *Faithful Cities* is the most recent example of a series of significant

contributions to the debate about the good city from British churches. In 1985 the Church of England published *Faith in the City* a report which began by listening to the stories of people living in the most deprived urban areas. The report addressed issues ranging from housing and health to community work, education and policing. Although harshly criticised by the government at the time, *Faith in the City* had a big impact on both urban policy and church. It also led to the establishment of the Church Urban Fund which has given millions of pounds over the years to enable churches and other Faith organisations to enter into partnerships and projects in deprived urban areas. Ten years ago the Methodist church published a report, *The Cities*, which called on churches to enhance their role in the community life of the nation's cities (published by NCH Action for Children, 1987). *Faithful Cities* reflected on the huge changes in our cities over the last 20 years, and focussed on the concept of 'faithful capital', the contribution made to the common good by religious faith.

⁷ See the survey by Andrew Davey in his *Urban Christianity and Global Order: Theological Resources for an Urban Future* (London: SPCK, 2001), p.66-70.

⁸ Epworth, 2005, p.183.

⁹ Inderjit Bhogal, *A Table for All* (Sheffield: Penistone Publications, 2000), p.12.

¹⁰ The word translated 'welfare' is the Hebrew word *shalom*, a hugely rich word whose meanings embrace social as well as individual 'peace,' 'welfare' and 'wellbeing'.