

**What makes a ‘Good City’?
A Christian Perspective
(extract).**

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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. 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, 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.’ (Revelation 21:3)

What, then, is the ‘Good City’ from a Christian perspective? While we cannot 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 Bible does have important things to say to this question. For instance, we read in Psalm 48,

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

This 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...’ Pilate was at a loss to know what to make of this kind of king or this kind of power.

The Psalms both celebrate and lament the complexity of the human city. They celebrate the

joy and order of the city, while being 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...' 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.

As I write, 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 Produkty' 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.' 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.