

City Life

invisible college

Winter 2008

P R E L I M I N A R Y D E T A I L S

Registration and text-purchase is on January 14 6:30 onwards:
Registration: \$30 (or \$15 students/low wage); Text: \$20
Please bring your travel mug for refreshments!

C O U R S E O U T L I N E

Urban experience, biblical drama

January 14

The majority of the world's population now lives in urban spaces. 80% of Canadians live in urban areas and 51% of the Gross Domestic Product and of employment is in big cities. We all have experiences of living in cities, even if only a medium-sized city like Kingston. But what does it mean to be "urban"? Does this refer merely to the density of housing or to the proximity of shopping and other services? Or does it refer to lifestyles, expectations, and cultural factors? What are the privileges and responsibilities associated with being urban?

Tonight's session focuses on the meaning of the city and in particular the drama of the city as dynamic biblical theme. The text of Hebrew scripture opens with a garden from which humans are rather soon expelled. A city is founded soon after, by Cain, as a means of protection and another on the Plain of Shinar, as a means of creating identity. Later, Jewish hopes are pinned to the city of David – Jerusalem – where the narratives of Jesus eventually converge. But another city, designed and constructed by God, takes shape from Isaiah's time and eventually "comes down" in John's Revelation.

Are there any "holy cities" today, or "sacred spaces" in cities? If "the earth is the Lord's, and everything in it" then this seems to exclude the possibility of a sacred/secular space split. True, Moses once had to take off his shoes on "holy ground." But in the New Testament any thought of a temple switches to the human body (Paul) or, curiously, to the whole city of John's vision. Perhaps spaces become sacred when they mediate God's presence in the world?

Questions to consider: What does this mean for contemporary cities? How does the lens of the biblical urban drama orient us to today's city? How do Christians live in the city? Should Christian people lament the lack of truth, beauty and justice in the city? Or should they rather be working to make the city a better place for all? A further question is this: How do we get to know our streets and workplaces so that we can relate to our city in an informed way?

Tonight's features:

“Urban experience, biblical drama” a talk by David Lyon, Professor of Sociology at Queen’s.

“The spirituality of place” a talk by Tim Vickery, Rector of St James’ Anglican Church.

“Internal City” an interview with artist Carmina French, 4th year BFA student at Queen’s.

“Urban Dynamics” (international video).

Reading: Chapters 2, 4 “From the Garden to Jerusalem,” “Learning to See Our Cities: A Theological Approach.”

A city evolves**January 21**

Although we want to understand urban experiences in general, our focus is local and specific. We want to get to grips with our own city, Kingston: from native site to military base to industrial centre to institutions, services and tourism. What do we know about the daily life and power-struggles of the limestone city? Why was the city founded and what has prompted its transformations? And how far is the future of the city dependent on its past? Can we break free for a fresh start or is our best bet to continue the path taken in the present?

The first part of tonight’s session takes a long hard look at where Kingston came from, but it also keeps an eye on the future: where is the city heading? What has made Kingston the city it is today, and why do so many people express a preference for living in Kingston over, say, Ottawa or Toronto? Tom Mawhinney (Market Square busker) used to sing a song about the subway line from Kingston downtown through Pittsburgh to Joyceville and the freeway snaking between the Kingston skyscrapers and across the Cataraqui River that might refer.

In the latter part of the evening we turn to the seamy underside: Sodom and Babylon as symbolically evil cities. The 2005 movie *Sin City* depicts violence, police corruption, rampant crime and prostitution and it was for similar activities that some cities mentioned in the Bible got a bad name. Babylon set itself up as a smugly self-sufficient city. Sodom, often remembered for sexual perversions, also callously exploited the poor. Tyre stood out for its economic excesses, Rome for its brutal system of slavery.

Questions to consider: If Kingston appeared in the biblical text how would we fare? What of the curious twist that it was Kingston’s failure to capitalize on industrial growth that produced the success of today’s city? What impression does the visitor to Kingston get (and how is this impression managed?)? Cities are often seen negatively as sites for sin but does it have to be this way? And, crucially, can we make a difference? How?

Tonight's features:

“Kingston: Past, Present and Future” an illustrated talk by Brian Osborne, Professor Emeritus in Queen’s Geography Department and author of a newly updated book *Kingston: Building on the Past for the Future* (Dundurn Press, 2008).

“The seamy underside: Sodom and Babylon as ‘sin cities’” a talk by Byron Wheaton, Theologian at Bay Park Baptist Church.

Reading: Chapters 1, 8 “Broken Promises: Sprawl and the American Experience,” “Local Economy and the Permanence of Place.”

Hope for the city

January 28

Who are cities for? Shopping malls, cathedrals, entertainment centres, suburbs, freeways and bus stops all give off clues about the city's purpose and who the city is meant to serve. Some vision always lies behind the buildings, parks, streets and sidewalks. Good or bad design can make a world of difference to our contribution to, enjoyment of or safety in the city. Poor people quickly understand when they are cleaned off the streets where consumers stroll. Parents soon see that their children are unwelcome in parks and streets where broken glass lies around. What visions do we have for the city? And why does God care about the aesthetics and the environment of the city? Should only urban designers and planners think about the shape of the city or is this something we should all do?

Biblical prophets like Jeremiah saw the problem, denouncing the exploitation of labourers forced to build fancy palaces for the rich that dominate the urban environment and contrasting this regime with Josiah's who "defended the cause of the poor and needy" – "Is that not what it means to know me? says the Lord?" (22:16) Or Isaiah, making a contemporary-sounding connection between an abused environment and the city: "The earth lies polluted under its inhabitants" (24:5). But Isaiah also envisions another city with rebuilt walls and open gates, with materials and cultural artifacts from all over, and no violence...(60).

If the first part of the evening is about visions for the city, the second is about making them work. How dreams become practicable: the task of implementation. Today, questions of urban life are urgently bound up with environmental responsibility. The vision for the aesthetically pleasing and community-friendly city must have local sustainability at its heart.

How do we reconcile power-boat use and overloaded storm sewers with having clean harbours and swimming places? How can we reduce the number of cars coming downtown while also wanting people to enjoy the ambience of the older Kingston core? Can there ever be a waterfront trail – as envisioned by Phil Quatrocchi – from Kingston Mills to Dupont or Le Moine Point while much waterfront property remains "private"? What part can local farming play in returning to seasonal eating in the city?

Questions to consider: Does painting the porch; planting a tree; joining your neighbourhood association help? What sorts of values are expressed by our own mode of transportation, use of the sidewalk, attendance at civic events, municipal votes, choice of schools...? Could these be more consistently Christian?

Tonight's features:

"Do we get the city we desire or the one we deserve? A talk by Jack Van Dorp, MA student at Queen's School of Urban and Regional Planning.

"Local Sustainability" a talk by Glen Laubenstein, Kingston's Chief Administrative Officer.

Reading: Chapters 6, 7 "Mixed Use, Pedestrian Scale and the Whole Person," "Beauty, Quality and other 'Non-essentials'."

Rainbow City

February 04

Who lives in this place and what difference does it make? Aristotle said it's not a city if the people are the same: was he right? We may not have Toronto's ethnic and religious diversity in Kingston. But the world is nonetheless in our backyard. From the native peoples who first lived here to the French soldiers, Irish and Scottish settlers and on to the Jewish, Indian, Portuguese, Italian, Ukrainian, Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodian and other groups, Kingston has quite a variety of origins.

The first part of our evening is devoted to thinking through some issues of ethnic diversity in an urban context (not forgetting that other factors may also play a role here: Paul says that in the Christian community there is no "Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free" Gal 3:28). For someone like Desmond Tutu, the "rainbow people of God" (in South Africa) is something to rejoice over but how much do we think about the importance of diversity? The curse of Babel becomes a blessing at Pentecost but how is this expressed – if at all – in our city and our churches?

The second segment turns only a short way to think about the splintered spiritualities of Kingston. Not just the varieties of Christian belief, but the range of religious expression here. On New Year's Day a multi-faith meeting at the Unitarian Fellowship included Muslim (snowed out, unfortunately), Pagan, Jewish, Quaker, Aboriginal, Baha'i, Buddhist and Christian as well as Unitarian voices. We need to know the spiritual make-up of our city. But how many of us know how to communicate with our friends of other faiths than ours, or how to do so appropriately?

Questions to consider: How do those who see Jesus as the "way the truth and the life" make meaningful relationships with neighbours and friends of other faiths or none? How does it feel to be different, either because of ethnicity or religion? And how can the "good news" be expressed in practical ways within those aspects of the city – schools, hospitals, churches, libraries, sports clubs – in which we are involved? How do we get to know our neighbours, and welcome recent arrivals?

Tonight's features:

"Ethnic clusters of Kingston" a talk by Steph Diepeveen, 4th year Global Development Studies student at Queen's.

"Religious Diversity in Kingston" a talk by Bill James, Professor of Religious Studies in the Queen's Theological College.

"How does it feel?" interviews with Kingston residents who know what it is to be a stranger in the city.

"How do we connect with neighbours, welcome newcomers?" a guided discussion.

Reading: Chapters 9, 10: "Critical Mass and Making Friends"; "Strangers and Hospitality" See also the "Religious Diversity in Kingston" (project led by Bill James) web site: <http://post.queensu.ca/%7Ejameswc/rdk/>

The good of the city February 11

“Seek the welfare of the city, and pray for it,” wrote Jeremiah in his open letter to the exiles in Babylon (29:7). Quite a shock to those who thought they should strive to keep their religious identity and traditional lifestyles intact, huddled in their ethnic enclave! The “welfare” is actually “peace and prosperity” or *shalom*, the all round renewal of right relationships between God, land, and people. But it clearly included justice for all, in the sense of a meaningful place for each family, as in Isaiah 60 or Revelation 21.

Tonight we think about why Christians live in two cities; why we’re citizens with dual attachments. Kingston and Kingdom sometimes clash but real responsibilities and challenges must be faced. Seeking the welfare of the city is finally about building communities. We are, as Stanley Hauerwas put it (following Peter), “resident aliens” – both cultural strangers, in a sense, and yet fully involved residents; marrying, raising children, buying, selling, working.

Christians have a strong mandate never to forget those neglected or disadvantaged by others or by circumstances. Mary’s song makes it clear where God stands on this question; divine discrimination is positive towards the poor. So in whatever ways we seek the peace and prosperity of the city, artistic, financial, educational, musical, sporting, horticultural, we’ll actually be assessed for how we treated the marginalized among us. Who cares?

Questions to consider: How do we mobilize churches in urban neighbourhoods? If Christians are supposed to live now in the light of City-of-God citizenship, how does this affect our priorities and prayers in the present? In practical, specific ways?

Tonight’s features:

“Settled Strangers and Resident Aliens” a talk by David Lyon.

“Seeking the city’s welfare” a panel discussion with street-level workers in Kingston.

“The Descending City” a talk by David Lyon.

“What difference can churches make?” a guided discussion.

Reading: Chapters 2, 5: “From the Garden to Jerusalem”, “Public Spaces and Incarnational Ministry.”

City Life: Books worth reading

Bakke, Pownall, Smith *Espoir pour la ville: Dieu dans la cité* Québec: Sentier 1994

An interesting look at francophone cities around the world, from a biblical perspective.

Includes some reflections on and analysis of Montreal. Ray Bakke is an urban theologian of the Lausanne variety; Smith works in Montreal; the book was written mainly by André Pownall, from Paris.

Jacques Ellul *The Meaning of the City* Eerdmans 1974

The French theologian and sociologist takes as his starting point the building of a city by Cain, as a means of self-protection, autonomously from God. Some wonderful insights about the evolution of cities from this viewpoint but in the end it seems from Ellul that although cities themselves are beyond redemption, they may provide places of refuge and genuine protection.

Timothy Gorringer *A Theology of the Built Environment* Cambridge University Press, 2002

Very well-informed and carefully argued Trinitarian approach to the city, in which imagination (God the Redeemer or Holy Spirit), order (God the Creator) and justice (God the Reconciler) are key themes. This is the best source of guidance on many approaches to the city, from urban theory to theology. Gorringer is clear, committed and thoughtful.

Jane Jacobs *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* New York: Vintage 1961

This is the classic that informs much of the “new urbanism.” A scathing critique of modernist planning à la Robert Moses, Jacobs focused on mixed-use neighbourhoods (commercial, industrial, residential) and favoured the small-scale, taking note of the importance of everyday things. She sought vibrancy and encouraged difference, over against Ebenezer Howard’s “sleepy” garden cities as much as the automobile-dominated urban landscape. Jacobs engaged the campaign opposing the Spadina Expressway. She lived in Toronto for most of her life (her dates are 1916-2006) where she was prominently involved in local urban politics and where many claim the maintenance of residential communities in the downtown core had much to do with her influence.

Eric Jacobsen *Sidewalks in the Kingdom* Brazos 2003

Our “text” for invisible college 2008 session has a foreword by Eugene Peterson (*The Message*) that states “What we often consider to be the concerns of religion – ideas, truths, prayers, promises, beliefs – are never permitted to have a life of their own apart from particular persons and actual places. Biblical religion has a low tolerance for “great ideas” or “sublime truths” or “inspirational thoughts” apart from the places in which they occur.” Jacobsen interacts creatively and biblically with the “new urbanism”, right from the “sidewalks” of his title, to which Jane Jacobs devotes three chapters in her classic.

David Lyon *Living Stones* Kingston: Quarry Press 1995

This little book traces the story of St James’ Anglican Church as it is woven together with the story of Kingston from the earliest days when St James’ served the poor outside the city limits (Barrie Street) to today, as the building sits on Queen’s campus. The story of the church cannot be understood without the surrounding shifts from military and maritime emphases to the institutional, university and tourist city. But St James’ story also illuminates the dynamics of Kingston, between the Irish and the Scots, the colonial and the Canadian.

Brian Osborne and Donald Swainson *Kingston: Building on the Past* Westport: Butternut 1988

This is the classic historical geography of Kingston, replete with lively characterizations of city figures, controversies over building design, prisons, and capital status, and fearless

interpretations of why we ended up with the city we call Kingston. Delightfully illustrated, containing a useful chronology and peppered with profound insight. As Margaret Angus says, it is the definitive history. I, for one, am looking forward to the brand new edition by Brian Osborne that picks up the final sentence of the 1988 one: “What judgments will the citizens of the early twenty-first century make of the leaders and planners of the 1980s. Did they – in adequate ways – consider the future?”

Other useful books are listed in the appendix to Jacobsen. Brief mention might be made of Richard Sennett’s *Flesh and Stone* and his *The Conscience of the Eye*, each of which are very wise historical-sociological treatments of the city, and Lewis Mumford’s several books on the city that include *The City in History*. Brian Osborne also wrote *The Rock and the Sword* about St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, showing how it was vitally bound up with the founding of Queen’s, the development of the city and with religious struggles here. Finally, mention should be made of David Ley’s work as a leading Canadian urban geographer (UBC) who also infuses all his work with a thoroughgoing but unobtrusive Christian perspective. Gentrification in Canada is discussed in *The New Middle Class and the Remaking of the Central City* (Oxford 1994) but he also writes about the contribution of churches to city life e.g.: “The immigrant church as an urban service hub” *Urban Studies* Vol. 44, 2007.