

invisible college

City Life

Session one: January 14 2008

Urban experience, biblical drama

1. How we experience the city

Negotiating sidewalks; through the bus window; looking out from the restaurant; loading up at the Market; chatting with parents outside school gates; looking up from the sidewalk blanket; risking a bike ride; seeing the skyline from the ferry; idling at lights; meeting in the Laundromat; staring through Stauffer windows...

As renters, owners, downtown dwellers, suburbanites, long-term or temporary residents... As children, parents, seniors, tourists, inmates, commuters, English-as-second-language speakers, women, people with disabilities, men, panhandlers...

With joy, frustration, delight, anger, thrill, disgust, contentment, despair, hope, fear, nostalgia, optimism, sadness, trust, disillusion, wonder, familiarity, gratitude, strangeness...

What does the city look like through Christian eyes? How do we sort out what might be appropriate responses to the city? What motivations and values guide our involvement in the city? We'll look at urban experience biblically, then at God at work in the city.

2. City in the biblical drama

The big story Christians tell may also be thought of as the biblical drama, from creation to the coming age. This orients us to everything, including the city. Also helps us see why our attitudes are ambivalent, even seemingly contradictory: there are tensions.

Creation: God orders things, bringing good out of chaos and nothingness, and people find themselves in a garden (Gn 1). Beauty and utility seem meshed; harmony between God, land and people is perfect.

Rebellion: Humans decide to strike out on their own, with disastrous consequences. Expelled from the garden, their responses include building cities to protect themselves (Cain Gn 4:17) and to establish their reputation (Babel-City Gn 11:4) but these fail, too. Fear, violence, corruption, exploitation result.

Redemption: God offers alternatives that are life-giving; refuge-cities have their place (Dt 4: 41-43) and exiles can find real homes in alien cities (Jer 29: 4-7). Even the language-confusion of Babel is turned around at Pentecost (Ac 2:5-12).

Coming Age: Wandering tent-dweller Abraham looked forward to a city that was prefigured in David's Jerusalem, poetically described by Isaiah (Is 60) and "comes

down” majestically in John’s vision (Rev 21). “Just as the resurrected body provides the individual context for our redeemed existence, so the resurrected city provides its communal context” (Jacobsen).

3. God and the city

A further way of thinking biblically and theologically about the city is to consider God’s urban activities. Christians know a God who is three persons in one and it helps for us to consider the task of each.

God the Creator: Brings order out of chaos, plans to form the world; provides for all the means of life; reminds us of the wide creation, not just human habitations; plans and delivers the New Jerusalem.

God the Reconciler: Jesus becomes human to reunite God and humanity; creates community by bringing together that which is divided or broken; destroys the “walls of partition” (Eph 2:14) making justice and community possible.

God the Redeemer: The spirit continues Jesus’ work in the world today; inspires action in the already-but-not-yet period; offers dreams – imagining New Jerusalem -- and prophetic vision -- anticipating future in present structures; provides critical hope.

4. God, the city and us

Biblically, our spirituality, beliefs, rituals are never apart from places. E.g. Moses said reminders of God’s law should be pinned to the doorposts of homes (Dt 6:9). Wisdom calls out in the street, public square (Pr 1:20). Jesus wept over the city, its refusal to recognize the true source of its *shalom* (Lk 19:41).

Paul wrote to the fledgling Christian community in the city at the centre of the Roman empire that Christians make the basic confession, “Jesus is Lord” (Ro 10:9), resist conformity to merely this-worldly thought patterns, seek transformation through mind-renewal in cooperation with the Christian community (Ro 12:2).

This means being thankful for the good that the city provides, realistic about its wrongs, aware of the resources available for its renewal and living actively in hope of the “city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10), because our basic hope is in the God who lowers the Holy City to earth, to live with people for ever (Rev 21:1-4).

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