

Spital Sermon 2016

The last time I had the privilege of preaching the Spital Sermon Peter Levene was the Lord Mayor. As he came in he said encouragingly “You won’t get much a congregation today because Monica Lewinsky, [who you remember was connected at the time with President Clinton I], she is in Cheapside signing her book.”

I hope that there will be no such distractions today because I want to consider a topic which concerns us all in this church whatever our particular faith perspective. The meaning and future of cities globally is a critical economic, social and spiritual question of our age. Now for the first time in history more than half of humankind lives in cities where the practice of everyday life takes place either creatively or destructively.

The size and radically plural nature of modern cities makes notions of the common good elusive. One of the questions is whether we can go beyond notions of passive tolerance to a shared vision of the good city?

Our lesson began with a visionary experience.

“He carried me away in the spirit and showed me that great city, the heavenly Jerusalem.” The Bible helps us to reflect on the theme of the city not so much by proposing philosophical abstractions but by telling stories and showing us pictures which invite us to do the work of applying Biblical wisdom to contemporary challenges in our own city.

The beginnings of urban life in the Book of Genesis were inauspicious. Cain was the founder of the first city as a human substitute for Eden. He was also a fratricide, a murderer and there is a fascinating parallel with the foundation myth of ancient Rome. Romulus you will remember slew his brother Remus at the inauguration of his new city. There is here recognition that the story of the human city, the earthly city as St Augustine would have said, involves coercion, blood taken. Indispensable order is in the last analysis secured by coercion.

Yet the story of the city develops. The story of Jesus Christ tends towards Jerusalem. He sets his face towards the city where he is judicially murdered but where the foundation is laid of the heavenly city which is built not upon blood taken but on blood given in self-sacrifice.

The two cities the earthly and the heavenly are not separate places but exist in our own time mixed up with one another. As St Augustine says in his City of God [I:35] the “two cities are interwoven and intermixed in this era and await separation at the Last Judgement.”

The heart of the matter and the crucial decision involved in the balance between the dominance of the earthly city and the growth of the heavenly city is how we choose to direct our love and our deepest desire. The teaching of the scriptures is that only if we direct our love to God shall we discover new ways of relating to one another and to the world.

Spital preachers in the past have used this opportunity for a Jeremiah, a denunciation of the city. No doubt such an approach has often been salutary and will be so in the future but I begin with a huge love for contemporary London which I know that many of you share. It is a privilege to live in such an international city.

I was invited a couple of weeks ago to give a talk to a group at the LSE as part of their “Faith and Leadership” course. There were twenty six young people representing every continent in a School which now embraces more than 150 nationalities. They were intelligent, good hearted and from very diverse cultures seeking a common understanding of how we are going to live together fruitfully and creatively in the 21st century. The old patterns and certainties are dissolving. Unchallengeable Western hegemony is giving way to a more genuinely multi-polar world. Who could be complacent about the continued prosperity and competitiveness of our service industries in London in the company of such able and strenuous representatives of the one million young Indians who join the work force every month and the determined Chinese who are to be found in the library at 2 o'clock in the morning? It was an occasion which gave me hope and deepened my humility.

The university sector in London teems with many such experiences we would be mad to make it any more difficult for young people to come from all over the world to study here. We should be greatly impoverished. But we have to face the question - Is our London going to continue to be a laboratory where the future of cities world-wide is worked out in a way that is globally significant or shall we be a warning of the grief that follows excessive size and complexity?

Because there are as we all know challenges which demand the application of practical wisdom. One the topics which unites the candidates for the pan-London mayoralty is the urgent need to build more homes on brown field sites. I opened a new school, in Barnet the other day opposite a large new housing estate built on the site of a former barracks. Knowing my concern with young people struggling to get on the housing ladder the project manager said reassuringly, “we are building starter homes bishop”. “What do they start at” I said. “£450,000” he replied.

If the most attractive metropolises like London do not build more affordable homes then they risk as Professor Glaeser says in his stimulating book, *The Triumph of the City*, becoming “boutique cities” depriving all but the wealthiest of the pleasures they offer.

Plenty of people are thinking about how to respond to the problem. Norman Foster to my mind has some sage advice. “I hope that any expansion of London will learn from the planning examples of some of its most desirable areas such as Chelsea, Notting Hill, Belgravia and Mayfair. All are characterised by high density and a generosity of green spaces.”

But what is the energising and integrating vision which ought to guide our debate about such challenges? At one level the city is a more or less efficient socio-economic mechanism generating prosperity and competition. But the city is also an arena in which strangers interact and ideas circulate with a velocity otherwise impossible. Why does the Bible begin in a garden but have its climax in the vision of a city?

In Latin there are two ways of thinking about cities. *Urbs* stands for the city of stone; *Civitas* for the city of people. St Augustine said in one of his sermons on the fall of Rome, “Do you imagine brothers that a city is defined by its walls and not rather by its citizens?” [Austin sermo de urbis excidio c. 420]

The city can be the place where we learn in company with others how to live the good life because that life is essentially relational and is enriched by going beyond the tribe to embrace the other. A successful city incubates a state of mind and opens up possibilities of living together that offers a vision of human community capable of promoting mutually enriching relations between strangers. There is in fact no ultimately private identity. The truth about our identity is a reflection of what Christians say about God. God is one and Father, Son and Holy Spirit exist in a dynamic mutually enriching movement of love. God is persons in communion.

In St Augustine’s commentary on Genesis, it is humanity as a whole rather than isolated individuals which is created in the image of God and will be redeemed. Adam’s original sin was pleasing himself and living for himself; retreating into a gated and enclosed world. Sin is living turned in upon ourselves and the virtue which can be incubated in the city and which contributes to building the heavenly city is self-giving and the search for a shared code of social behaviour.

Cities should be inhabited and not just occupied. They should be places where the habits and the stories that promote our life together should be publically celebrated. I regard events like the Lord Mayor’s Show, Danny

Boyle's pageant at the start of the London Olympics, the encouragement which the City gives to the Arts as a hugely significant contribution to enhancing an inclusive public realm where the arts of civitas can be celebrated and learnt. Such public events ought not to be dismissed as entertainment or peripheral. Our city must not be a counting house with the really important areas private and hidden. We should not build a city in which opulent domestic ghettos are protected against sterile public spaces. Moral virtue consists in defending what is public or held in common.

The fundamental heresy of our time is the assertion that "I do not need you or anyone else to be myself". Rather the truth is as St Anthony the Great said "I am saved in my neighbour". This truth is learnt and inhabited by interaction with other people in a mixed community.

There is a utopian dream that we are capable of creating a perfect city through architectural design, systematic planning and political regulation with human existence reduced to absolute freedom for individual consumer choice. But the meaning of human life is beyond technical descriptions and the satisfaction of immediate appetites.

There is a longing and a dissatisfaction at the heart of human life. Ultimately this longing is satisfied only in God, the Beyond-all, Infinite mystery whose human face we see in Jesus Christ. As we direct our longing to him and learn detachment and freedom from all other lesser objects in order to attain and embrace the more, we discover that our relationships with one another are purified and we can love one another without any distorting agendas. Right desire should lead from fragmentation to harmony – a movement from surface to centre where we are connected with all beings. This is the way to the heavenly Jerusalem.