

Isaiah 61:4 Hope in the Concrete City

KEVIN METCALF, THERUBICON.ORG APRIL 2006

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendour.
They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.
Isaiah 61:1-4*

For some it was truly a milestone - a grand achievement to be celebrated with extravagant pomp and ceremony. They made the transition with glee, like television's *Jeffersons* who moved "on up to the East Side, to that deluxe apartment in the sky!" For others it was a painful transition. They felt like some of their limbs, or perhaps some vital *organs*, had been left behind. Most, though, just went. Like quietly packing up the family car in the early morning hours and heading off for a trip to Disneyland, the churches abandoned the city, silently slipping away to their great adventure in the suburbs.

There has always been a faithful remnant of churches struggling to survive in the city. The missions and the parachurch organizations have continued their inner city ministries. Today, however, a broader assortment of evangelicals are taking a fresh look at the city. Is there a place for us there? Can we survive the rigours of city life? Should we move down into the city? What is God calling us to do in the city? With the idea of the city inescapably stuck in the craw of many thoughtful Christians, our burden for the city is getting heavier, our vision for the city is becoming less hazy, our mission to the city is steadily growing new arms and legs.

For me there is something refreshingly good about this

renewed interest in urban mission. I've lived in the city for many years, mostly in Toronto. Toronto has an enviable international reputation as a clean, safe metropolis. By night, in addition to the spectacular skyline, there is a thriving world of culture, the arts and, of course, some great sports teams. And by day Toronto's downtown is a major centre for finance, business, industry and academia. If escape from the hustle and bustle becomes necessary one need only to escape into one of Toronto's beautiful parks for awhile. Like most city dwellers I just assume that people were meant to live in cities. Even rural folk who claim to hate the city – the traffic, the crowded malls, the noise, the smog - come here in droves every weekend to experience the excitement and to take advantage of the endless resources. Ah... the city! Not exactly heaven – but, at least in some prophetic fashion, a living lesson about “the Holy City” which will, at the restoration of all things, come “down out of heaven from God”. The city, according to Revelation 21, is where God intends to dwell with His people.

Could it be that the urban church is, then, a little bit of heaven? It is true that urban mission has not magically wiped away all the tears of the city. Sadly there is still plenty of death, mourning, crying and pain within the circle of inner city ministry that I am familiar with. But as we seek to engage the city with the gospel, as we work to restore the ruined city that's been wasted far too long, as we rebuild the ancient ruins and prepare a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour... heaven is here! This is the work God is calling us to. It is not always pleasant. It is not always easy. It is not always clean, fresh and fragrant. But whenever I am tempted to see urban ministry as somehow a bit too sacrificial, it is time for me to take another look at Jesus. He was willing to do whatever it took to deal with *my* shame, to release *me* from bondage, to bring *me* from darkness to light. Christ's redemptive mission brought him to the city where *his sacrifice* provided *me* with a garment of praise and a crown of beauty. His abundant grace has given *me* a smile instead of tears. As a matter of fact, as I have travelled this spiritual journey alongside the numberless ransomed host, I have discovered everlasting joy - the surprising legacy of the redeemed! And now this same Lord Jesus – Saviour, Redeemer, Conqueror... perfect Lamb of God - is calling me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken heart, to shepherd his flock, to work in his vineyard, to lovingly look after the garden of the Lord. This is the message of Isaiah 61.

The Bible is, among many other things, a tale of the city. Or, rather, it is a tale of two cities.

“Now citizens are begotten to the earthly city by nature vitiated by sin, but to the heavenly city by grace freeing us from sin.”

Augustine

What sort of city has human ingenuity created? What has humanism achieved? Marshall McLuhan's global village now exists, to be sure. Sadly, however, it is largely a godless village. Perhaps the concept of shepherdless sheep has never been more poignant than it is in the city today. But... it doesn't have to be this way! Isaiah 61 speaks of a God who has astounding plans for the city. Isaiah tells about the inevitable overthrow of the City of Man. In the City of God, God will be King – God will be at the centre of a new kingdom of light, righteousness and peace.

It may have taken a genius like Augustine to delineate it, but the idea that there are two cities - a City of God and a City of Man, in constant tension with one another - is a very ancient biblical idea. In short, having determined that killing each other is not an acceptable solution to the awkwardness of human relationships, Cain set about the task of building a city for people to live in (Genesis 4:17). Conditions would not be easy for the world's growing population, but life together in the city would force us to learn the meaning of civilization!

With the development of civilization came the consequent burgeoning of evil (“Come, let us build ourselves a city!” – Genesis 11:4) and God's subsequent intervention (read redemption.) God had plans for a city of his own! God's “great nation” (Genesis 12:2) that would bless the world was clearly to be rooted in the city God chose as a special place for his earthly dwelling, a place where he would be worshipped, a place where God would draw people to himself. Centuries later when the people sat and wept by the rivers of Babylon (Psalm 137), they wept for what they had left behind... the city.

The theology of the city in Isaiah 56-66 clearly has implications beyond Judaism. The whole world is defeated by sin (Isaiah 56-59.) Our only hope is that God will intervene with the fulfillment of his plan of salvation and restoration (59:14-63:6). He will do this through Jesus who heals his people and leads them in the task of rebuilding the city.

The reclamation of the city in Isaiah 61:4 is a fitting

climax to Isaiah's city-based theology. Isaiah is a book of the city. Regardless of how one chooses to understand the nature of the various parts of Isaiah, the motif of the city runs through every section of the book offering an intriguing invitation to consider a wholistic approach to this prophet. Isaiah's vision of God's glory is centred in the city. Jerusalem is the place God chose – a place where the messianic hope sits (prophetically) on the messianic throne. Isaiah proclaims a city-based message of hope and salvation.

Clearly, in Isaiah, the city is central to God's redemptive plan. Admittedly, Isaiah has the city of Jerusalem in mind as he struggles to portray in words what God has revealed to him in this vision of restoration and renewal. Historically the political, economic and spiritual health of God's Old Testament people rose and fell with either the glory or the demise of the city. But in these latter chapters of Isaiah, where historical references are noticeably absent (unlike the rest of the book in this regard) God's Word transcends the particular (Jerusalem) in order to present us with principles rather than mere history. Isaiah's predictions about the return from Babylon and the subsequent restoration of the devastated city of Jerusalem have a much broader prophetic application. Here is a message for the global village. Here is a message for today – a very powerful message. In response, the hustle and bustle of the cities ought to grind to a halt, and all the world should sit quietly and watch to see what God will do. Will he redeem the city?

God means to overthrow the City of Man. This victory will be completely God's doing, but he will use his people in the accomplishment of his purposes. God will employ willing Christians in the ongoing building of the City of God just as surely as he used Isaiah to proclaim his words. Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of this text – “the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” But these words are not for Christ alone. Isaiah quite legitimately joins his voice with that of Jesus in proclaiming “the year of the LORD's favour.” We, too, can join with Christ in rebuilding “the ancient ruins.” Make no mistake, the beautiful City of God is being built – with or without us! Don't stand outside the safety fence observing the construction site for too long. God is at the centre of the city! There, in the tumult, in the clamour, in the heat of the battle, we will find him. And there, carrying endless burdens for the city, we may truly find ourselves.

God's restorative justice, as described in Isaiah 61,

will be a part of the redemptive messianic mission. We know this because Jesus applied these words to himself (Luke 4:16-21), validating our assumption that Isaiah's words are messianic prophecy. Jesus chose Isaiah 61 as a way to begin the unravelling of the ancient messianic mystery. “Here,” says Jesus, “this is who I am!” The really interesting thing, though, is that in quoting from Isaiah 61, Jesus stops part way through Isaiah 61:2 – ending his messianic proclamation on a positive note (“to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.”) But what about “the day of vengeance”?

According to the prophet, the messiah will have two tasks – he will bring salvation to the city (providing “for those who grieve in Zion”) but he will also bring vengeance. This coupling of “the day of vengeance” with “the year of redemption” runs thematically through Isaiah 59-63. It is explicitly presented again in Isaiah 63:4. As Jesus quotes from a portion of Isaiah 61 in announcing his messianic mission, he is clarifying the details of ancient prophetic visions that the prophets themselves had been puzzled about (see 1 Peter 1:10-14.) The prophets made no distinction between the first advent of Christ (and his mission to save the world) and the second coming of Christ in judgment. The prophets lumped the two aspects of the messianic mission into “the day of the LORD.” Jesus, however, on the day he proclaimed the beginning of the public ministry portion of his mission stopped reading at Isaiah 61:2a as if to say – “I am all about SALVATION – that is the purpose of my being here!” Jesus was certainly not unaware of the “day of vengeance” (Isaiah 61:2b.) But the essential heart of Jesus is exposed here... he would much prefer to SAVE the world rather than to condemn it. Jesus makes clear the separation between his first and second advents. The “day of vengeance” will come soon enough – but for now, he seems to be saying, Isaiah's city-based idea of renewal and restoration (healing broken hearts, etc.) is at the top of his agenda.

With Luke 4 in mind, then, we can go back to Isaiah 61:1-3 and clearly see that this is a messianic testimony. The ministry of the Christ will be a ministry of transformation. If the passage ended there we could happily cocoon ourselves in our churches and endlessly revel in the redemptive work of Christ. But the passage doesn't end there! Isaiah 61:4 drops like a bomb on the playground of the church growth movement. Christ's redeemed and transformed people will renew the ruined cities (Isaiah 61:4.) It is the only option the passage

allows us.

The new humanity in Isaiah 61:4 (“they”) will rebuild, restore and renew the cities. They *can* do this because they are called to do this and they are equipped to do this – and because this is the only proper response to the redemptive work of Christ. After our hearts have been healed and we are filled with joy, after we have been freed from our bondage to sin and are really solid kingdom citizens (“oaks of righteousness”) we *will* engage in the struggle to repossess the cities. At least it seems that God assumes that this is what will happen!

It isn't as if we weak and flawed human beings will be entrusted with the work of the messiah. Rather, he will do his work through his new humanity. God's plan of action depends on him, not us. It is simply a question of whether or not we are ready and willing to be used of God in this redemptive mission.

Are we up to the challenge? Does God really expect so much from us?

As I said, the restoration of the city is really the work of God. When will he do it? When will he vindicate himself? When will he show his power in the renewal of the city? In Isaiah 56:1-8 God's people find themselves waiting for God to take action (i.e. – reveal his righteousness.) A “meantime” strategy is suggested for us in that passage. While God's people are waiting for God to do his work, we are called to *live in righteousness*. Of course it is always easier to sit in a Bible Study and talk about righteousness than to actually live it. Sadly, according to Isaiah, God's people have some serious problems with the whole concept. Yes, we experience moments of righteousness (Isaiah 57:1) contrition and humility (57:15) but alongside these are times of failure (56:10-11) and spiritual decline (57:3-13). It is God himself, in Christ, who will come to our rescue (61:1-3,10; 63:1-6).

Isaiah emphasizes the importance of prayer as we wait for God to take redemptive action (63:7-64:12) – as we wait for him to “rend the heavens and come down” (64:1). But prayer, in Isaiah, is never an excuse for inaction. Prayer is not a place for God's people to retreat to. We can't dig a hole and hide in blissful devotion until God rescues us on the resurrection morning. No – God's people must pray and God's people must work, proclaiming his “glory among the nations”, bringing all of our “brothers from all the nations” (66:19-20) to the Lord. Perhaps if we are

willing to go out and survey the carnage in the city – to look upon the spiritual death and decay that abounds because of rebellion against God (66:24) – some of these poor lost souls can be rescued before it is too late. In urban mission, though, we must carefully guard against the possibility of becoming activists at the expense of our devotion. All work and no prayer makes for a lopsided response to the gospel. It is ironic that service for Christ can become a stumblingblock to our own spiritual growth. We must pray and work while we wait for God to reap a harvest of restoration and renewal.

I have written all of the above with a view to convincing Christians that we are the “they” of Isaiah 61:4. And having accepted our mission – at least in a general sense – we must now look to this intriguing verse and ask, what does the restoration of the city look like? What is it that we are actually to do? What is the size and the shape and the texture of urban mission? Should we take whatever has been good and productive and successful in the suburbs and replant that in the city? Will that work? Will that meet the needs of the city?

Isaiah 61:4 suggests that we should start by rebuilding the “ancient ruins”. Inner city congregations include individuals who are seemingly hopeless cases. These people are carrying around copious amounts of baggage. They sometimes seem like human “ruins”. 61:4 is stupendously optimistic about the potential for the restoration of these ruins. Broken lives can be mended in Christ! Since that is true, then what is there to fear about urban mission? Why not engage the city with the gospel of Christ? We have a gospel that matches the hour! The city is overrun with apparently hopeless people - violent men, codependent women, pregnant girls, desperate addicts, unloved children, homeless families. God is able to restore the ancient ruins. The city is rife with drifters, prostitutes, deviants and abusers. The city crawls with devastation. The city teems with unbelief. Jesus wants to rebuild. I know this because I have experienced testimony time in an inner city congregation. The eyebrows of our suburban visitors are predictably raised while one trophy of grace after another personally verifies the accuracy of Paul's words:

*Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers
nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves
nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor*

swindlers

will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus.
1 Corinthians 6:9-11

In coping with urban ministry one must be prepared for the tenacity of human bondage. Restoration will not often happen quickly. And even where some significant spiritual progress has been made, relapses are common. Some of the “ruined cities” have been “devastated for generations”. Many people in our cities are living in messes not of their own creation. They have inherited their situation. They have become, as it were, comfortable with baggage that has been passed on from generation to generation. For many generations families have helplessly observed the ravaging of their own lives and the lives of their children. Isaiah 61:4 insists that this ancient, transgenerational cycle of waste and devastation can be broken! The gospel has the power to rebuild, restore and renew.

Do you have a heart for the city?

Stephen Schwartz expressed our dream so well in the musical *Godspell*.

*We don't need alabaster
We don't need chrome
We've got our special plaster
Take my hand
I'll take you home!...*

*We can build
A beautiful city
Yes we can
Oh yes we can!*

Unfortunately *Godspell*'s version of Isaiah 61:4 ends badly (with an apparent humanist agenda... “Call it the city of *man!*”) The beautiful city we want to build is the City of God! God is in his city and he is building his city – of that there is no doubt. He has raised up a people who are engaged in the task of rebuilding the ancient ruins. With God's help we can build *a beautiful city*. Oh yes we can!

