

Sermon at York Minster Evensong to celebrate York800

The following sermon was preached by Johan Bergström-Allen, a Lay Carmelite and Chair of Churches Together in York, at Evensong in York Minster on 8th July 2012 to celebrate the 8th centenary of York receiving its city charter.



May my heart and mouth be inspired by God who dwells among his peoples, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Despite persistent rain this summer, 2012 is a year of special celebration for York. The Queen distributed the Maundy Money in this Minster. The Olympic Torch came here. And tomorrow our city marks 800 years since King John signed a charter that was an important step on the road to the civil liberties we now enjoy. These significant events are a cause for celebration, as well as an invitation to reflect on what it means to be a city.

The Bible offers an interesting perspective on citizenship, because its first book speaks about a bad city, Babel, and its last book looks forward to the perfect city, the New Jerusalem.¹ It seems to me that York, like all cities, is on a journey from Babel towards the New Jerusalem.

The first lesson read by the Lord Mayor – and we're grateful to you and the Civic Party for joining us – tells us what a city should not be. According to *Genesis* (11:1-9), the founders of Babel said 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves'. Those builders were working from a distorted blueprint, a city designed for their own glory. Huddling together for self-protection, Babel's inhabitants turned in on their own problems, with no regard for those outside. God, Creation's master builder, was left out of the planning process, and saddened by his people's pride and self-centredness.

Genesis tells us that at that time 'the whole earth had one language and the same words'. There was no diversity in Babel. The city's builders sought to confine everybody within one tower. If they had built outwards they would have encountered otherness, the diversity of God's Creation. Instead they built upwards, presuming that the world's first skyscraper would give them access to heaven. But heaven isn't only in the sky; heaven is wherever God is, and *Genesis* says that God came down to see Babel. And what was God's reaction? God cursed the people – or did he bless them? – with diversity. God gave the people a multitude of different languages, making them spread outwards, encountering other people who were different but, like them, made in the image and likeness of God. Metaphorically speaking, all cities are the result of this act of God's kindness, making otherwise different people recognise their common humanity.

Later Bible stories suggest that cities have a special purpose. In the Scriptures a city is often a refuge from the wilderness, where people share resources and talents, where education and the arts flourish, crafts and trade can be conducted, science and technology can advance, where families and friendships can be built. Put together with large numbers of different people, we are challenged to be transformed by new experiences. The countryside is wonderful too, of course, but in cities people come together to relate in new ways, building a civilisation that honours God by honouring others made in God's image.

Creativity and vitality in cities are not to be worshipped as gods in their own right; they're signs pointing us towards the God who made the world in all its richness. Cities, like human beings, are fundamentally good and reflect something of the divine. That's not to say that they're perfect, of course, because cities, as well as people, can be disfigured by sin. Cities can bring out the best and worst in the human heart. Density supports diversity, and so minorities can flourish in peace, but cities can also push people into ghettos. As well as sheltering the needy, cities can hide those fleeing justice. The pressures of urban life can make us competitive and insensitive. Babel warns us that a city's potential is corrupted if we put selfish interests at the heart of society instead of other people, including God.

Two thousand years ago Saint Paul recognised the great potential of cities. We read in the New Testament that Paul headed for the biggest urban centres of his day, planting church communities of people who embraced the Gospel, the Good News that Jesus came to tell us: that God exists, and loves humanity. Recent studies have shown that cities are still critical in spreading this Good News because by influencing a city, you influence the broader culture that looks towards it. That's why Christians in York today need to be engaged in our city's life. If we can offer people credible Good News of God's love, witnessed to as much by our actions as by our words, then the effects will be remarkable.

York has had a unique role in spreading the Good News of Jesus, and I think today it's appropriate to celebrate our city's Christian heritage. Christianity first came to York when it was a Roman city. It was here that Constantine was declared Roman Emperor, and under his rule it became possible to openly profess the Christian faith. There was a bishop of York as early as 314, and being the most important northern city for not only the Romans but also the Saxons and Vikings, York played a key role in the spread of Christianity.

When York received its charter in 1212, this city had already had a Christian presence for centuries, with this Minster its spiritual heart. This cathedral was and remains the seat for the second Archbishopric in the country. York produced Christian saints and scholars, like Alcuin, St. Wilfrid and St. William. Medieval York was home to a vibrant Church that provided crucial civic institutions: abbeys, friaries and nunneries, hospitals, and religious guilds which performed the Mystery Plays. The Reformation sadly brought persecution on all sides; the Recusant Catholic community produced extraordinary figures like Margaret Clitherow and Mary Ward, a promoter of women's education whose followers established The Bar Convent, Britain's oldest continually-inhabited religious community. Other Non-Conformist groups like the Quakers made a huge impact not only in York but nationwide, with philanthropists like William Tuke whose Retreat Hospital pioneered humane treatment of mental illness, and Joseph Rowntree who promoted education for the poor. In the eighteenth century John Wesley preached in York and established Methodist chapels. In the Anglican Church York remains the centre of its northern province (and welcome to anybody here attending Synod), and St. Michael-le-Belfrey next-door is known as an Evangelical powerhouse.

Christians make an enormous contribution to this city today. For example, in education, through Church schools and York St John University. Christian chaplains bring comfort in hospitals, hospices, and workplaces. Saint Martin-le-Grand Church, bombed during World War II, has risen anew as a

centre promoting reconciliation. The Salvation Army and projects like Street Angels, The Besom, The Saint Vincent de Paul Society, Saint Anne's Orthodox community, The Gateway Centre and Spurriergate Centre offer social outreach into the community through very practical help. Christian venues offer space for reflection in the busy round of urban life. York's churches contribute tremendously to tourism, offering a rich cultural heritage of music, bells, organs, art, glass, manuscripts and architecture. Choirs such as today's wonderful singers, and drama groups like Riding Lights, enrich York's artistic life. Christian communities are among those campaigning on environmental and justice issues. The generosity of Christians in York reaches way beyond our city, with charities like CAFOD, Christian Aid and Feed the Minds raising money and awareness for some of our planet's most vulnerable people. Some today would like to sideline faith, but it has been crucial to York's development, and I'm sure it will remain so in the future. Let's thank God for so much that Christianity has contributed to York in the last 800 years.

At the same time I believe we should humbly repent of those occasions when Christians have failed to live up to all that God invites us to be. York's tragic history of Jewish persecution, as well as previous disrespect between Christian denominations, calls on us to redouble our efforts to ensure that our city is not like Babel in rejecting those who are different.

As well as people of other faiths and no faith at all, today there are dozens of Christian traditions in this city, many represented this afternoon. Ecumenical dialogue is flourishing with groups like *Churches Together*, *One Voice* and *CoRE*. I think the Babel story gives us confidence that God does not want us all to be the same, speaking as it were only one language. Our humanity is enriched by our diversity, united in God.

Diversity united is what we find in the *Revelation to John* (21:1-5, 9-26), the second lesson which Juliet Wright read. In *Revelation* a city, the 'New Jerusalem', is the symbol of God's redeemed world.

To understand the New Jerusalem, we need to know something about the old, earthly, Jerusalem. In the ancient world, cities were religious institutions, built around temples where the presence of God was deemed to be particularly felt. Cities were royal residences of the divine, and none more so than Jerusalem – otherwise known as Sion – where Solomon built the Temple of God. In today's Psalm (48) we heard 'The hill of Sion is a fair place, and the joy of the whole earth ... God is well known in her palaces as a sure refuge.'

It was to Jerusalem that Jesus came, its king, riding on a humble donkey. There he preached the Good News of God's love, a bigger message than the confines of any religion, for which, just a few days later, he was crucified outside the city walls, a biblical metaphor of forsakenness, beyond the place where God was thought to dwell. Jesus shows us that God is not confined to a specific city. By his crucifixion Jesus lost his place in the earthly Jerusalem, so that by his resurrection we can become citizens of the New.

The earthly Jerusalem has only ever been a foretaste of God's city which is to come. In *Revelation* we're given a vision of that New Jerusalem. A loud voice proclaims 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them.' This is a very different city from that of Babel. Instead of being built for the glory of its inhabitants, John says the New Jerusalem will possess the glory of God.

What is the glory of God? Well, Saint Irenaeus, an early Father of the Church said, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive'. God's glory is seen when human beings are fully alive, fully themselves, fully open to others in relationship. This is how people will be in the New Jerusalem, a city in which God will be at its very heart, living with his peoples. And note the plural there, 'peoples'. The New Jerusalem will be a rich blend of different peoples united. Whenever different nations come together as friends we get a glimpse of the New Jerusalem. So it's wonderful that for our York800

celebrations we're able to welcome guests from York's twin city of Dijon. Bienvenue! And it's inspiring that Christians of different traditions have come together today as friends; we're very grateful to the Minster for its hospitality, and we look forward to welcoming your Dean-elect.

In York we are on a cosmic journey, moving away from the model of Babel, striving towards God's kingdom, the New Jerusalem. There are already some physical resemblances! Like York, the New Jerusalem will have walls and gates, but beautiful as our York stone is, the New Jerusalem will be built of living stones, human beings so fully alive that they shine like gold. Here in York, we have to close our city walls at dusk for safety, but the New Jerusalem will never shut because there will be no night. It will be illuminated by the glory of God, that is, human beings fully alive. Instead of walls for defence and separation, the walls of New Jerusalem will be transparent as glass, allowing us to see and celebrate one another.

York has this beautiful Minster for worshipping God, just as the earthly Jerusalem had its Temple, but of the New Jerusalem John says 'its temple is the Lord God the Almighty'. God will live in the midst of God's people. In the days of Babel, God came down just for a brief visit. After Babel, humanity encountered God again in a builder from Nazareth. Jesus has shown us what God is like; compassionate and loving. Jesus has shown us that the best way for human beings to be fully alive, the best way to build a city together, is to reflect God's compassion and love. If very diverse human beings can live together in the way Jesus has shown us, then the New Jerusalem won't so much descend from heaven. We will be building it up, not by constructing a tower that looks upwards, but a city that looks outwards. And God can be at the heart of our city now, if we seek Christ in the faces of the poor, the sick, the lost, the marginalised, the other. If we can build a city by loving God and our neighbours as ourselves, whoever they are, then the New Jerusalem will become a reality.

In York we are on a journey towards that New Jerusalem. Occasionally something takes us a step closer. 800 years ago civic leaders banded together with a vision for how human beings in this city could be more fully alive. They obtained a charter giving York citizens the right to gather taxes, hold their own courts, and appoint a mayor. Justice and self-determination are civil freedoms that bring us a step closer to the New Jerusalem, rights and responsibilities for which we should thank God, and to which Church and Society must recommit in every age.

I would like to close with some words of Jesus, who thought that cities were such a good thing that he used one as a metaphor to encourage his disciples, journeying towards the New Jerusalem. We read, in Matthew's account of the Gospel (5:14-16), Jesus' words which are my prayer today for the Church and City of York: 'Jesus said to his followers "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden ... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven."'

¹ For an Evangelical Christian interpretation of the significance of cities, which I found very useful in compiling this sermon, see: <http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-1869-A-biblical-theology-of-the-city.htm> (accessed June 2012).