

# THE WORD ON THE STREET: BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON GOD'S REIGN IN THE CITY

*C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell*

What does God have to say about cities? What does God have to say about mission and evangelism? What do we already know about cities and what can we learn from the Bible? What is new for our age? What might be the signs of the reign of God in the city today? What is the word on the street? Where is the Word on the street?

Cities are not new or novel to our times. They have always played a role in God's mission. Many times they have been very central to that mission and often God has asked very demanding things of his servants in relation to a particular city. Think of Jonah and Nahum—which prophet would you rather be? The prophet from the marginalized and oppressed people who is sent to the centre of the empire, to the seat of power to tell them “repent!” and then to see God save that horrible city—the city of your enemies? Or the prophet who gets to say, “Finally, justice will be done and Nineveh will be destroyed!” In general, when we think of our cities, of the corruption, the violence, the abuse, the poverty, we much prefer to be Nahum and to think of God's mission as doing away with all this horrible stuff. It is easier to be Nahum than to be Jonah.

Similar stories follow for cities like Babylon or Jerusalem or Rome. Babylon is at once both the object of prayer in Jeremiah and the trope for all that is evil and against God in the book of Revelation.<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem is at once the city of David, the city of the beautiful temple for Israel's God, and the city for which Jesus cries, the city that turns away its prophets, condemns and kills the messiah. Thus, even a cursory sketch of the Bible suggests at the very least that the Scriptures are ambivalent when it comes to cities.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jer 29:7 and Rev 18:2–24.

However, you read the first chapters of Genesis, it seems we did not start off as city people: there was the garden and then a more pastoral society. But as the numbers increased and people started living together in larger groups, we begin to see how close living conditions bring out both the good and the bad—the virtues and the vices are exaggerated and made more evident in cities. It is in cities where we witness God's care and the goodness of his people towards the vulnerable, the sick, the oppressed; but it is also the place where we see the increase in violence, in the practice of oppression and forcing some to the margins. Close living conditions promote the exaggeration of both virtues and vices—the sociological impact of condensed living has both a sinful and a salvific impact.

While the biblical texts have much to say about life and living, this study will focus on “dwelling”—what it means to live the Good News in the city and the Word on the street. Mission thinkers (and the field of missiology in general) can sometimes get caught up in methods, in analyses and strategies for mission and thus fail to imagine what it means to live and to dwell, we fail to reflect on the Word that dwells on the street. And yet dwelling is an extremely important concept in the Bible and it is a concept that relates directly to God's mission for his people.

Ivan Illich, a Catholic theologian who died in 2002, argued in a speech to the Royal Institute of British Architects that modern cities have reduced dwelling to housing.<sup>2</sup> To dwell is human, Illich wrote. Wild beasts have nests, cattle have stables, cars have garages. Only humans dwell—“To dwell is an art... Spiders are hard-wired by their genes to weave a web of its own kind... but the human is the only animal who is an artist, and the art of dwelling is part of the art of living—it is the art of loving and dreaming, of suffering and dying. A house is neither a nest nor a garage.”<sup>3</sup>

What if we thought of Christian mission as a recovery of a sense of dwelling? What sort of impact might this have on our cities? How might this help us find the Word on the street?

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<sup>2</sup> Ivan Illich, “Dwelling,” in *In the Mirror of the Past* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

When I ask the question: Where do you live? I am not asking for an address. It is a question that asks for the place where your daily existence gives shape to the world. “Just tell me how you dwell and I will tell you who you are.”<sup>4</sup> The problem is that in today’s cities people cannot ask this question anymore—at least not fully. Cities are made for consumers and commuters, whether they commute from fancy skyscrapers to the office, or from the slum to the street. We have reduced dwelling to residence. Again following Illich, for the resident, the art of living is fortified—he needs an apartment and security more than he needs a neighbour. He has no need for dwelling, just as he has no need for the art of suffering because he counts on medical assistance, and, he has probably never thought about the art of dying. Residents—those who live in settlements, look the same from Shanghai to New York, from Lima to London. Everywhere you find the same garage for humans—shelves to store the workforce overnight. There seems to be little difference between many apartment complexes and large scale chicken coops—neither is dwelling, certainly neither are at all close to the biblical image of God dwelling among us, of God becoming flesh, and pitching his tent with us.

Cities are a concentrated place of corrupt power and the church in the city must be very careful in its witness to this power lest she also become corrupted by it. Cities alienate—you can be completely alone with 15 million people around you. This also is not the biblical vision for the city or for the ways in which God calls us to dwell and to witness.

Part of the challenge for us is to recognize that cities make *koinonia* (biblical fellowship) seem invisible, unreal, or impossible because those who can flourish in the city are the ones with resources. It is harder and harder to find yourself depending on others, to share life with others—not just an apartment block, not just sharing square footage, but genuinely sharing life. Dwelling is about sharing life.

So much of urban mission seems to presume that mission is about servicing what we already have—providing more services within the system—more food for the hungry,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 55.

more shelter for the homeless, more Bible studies for the middleclass. I am not arguing against shelters or food or Bible studies. But I am challenging the idea that cities are neutral and that we just need to make the best of it, do the best we can to patch things up and make up for the inequalities. What if cities are like the Titanic? Moving around the deck furniture will not do us much good! What if we see the city more like the tower of Babel? It is not neutral, but is a sign of a proud and self-sufficient people that says, “We will make a name for ourselves” rather than “Come Holy Spirit, dwell with us.” It is important to remember that God judges certain forms of life.

*Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth (Gen 11:4).*

*Out of Haran, God called Abram... so Abram went (Gen 12:1-5).*

The people who tried to build the tower were afraid of being scattered so God confuses them and they are scattered indeed. But, already at the end of Genesis 11 and beginning of chapter 12, we read about God’s calling of one particular man. Amongst the scattering of peoples, God builds a relationship with Abram and his family. It is tumultuous, filled with ups and downs, betrayals and faithfulness. God dwells among his people as a visitor near the oak tree at Mamre, as a tower of fire by night, as bread and water and life. Ultimately, God dwells with us in Jesus. And here we have dwelling in its full sense—in Jesus we are taught the art of living and of dying, of being in relationship, whether in Jerusalem or in provincial Nazareth, or London or Bangkok.

God’s renewal does not necessarily mean, “Let us patch up this mess.” Rather, let us build an ark and start anew. Perhaps the hope is not in redeeming the city as it is, but in finding alternative ways of dwelling, offering new spaces where God’s dwelling is seen and heard and touched and tasted. This might very well look like homeless shelters or Bible studies, but it is more than that as well. It is seeing mission as finding ways to share life with others and to build relationships because this is how God chose to do things with us.

In the first verses of the Gospel of John we read about God dwelling among us—coming literally in the flesh to share life with us in all its fullness, in all its messiness, in all the joys and challenges, unto death. It is this type of dwelling to which Christians are called—to live the good news so that the world might know of this God that came to dwell with us, so that the world might know the Word on the street.

*For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth...*

*Be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.*

*I will rejoice in Jerusalem and delight in my people;*

*no more shall the sounds of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.*

*No more shall there be an infant that lives but a few days,*

*or an old person who does not live out a lifetime...*

*They shall build houses and inhabit them;*

*They shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit...*

*Like the days of the tree shall the days of my people be... (Isaiah 65:17-22).*

This is God's vision for the shalom of the city and it reminds us of the famous text in Jeremiah 29: seek the peace of the city. It is indeed a revolutionary vision even; perhaps due to its simplicity. It is the small things like building houses and planting gardens that shape this vision for the city. Though our contexts and ministries are varied, these verses give us a glimpse into the ways God calls us to participate in shaping his vision for the city—a place where child mortality is no more and where old people actually have a role, or are really cared for, no matter what disability or illness they might have (v. 20), a place where the hard work put into building a house is shared work and work that is enjoyed by the very ones who have put brick upon brick (v. 21). Building houses and planting gardens require care and the help of others—they are by nature community-building activities.... You have to learn how to be a neighbour. The fruit of a garden is meant for sharing. God's vision for building houses and planting gardens is a community vision—a community whose days will be like the days of the tree—the tree of life. Embodying the Word on the street is learning to be this tree. Are we reading the Bible and shaping our lives to be this tree?

Let us look at another text in Isaiah and one that might be a bit more challenging. It is doubtful that anyone disagrees with the vision of the city of Isaiah 65, but in this other text, Isaiah 58, the prophet strikes closer to home partly because he gives us a vision for what the tree looks like and how it grows.

In some translations the subheading for Isaiah 58 reads “False and True Worship.” In other versions it reads “The True Fast.” It fits within the general section in Isaiah that begins in chapter 56, where the prophet turns his full attention to the characteristics of the new era—the time of the Lord, salvation for all the nations, and the glory of Jerusalem—this glory that was described in Isaiah 65 and many other texts. But here Isaiah looks at the characteristics of this new era by contrasting the blessings promised by God with the distressing attitude of the people of God. Here, he argues, humbling yourself is useless if it is merely a matter of appearing humble.

True worship is lived; it is embodying the Word of God. The faith that is lived is not simply about fasting or false humility—it is an active, holistic faith. It is faith that loosens the bonds of injustice, lightens the weight of those with heavy burdens, and sets the prisoner free. It is a glorious picture, a revolutionary picture, a picture of peace and justice that has often been picked up by Christians in Latin America and around the world to describe what the church needs to do: to denounce the injustice of dictatorships or colonialism. Yes, the text can be used this way. But the prophet warns us—are we criticising the other while doing nothing ourselves for justice in our own house? We cannot pretend to be humble with fasting and prayers when we are not even a people who strives for justice in our own homes and in our church or our own institutions and mission agencies.

Using Isaiah’s texts for public protests is not wrong. In fact, it is a very good reflection of one important sign of God’s kingdom: the justice, freedom, and peace that Jesus brings. And yet, there is more to this chapter in Isaiah that we in the church can easily forget because it is perhaps harder to deal with. It is more challenging because it is closer to home. It is sometimes easier to pray for a violent enemy across the border than it is for a next door neighbour with whom we do not get along. Or we pray and

work for world peace, but not for reconciliation with someone in the church or in the community that we do not like. Maybe one reason this Isaiah text is so revolutionary is because it reminds us to incarnate the good news for those that are.

*Is not this the fast that I choose:*

*to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?*

*Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?*

*Then your light shall break forth like the dawn...*

*Then you shall call and the Lord shall answer...*

*If you remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,*

*if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday sun (Isaiah 58:6-10).*

In verse 7 and again in verse 10, Isaiah says share your bread. He also reminds us to share shelter, clothing, and healing—the poor should not just get what is left over, but we are called to give of our very selves on behalf of the needy (v. 10). Isaiah makes no distinction between the ethnicity or faith of the person that is to be served. Service and peacemaking, that is, being the hands and feet of Jesus on the street, knows no discrimination.

Sandwiched between verses 7 and 10, he says, “in these things your light will shine very brightly and God will answer your cry for help.” Then, at the end of verse 9, he hits closer to home again:

*Remove the yoke from among you, the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil (Isaiah 58:9).*

The revolutionary character of God’s people has everything to do with the daily matters of how we treat one another and how we use our tongue.

This is about sharing the burdens in-house, within the community, within the family, within the church. It is about saying things that build others up rather than put them

down; it is about not gossiping, not blaming others, or coming up with excuses for ourselves. Here, in a chapter about revolutions and the promises of God, the prophet says, “Watch how you speak!” This is harder to do, but this is also the Word on the street.

Let us look at one more passage. Paul’s letter to the Philippians is an extraordinary book. Some commentators say it is the apostle’s swan song; but really, it is a call to subversion. For Paul another world is possible.<sup>5</sup> This letter, one of the so-called “prison epistles,” was dictated by Paul during the years he was imprisoned in Rome. Some think he wrote while in Ceasarea, still others say Ephesus. Wherever the place of writing, his message continues to be the same. What we must keep in mind is that Paul was in jail. He had endured beatings and threats, disappointments, and near-death experiences. He was persecuted, oppressed, and the victim of all sorts of violence. Now in prison his future was nebulous at best. The authorities, both civil and religious, did not sympathize with him or with his teachings. Despite all this, Philippians inspires faith, hope, love, joy, and a fighting and victorious spirit. Paul is grateful for the Christians in Philippi for their “communion in the gospel” (1:5) and for their “sharing in grace” (1:7). Paul responds in the only way a human being can and should respond: with a deep and joyful sense of gratitude.

After citing the glorious hymn of Christ’s humiliation and service—a hymn that calls to memory what true humility is, in contrast to the false humility noted in Isaiah—this hymn is about God’s faithfulness in exalting Jesus above all. After the hymn, Paul again reminds the Christians of what it looks like to embody God’s Word on the street.

Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

Do all things without murmuring and arguing, so that you may be blameless... in a crooked and perverse generation, in which you shine like stars in the world (2:12-15).

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<sup>5</sup> Pedro Arana, *Latin American Bible Commentary*, forthcoming.



The Philippians are not perfect and Paul knows fully well the challenges of living out the faith, especially under difficult circumstances, as was the case for this small group that gathered by the riverbank to worship. Even for them, as the oppressed and persecuted minority in their place, there was the challenge of treating one another well. As was the case in the Isaiah text, here too we are warned of how we speak. The prophet said, “Do not speak evil.” Paul says, “Do not murmur or argue” (v. 14).

It is so tempting and so easy to complain, especially in the Christian circles. Just as children need to learn how to work out their differences, to be kind to one another, and not jealous, so also we need to learn to do the same—to know when to speak and what the right manner of speaking might be when there are disagreements or when we feel an injustice has happened. Too quickly we think we are always right. Yet, we must open ourselves to the humility Paul speaks of, open ourselves to the possibility that we might be wrong and that God wants to transform us and to make us instruments of his justice, but that God does it God’s way, not our way.

How do we embody the humility of Christ? How do we live out the good news in the way we treat one another and the way we treat our neighbour?

What is extraordinary and wonderful in this Philippians text is that like the Isaiah passage, here also is the promise that if we are careful in these seemingly small things like not murmuring or arguing, we will shine like stars! In Isaiah it says our gloom will be brighter than noonday;<sup>6</sup> you will shine like stars in the darkness.<sup>7</sup> This is the good news on the street. It is not lived for its own sake, but is lived so that others might also have this hope that is within us. It is evangelistic shining—the good news that is lived is the good news that shines as brightly as the tropical sun, such that others will want to join in with this very strange people and will join their stories to the one great story of Jesus.

God is at work in you, says Paul (Phil 2:13). It is truly extraordinary to recall that God himself dwells among us so that we are enabled to work for God’s pleasure. This is

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<sup>6</sup> Isa 58:10.

<sup>7</sup> Phil 2:15.

a call and a promise to all of God's people. We are all supposed to shine like stars in the darkest night. Whatever urban ministry we are in, whatever work God has for you, you are challenged to remind yourself about not whining, not complaining, not pointing the finger, but to live and exemplify in word and service the peace of Christ, even among those people with whom we do not get along. In these small acts of faithful speech and true worship, in doing justice, and sharing bread, God's promise is that God's people will shine like stars.

Dwelling in the city (or anywhere else) has to be personal. It is sharing the love of Jesus one person at a time, even in a city of millions. It is about building new forms of sharing life together that are lifeboats, not chicken coops, that make the living Word possible.

Mission is about building friendships in the loneliest of places, of visiting the prisoner and finding ways to share in his life even behind bars.

There is a small group of believers who gather weekly in New Delhi, India, to read sacred texts and to share a meal. The people that gather have been told by the city and by their culture that they are in competition with one another; they are taught to oppress others and to accept their position as oppressed. Yet in the upper room at this house, leaders of the backwards castes are offered food and shelter under one condition—to share the table with those you do not get along with and with people with whom you are in competition. It is a new form of sharing space and of learning what reconciliation really means. It is a form of dwelling that challenges the powers that be in that city and that culture.

The prophet Amos said that the day would come when there would be famine in the land—not the famine of food or drink, but famine of the Word of God.<sup>8</sup> People will search high and low, from north to south and east to west, but they will not find the Word of the Lord. The city can numb our senses so that we become lukewarm. Yet God dwelling among us is anything but lukewarm. The Word has come and God has called each of us to be voices and hands and feet, together for that Word on the street.

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<sup>8</sup> Amos 8:11-12.

Not just the word of service, but the living and revolutionary Word that is the Bible. Is the Bible the word on the street?

We are called to a vibrant, living faith that shows the world, urban or rural, that another world is not only possible, but already dwells among us. What are the signs of the fullness of life? Where are these found in the city? Christian mission must be about such signs—learning from them, strengthening them, and sharing them in other cities so that if and when judgment comes, the church will be seen not as servants shuffling furniture on the deck of a sinking Titanic, but as those building the lifeboats, proclaiming the Word on the street, and shining like stars.



**Dr. C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell** is the executive director of the Theological Commission for the World Evangelical Alliance. She is a Brazilian Baptist theologian from São Paulo. Rosalee also serves as New Testament editor for the forthcoming *Latin American Bible Commentary* and is the author and editor of various books and articles.