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The Church in the City
City Vision, 21 May 2002

1. Anointed imagination

'Your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams' (Acts 2:17)
John Dawson once said that 'an anointed imagination is the eye of faith.' (*Taking our Cities for God* (Word 1989) p.55). Imagining and dreaming matter a great deal with God, especially for leaders, I believe; they are spiritual disciplines which we have neglected. Allowing the Holy Spirit to work in those parts of our minds which dare to dream and imagine a future radically different to the past is crucial. In so many churches creativity has been stifled and imagination tamed. So what would you dare to dream for your city? Think of the great visions of John in Revelation, of the new Jerusalem. Dream, for a moment, with the person next to you, of what God wants this city to be.

2. Getting there from here

'Where there is no vision, the people perish' (Prov 29:18)
How do we get there, to the place where we have dreamed of being, from here? If we are truly to have a 'City Vision' shared among the people of God in this place, how could it happen? There is, of course, no blueprint. It can only be done by God, and not techniques, though they may have their part to play. Prayer is the key – first for the city, only then for the church.

But, I believe that unless the church in the city understands and lays claim to its true role and true relationship to the city, then revival will not happen, and the dreams will not become reality. So I want to speak about the relationship between the city and the church.

3. The significance of the Christian *ecclesia*

'To the church in...' (1 Cor 1:2)
In the New Testament the church is referred to in local terms almost all the time. Churches have a local character, and belong to an area or place. When Paul writes to the churches in a province (e.g. Galatia) it is to the churches. Over a third of the references to 'church' in the New Testament are to the church in a city.

The church is a vehicle of the kingdom – but it has been split and muddled for so long. But the church in the city is part of revival, because through it and the people who make it up, God works and brings his kingdom. We see this when we understand that the gospel of the kingdom was not just an intellectual answer

to religious or philosophical needs in the early church (though it was that), but it was a physical form that *embodied* (dare we say *incarnated*?) an answer to the needs of the first-century world.

The city was known in Greek as a *polis* (from which we get our word politics). A *polis* was a city state which was, ideally, small enough for the citizens all to know each other, and where each (free male!) citizen had a stake in decision-making through a meeting known as the 'assembly' or *ecclesia*.

But what was happening in the first century was a disenchantment with this ideal. Cities had lost their independence as Roman imperial power grew. People no longer knew what they belonged to, as old forms of community were eroded gradually in some cases and swept away in others.

One hotbed of trouble was Ephesus. In Acts 19 you can read the story of how a riot happened and the 'assembly' gathered (illegally) in the theatre, an assertion of political muscle that had no effect (the authorities, in the form of the town clerk, were very worried about it, though).

In such a situation, consider two things:

- i) The Christians called their own meeting the *ecclesia*. This was, I suggest, a claim to be the true 'council' or decision-making body of the city. Here was a meeting that answered the needs of the disaffected citizens of the *polis*. How did it do this?
 - All its members could know each other by sight.
 - It had a leader in Jesus Christ who was called *Lord*, over and above the power of Rome or anyone else.
 - It was open to slaves and women, which the city *ecclesia* was not.

In Acts 19 there is an implicit contrast, I think, between the confusion of the city *ecclesia*, and the order of the Christian one.

- ii) 'Christians' accepted this name for their group (Acts 11:26), and it has stuck down the centuries, but because of its familiarity to us we miss the particular connotations it carries. E.A.Judge suggests that adding '*ianus*' to the end of a name, as was done in the coining of 'Christian' implies 'a political comment. It is not used of the followers of a god. It classifies people as partners of a political or military leader, and is mildly contemptuous.' ('Judaism and the Rise of Early Christianity' *Tyndale Bulletin* 45 (1994) p.363.) In other words, the very word which Christians accepted to describe themselves contains within it a claim to power, or at least a role within the ruling of a city. They called the city to its true form, and sought its welfare (see Jeremiah 29:7, and 1 Peter 2:11-3:17). There is

strong evidence of Christians living up to this call by making considerable and significant benefactions to the cities in which they lived, and being encouraged to do so. Normally this would have been a way of ensuring popularity and personal power. But Christians seem to have done it for no reward other than the welfare of the city, and sought no honours in return. They also seem to have taken political office as part of their discipleship and service (e.g. Erastus, the city treasurer at Corinth, whom Paul mentions in Rom 16:23. See B.Winter *Seek the Welfare of the City* (Patternoster 1994)pp.179-98).

The form of the early church, then, was a practical apologetic. It showed people a new way of life, a new kind of society. It embodied and incarnated the gospel of the kingdom: Jesus called his people into a common fellowship. To speak of a 'Christian church' implied a group of free citizens (of the kingdom), called out (by God) to a political role (seeking the welfare of the city).

4. The Activity of the Christian *ecclesia*

'When you come together' (1 Cor 14:26)

What did this Christian assembly do when it gathered together? It did not debate politics. It prayed for the city, and the ruling powers there (1 Tim 2:1-2). Perhaps I am begging the question here whether the whole church in a city did meet together. The accepted orthodoxy of the last few decades has been that small groups of Christians met in isolated house-churches, but that the whole church in a city would not have been able to get together because of limitations on space within available buildings (a too-ready acceptance of this point is the only ground on which I would criticise Robert Banks seminal and indispensable *Paul's Idea of Community* (Revised ed. Hendrickson 1994); see pp.35-36 for the size of churches). Nevertheless, it seems to me that the implications of Paul's writings are that though a weekly gathering was small and local, there was an occasional gathering ('assembly') of the whole church in a city. This is confirmed by Robert Banks's comment that "'church" ... does not describe all the Christians who live in a particular locality if they do not gather' (*Paul's Idea of Community* p.35). The early second-century *Epistle to Diognetus* sums up the function of the gathered church when it speaks of how Christians are related to the world 'as the soul is to the body. As the soul is diffused through every part of the body, so are Christians through all the cities of the world...it is Christians who hold the world together' (*Epistle to Diognetus* 6). This is a breathtaking claim made by the embattled baby church. What a vision and vocation they felt they had! They held the destiny of their city in their hands, as they presented it to God.

5. What are the implications?

'Your kingdom come' (Matthew 6:10)

There is not time now to try to spell out in detail what this might mean. Of course there is a task of adaptation, and we cannot, in our very different social context, lift the patterns of the New Testament church into our own day. Nevertheless, I do believe that God is calling us (and has been calling us for some time) to the sort of pattern of involvement in the city that the early church had, in particular by trying to come alongside the 'powers that be' and asking to do no more than pray for them. Interestingly, this seems to be happening at a national level at the moment, with both Prime Minister and Chancellor using the idea of 'stake-holders' to invite representatives of the Christian community to talk with them about what sort of society we should seek. Could it happen at the local level?

There is much more to say about Coventry. I would love to talk about what I believe to be its role as a place called by God to a work of reconciliation, a symbol of hope for others (something I have been very struck by as I have told the story of the bombing of the cathedral and the cross of nails in Uganda and Nigeria recently). But I am also very aware of how much our city (and I have been ministering here for twenty years now) needs to be healed. As we seek revival, that means for me asking for God's kingdom to come in our midst. That too is a big subject, too big for today. But I believe we can confuse the partial coming of the kingdom, a taste of God's power and presence, which is the phenomenon we witness as 'revival' with waiting for the second coming of Jesus. And because we confuse the two, we wait for God to intervene and wrap things up, and do not actively seek the coming of the kingdom by nurturing and encouraging the mustard seeds God has planted in our midst to grow.

My introduction to ministry in this city was working as a very junior colleague with Graham Dow. Graham always used to say 'my prayer is first for the city, and then for the church'. As God's people called by him to this place, let's pray for God's kingdom to come first to the streets of this city; and only then to overflow into the churches.

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