

SPIRITUALITY IN THE CITY

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“God’s love speaks to me in the birds and streams, but also behind the clamour of the city....”

Thomas Merton, What is Contemplation?

This reflection came from my own need to find enrichment.

Opportunities for "refresher" breaks in the country have diminished, so I needed to look afresh at where I am - in the city – for spiritual nourishment. While the text is expressed here for the individual, it may be adapted for a group setting.

REFLECTION OUTLINE

1. SCRIPTURE. - What might God be saying to me in Scripture?

2. WHAT ARE THE FEATURES, CHARACTERISTICS OF A CITY?

What can I see or what do I know of a city that might speak to me of God, and what might they be calling me to do?

3. WHAT ABOUT THE CITY WITHIN?

What symbols and features of a city that may be found within me might touch into my relationship with God, and possibly with the God within my friends and family with whom I relate?

Scripture: Luke 19:41-44

"As Jesus drew near and came in sight of the city he shed tears over it and said, 'If you too had only recognised on this day the way to peace! But in fact it is hidden from your eyes! Yes a time is coming when your enemies will raise fortifications all round you, and when they will encircle you and hem you in on every side; they will dash you and the children inside your walls to the ground; they will leave not one stone standing on another within you, because you did not recognise the moment of your visitation."

We have in this reading a challenge to see God in the city, to recognise in the city the way to peace and the visitation of our God.

The challenge to see God in the city means to see God in the busyness, the congestion, the built-up environment, the activity, indeed the frenzy of traffic and bustling humanity. "The way to peace" is through our own situation, i.e., through the city. This has more to do with internal navigation, perception, and attitude than with external circumstances beyond our control.

In **Luke** we also have the enlightened concept that *"The kingdom of God is among you"*. (Luke 17:21)

Further to this, our own **Mary MacKillop** said in 1871, *"There where you are you will find God."*

We're in the city so 'open our eyes, Lord,' to find you here in our city.

The Features/Characteristics of a City

The architecture of **high rise**: skyscrapers and soaring towers reaching up to the heavens, calls us to the ancient perception of finding God "on the mountain" or "going up the mountain" in order to be closer to God. The Decalogue was given to Moses in his encounter with God on Mt Sinai. The tall spires on churches give us a symbol of this reaching up to God in heaven.

In **Genesis** 11:4 we read "*Come,*" they said, "*Let us build ourselves a city and tower with its top reaching heaven. Let us make a name for ourselves, so that we do not get scattered all over the world.*"

The tower was the **Tower of Babel** - a place of confused languages! Why did God confuse the people by mixing up their languages, giving each a different one so that they couldn't understand each other? They had all been speaking the same language, successfully building the city, when God intervened and upset the status quo. This is now sounding more like **real life!**

God saw the risk in the **power** which may be generated in a city. God was worried there would be no stopping them: "*Now, nothing they plan to do will be beyond them*". (v. 6)

The confusing of their languages and the scattering of the people to all corners of the world is an indication to us to not adopt the arrogance and power of city dwelling lest we lose our humility.

We may seem to have it all! If we were to ask country people, we would learn how they feel about the discrimination that can and does occur because the city holds the wealth, the votes and the popular, or populous, trend.

Look at the city and know that in all the **advantages, opportunities and facilities** so readily available, we are to stay humble, simple and grounded in a **spirit of equality and sharing**.

In **Matthew 5:14-16**, the image of a city is used to tell us that we are the "**light of the world.**"

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill-top cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in people's sight, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven.

The City Within

Using the image of '**You are a city**', we ask:

What are some of the characteristics of a city?

***Many people:** *Who are the 'many people', personas, images that are all within me?*

Who are the different people I display to others, depending on circumstances, personalities, etc.?

Does the crowd within block my relationship with my God?

Does the giftedness of my personality allow me to be "all things to all people" and therefore allow me to be comfortable with all people, and for all people to be comfortable in my company?

(**A word of caution** - do foundational gospel values become watered down in order that I may be friends with everyone?)

***Many tracks, roads, avenues, cul de sacs, freeways, footpaths.**

How do I move through my day, my life?

Mary MacKillop reminds us "*We are but travellers here.*"

What about the pot-holes, reconstructions and diversions of my life?

Have I well-established lanes and clearly-defined curbs
and guttering?

Are there paths I avoid, and ways I do not open for
general thoroughfare?

Do I walk, run, drive, or get a lift on life's journey?

What is my preference?

***Many buildings housing many things.**

There are **skyscrapers** - high flying, idealistic,
visionary aspects of myself.

I need to aim high, do my best, and be a little
discontented with the lowest common denominator.

God is reached with my striving efforts and
acknowledgment of my gift of faith.

Who I am, and who I am best meant to be in God's
plan, are not found in my complacency, my apathy, or
my unwillingness to take leaps of faith.

Lofty ideals and soaring aspirations keep hope alive and
move us onward and ever upward towards our God.

The notion of heaven being "above the clouds" is to
give us an uplifting vision of perfection and **union with
our God.**

What are the "skyscrapers" of my life, my vision for
myself in God's eyes?

There are **terrace houses** - the traditions and heritage,
the family connections that help fill out our identity and
give us our grounding and rootedness in who we are.

I am not an island, and sometimes the search for my
heritage and forebears can be a most significant aspect
of my life.

Family stories give us our familial memory to pass on
to succeeding generations.

The nostalgic elements of myself lives here.

What are the traditional values I hold dear that I believe are worth preserving and handing on?

What are the family **traditions** that have helped form me, making me who I am today?

There are **sheds and garages** - these are the storage places for all those practical things, the little things we have picked up along the way that might come in handy.

It is here that we **store** the learned skills, the tried and true advice or ways of doing things: "This is what I do, or how I do it because this is the way I've always done it!"

We all know, though, what a mess the back shed can get into when it doesn't get a regular clean-up and sorting.

Sometimes the new-fangled things of today have great value and can be a tremendous improvement over past practices; sometimes there is wisdom in holding onto the tried and true.

The point here really is to consider, discern, and consciously make the **choices** of what I hold onto and what I give up: to sift and sort so that I don't carry too much baggage that clutters up the works and blocks out space for my own growth and maturing.

***Many activities, interests, opportunities, involvements.**

These may be the **blessings** of the city that allow our gifts to have expression.

The risk is always that the pace of life picks up considerably when pursuing the activities (our own or those of the family) and this can sap the energy and

perhaps even become a distraction from the real issues or ideals that truly give us life.

Trotophobia - the fear of not having things to do, the fear of being idle - manifests itself more in the city than in the country where the pace of life is a little more gentle and relaxed.

Being restless and continually on the go may be an avoidance of facing ourselves or our God.

The notion of “**Sabbath**” contains great richness and it is of little wonder that we have been told to "keep holy the Sabbath day" in order to give some space and time to the quiet, calm refreshing of the spirit; in fact to give to God His/Her due!

The words of **St Augustine** come to mind: *"Our hearts are restless until we find our rest in him."*

Do I actively seek the quiet parks and reserves, the pools of **reflection** in the gardens within,
or am I so caught up in the **rush and bustle** of my inner city that I look elsewhere for my refreshment?

***Suburbia** - the security, homeliness, community and sense of belonging which is so important for a healthy **equilibrium**.

The notion of suburbia, if that is where we grew up, may give us the perspective on reality that allows us to keep going, negotiating the ups and downs of life, with an inner security and feeling of well-being.

Suburbia may speak to each of us of different things within ourselves.

Possibly boredom, sameness, convention, loyalty or even rebellion!

How about bohemian, outrageous, creative, unpredictable?

The built environment far outweighs the natural environment in the city landscape and those who find God in nature may seem to be deprived of images of God. Yet the very act of building speaks of an image of God and how the spiritual life is lived in **day to day reality**.

Our spirituality, our **life-long quest** of seeking meaning and seeking God, is one of "co-operation with God". **Evelyn Underhill**, in her marvellous pragmatism, speaks of this in her writings, The Spiritual Life as Co-operation with God. We are not charged with the luxury of being able to sit back and let God do the work in order for God's will to be done, but we are charged with the responsibility of putting into practice (i.e., making practical) God's will, work and action. Evelyn Underhill puts it quite bluntly and beautifully in these words. "*We shall not live up to our call as spiritual creatures unless we are to pull our weight.*"

The image of the building process speaks of this co-operation with God in order for God's will to be manifested. Many agencies, requirements, by-laws, zoning regulations and so forth need to work in co-operation with the proposed building. The planning is multi-faceted and usually with hiccups, delays and compromises, testing our patience and tolerance, fine-tuning our vision and requirements, sometimes stretching us to the struggle and passion experienced by Jesus. Anyone who has ever been involved in a building project will know of the flagellations, crown of thorns, insults, and trial of suffering!! A finished building is a testament to a most **co-operative** enterprise: using skills and gifts, and relying on the other for each aspect to inter-connect and support.

Is the building image or metaphor carrying me too far from seeing God in the built environment, or is it another way of simply **recognising God where I am?**

The constructed environment is not without beauty. It speaks in another way of the survival of the fittest experienced in the bush and, with new perception or attitude, may lead me into a deeper relationship with my God that teems with **life and richness**. My co-operation with God is limited not by my environment but by my attitude and willingness to engage in the co-operative act.

TIME FOR REFLECTION: to consider any points or images that ring a bell.

IF I TAKE TIME TO LOOK AT THE CITY, WHAT SYMBOLS OF GOD'S ACTION, GRANDEUR AND PRESENCE WILL I SEE IN THE ENVIRONMENT?

**CONSIDERING THE CITY WITHIN, WHAT ARE THE SYMBOLS OR METAPHORS THAT SPEAK TO ME OF GOD AND GOD'S INDWELLING SPIRIT?
WHAT MIGHT THESE BE CALLING ME TO?**

Let us sing with uplifted voice this **City Psalm of Praise:**

Freeways and skyscrapers that highlight our city

Praise our God

Bridges that span our streets and waterways

Praise our God

Gardens and trees beautifying our suburbs

Praise our God

Cars, trains and buses hurrying people to work

Praise our God

City lights and neon signs brightening our darkness

Praise our God

Computers, fax machines and telecommunications

Praise our God

People who bustle from one place to another

Praise, praise our God

All that exists and gives witness to the Creator

Praise, honour and glorify our God.

Madeline Duckett R.S.M.,

in Secret Places, Sacred Paths.

Collins Dove Publ. 1992.

Song: '*The City of God*' would be a fitting conclusion in a group setting.

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