
A Better City

A Sermon at Union Chapel

Readings: Joshua 2:1–14
Hebrews 11:29–12:2
Luke 12:49–56

19 August 2007

I have come to set fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled.

Luke 12:49

“to set fire to the earth”: not something that sounds easy or comfortable. Extremist, even. And we, all of us, have surely had enough of extremism: there are enough bad stories of extremist religion (ethnic cleansing, violence, bullying, militant ignorance), of extremist politics (the same list, more or less): it all sounds very much like bad manners, or bad citizenship, or worse. Far worse.

But still: there is enough injustice in the world, if we look around us. Enough to get angry about. Enough of the hunger, of the poverty, of the social discrimination: of the sheer foolishness and lack of perspective in the world around us. Enough to make us want radical change, and enough, surely, to get angry about: enough to pray to God with our anger. So, should we not get angry? And (having maybe drawn back a bit from the opportunity for a good rant): how do we draw a balance between a legitimate fear of extremism and a legitimate and burning desire for a better world?

Today’s reading from the letter to the Hebrews is the second half of a long chapter on faith. Now what this letter means by faith is not what Richard Dawkins means by faith (that is, believing a whole lot of improbable stuff for the fun of it). Faith, according to this letter, is what “gives substance to our hopes”: it is what keeps us directed towards the future, towards what we hope for. What do we hope for? We hope for what God has promised us: and what God has promised is – again, as Hebrews

says – “a better city”. And who hopes? People who, as the letter says, lived in holes in the ground: people who were literally homeless. But who still hoped. Or people like Rahab the prostitute: people who were (despite their prosperity) on the fringes of society. (Well, Ms. Rahab, how are the citizenship classes going?) But they still hoped.

This is, of course, a seductive picture, and easy to get wrong: it is easy to fall into some kind of petulant, self-centred attitude, and think “the world is not worthy of me”, and so fall into the very trap that we are trying to avoid: it is an attitude where ignorance leads to intolerance of others, where we become too taken up with our own particular desires.

There are, I think, two tests here. One is this: do we really hope for, seek, a better city? Do we want more than to simply continue as we are, more than simply impose our own will on the world? Are we too taken up by what we can see and by our own projects for our own, self-centred future?

The second test is this. Does this hope for changes involve us? Jesus, after he talked about setting fire to the earth, also talked about being baptised, about being changed himself: he was aware that these things would be far from pleasant, but he was courageous enough to still hope for this future. Can we, ourselves, manage to find even a small part of that courage?

To make this more concrete, we should think of the rest of the Union Chapel community. There are two other groups of people – the homeless, and the musicians – and they both have something to teach us.

The homeless, now, are people who are literally living in holes in the ground (or in their modern equivalents such as shop doorways): and, as for whether they seek a better city, well, it varies. Some attitudes you would expect from people in their situation – rage, the mere desire for survival or for oblivion. You can certainly find these, but you can also find a surprising amount of care and concern. So, don’t neglect these people.

What, then, do we say about the musicians? What does music mean for people? For some, of course, pure hedonism; for others, the possibility of an escape, even if only for an evening, from a world grown heartless and alienating; for others, a vision, even, of a better city. There are all sorts of things. And, of course, all of these attitudes – the homeless peoples’, the musicians – are probably a lot more fragmentary than anything that we would regard as religious, and they are probably expressed, when they are expressed, in rather more informal terms than we would use. But remember this: Rahab was a prostitute, but she had the courage to grasp at the promises. And that, says the letter to the Hebrews, is what counts.

So we come back to our two questions. Do we seek a better city?

What does a better city mean, for us and for all of the people in the Union Chapel community? Are we ambitious enough, in our hope? Does this better city involve us, and does it involve the homeless and the musicians? Do we listen to what these others are saying? Are we prepared to welcome them in, to welcome them in their own terms? This, says the letter to the Hebrews, is faith: the courage to seek a better city, and to see ourselves as travelling together with those who, like us, seek it.

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