

Cities as Locations for Partnering With God



Stephan de Beer

Cities are locations of human achievement and human pain. Wealth and poverty, power and vulnerability, belonging and exclusion, all exist side by side.

Urban catch-basins for global and local migrants, and the poor searching for hopeful alternatives, have motivated the song-writer to sing: **“I love my city, for she is a safe haven for the stranger. I hate my city, for she is cold and hard to outsiders”**. The city deals some with new beginnings and others with cruel endings. It houses some in extreme opulence and it condemns the masses to slum housing, informal settlements, or fragile life on the streets.

The city evokes in us conflicting emotions – between excitement and isolation, enchantment and disgust, love and hate; a place of cultural diversity and great innovation, but also a place of failed infrastructure and lack of basic sanitation.

And yet, precisely in these “in between” spaces – between rich and poor, between different cultures, between inclusion and exclusion, between power and vulnerability, between adoration and disgust – **the cross is erected: a cross that spans the city, a cross that absorbs every inch of pain and every glimmer of a dream, a cross that indicates the surprising appearance of God**, just when we thought death was immanent, this God – in partnership with us – creates partnerships, and possibilities, of new life.

The work of Jesus-followers in the city has never been to retreat into comfort, but to create a refreshing, and sometimes subversive and offensive, presence in the “in between” places; often where all others have withdrawn, where the city itself and its resources have departed, between the halls of power and the garbage heaps of misery.

Jesus says “there you will find me”; in the cup of cold water to the child, in the eyes of the stranger, in the embrace of the sick; but we also see him in the confrontation at the temple, or the teaching on the public squares. When God looks at the cities of our world, and the cities of Africa, it is like Jesus crying over Jerusalem:

“she is like a chick without a mother hen; scattered without direction”. **And God is forever seeking to embrace such scattered places and people – with tender and ever-patient love, with tough and penetrating justice.**

But how does God embrace the city? God embraces the city and broken people by entering into bold partnerships with human beings like us. Christ-followers who refuse to withdraw from the city make the most hostile urban places home. We are the salt and light of God’s household called to transform the old into something vibrant and new. Missionary workers, community developers, pastoral counselors, local politicians, urban planners, health care workers, all understand our mandate as that of partnering with God to heal the urban fractures.

Our changing cities can leave us gasping for breath, desperate and worn-out. Or they can fill us with excitement as they become locations where God’s Spirit, in creative partnership with us, the body, is forever seeking to engage in life-giving and transformative ways:

- to change an old building used as a brothel into a vibrant apartment building for low-income people, the elderly, babies and girls at risk – combining discipleship and healing with housing and economic empowerment.
- to restore a wounded and broken individual into somebody breathing life and

adventure, taking on challenges not any longer a victim of abuse or exploitation, but as a change-maker and healer.

- to change an old neighbourhood by retrieving hidden assets, connecting scattered or “invisible people” and unlocking blocked potential; **recognizing the mysterious work of the Spirit where the eyes could not see any longer – until the bones begin to rattle and what was dead begins to breathe life.**

- to change a garbage dump in the inner city with no waste management, where hundreds of women, men and children live in ghastly circumstances, into a creative space. Here jobs can and are created, schooling and basic health services provided, and innovative waste management solutions implemented. All this because God’s people in partnership with the creative Spirit of God remember our mandate to look after creation.

The cities of the world – present us with exciting locations for witnessing modern-day miracles. Here absolute misery can be transformed into astounding wholeness. Jesus wept over the city, and never gave up, because in every city and town he placed His people to partner with Him, in the adventure of re-weaving the urban fiber, and rebuilding the broken city.

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