

### *A Tale of Two Cities*

Isaiah 55:1-9

Two thousand five hundred years ago the Babylonian Empire overran the little kingdom of Judah in the fertile crescent of the Middle East. A large percentage of the kingdom's population was taken into exile in Babylon over a thousand miles away. Over a period of time the exiled people began to integrate into Babylonian culture. The process of integration meant that they began to accept the values of Babylonian culture. The prophet Isaiah spoke of God's purpose to these integrating people. What did Isaiah have to say at the behest of God?

Isaiah told the people that God was inviting them to be part of a new community in a new city. Isaiah said that Yahweh was a God whose will was to gather people into this new community of justice and healing. Isaiah also indicated that life in the new city would entail a reorientation of people's lives in terms of political and public categories. So if this is the case what will characterise, according to Isaiah, God's future community? According to Isaiah the answer that God gives to this question is that the people of the new city should "maintain justice, and do what is right...." (*Isaiah 56:1*). The assurance is that every member of the community will have security, dignity, and well-being. Furthermore the community that embodies this new future will be an inclusive community. To show you how radical this inclusiveness was I can draw your attention to a passage from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy which runs, "no one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord" (*Deut. 23:1*) But God has Isaiah prophecy:

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,  
who choose the things that please me  
and hold fast to my covenant  
I will give, in my house and within my walls,  
a monument and a name  
better than sons and daughters.

*(Isaiah 56:4-5)*

Those, therefore, that were previously excluded from God's community are now included if they take seriously what God requires of his people. What is required is to

practice the Sabbath. Foreigners are also to be included in God's new city. In God's new community foreigners are welcome and will participate in the life of the community (*Isaiah 56:6ff*). Thus ethnic purity has no place in the city that God, according to Isaiah, will establish. According to Isaiah, God also calls 'the wicked' to be citizens in his new city. The 'wicked' are those people who have adapted themselves to the practises of the empire. The policies of the empire are, apparently, assumed to be antithetical to the practices of the God's new city.

Now you may think that all this is mildly interesting in as much as it tells us a bit about a dim dark past. The Church, however, has thought that God's purpose, as proclaimed by Isaiah, has implications for the Christian community in any age. This is the case because Christianity holds that God's promises as Isaiah proclaimed them are being fulfilled in Christ Jesus. This is the case because the Church is the vanguard of the new city that the resurrection of Christ confirms to be the fulfilment of the promise made to Israel. Furthermore what Isaiah had to say about God's new city to a people living in the bounds of an empire has implications for us because we live in the bounds of a nation-state.

The nation-state could be categorised as being similar to an empire because it is the institution that historically replaced empires. The nation-state represents itself as the keeper of the common good, and the repository of sacred values and, like religions in the past, it demands that citizens be prepared to sacrifice their lives for these values. The nation-state is looked to as the guarantor of the unity of the people and is prepared to go to war to preserve what it defines as national identity. Thus it is the nation-state that gives the people within its bounds an identity. In previous ages it was believed that God revealed the good for humanity, that he was the author of unity, and that identified people as the recipients of his grace. It has been said that the nation-state became a replacement for God in the modern world and I think that there is a degree of truth in this.

It is interesting to note that the establishment of the nation state and the establishment of private property happened at pretty much at the same time. Prior to this it was the king, who claimed to rule by divine right, who theoretically had ownership of everything in his realm. John Locke, an English philosopher writing in the last

decades of the seventeenth century, was crucial in developing a practical theory of what the nation-state should be. As an indication of his importance it is worth noting that those who wrote the American Constitution used his treatises on government as a critical source. One motive Locke gave for establishing the nation-state was the protection and preservation of private property. He said that whatever a person removes from nature by their labour, for example by setting up a gold mine, became the person's private property. Locke went to say that it was the ownership of property that gave a person political rights in the nation-state. Slaves had no political rights because the slave, by definition, is incapable of having property. The nation-state and what we call 'the economy' are, therefore, inextricably linked. This is still the case today. One of the crunch issues in the federal election this year is going to be negative gearing and what effect the policies of the parties could have on property ownership.

Now you may ask what all this has to do with the new city that Isaiah says God will establish? What has it got to do with the Church that understands itself to be the body politic of Christ? It means that relationship between the community that is the Church which understands itself to be both participating in the City of God and the imperial nation-state, will always be somewhat tense. This is because the City of God is not concerned with private beliefs, as the nation-state says it should be, but is concerned with the organised life of men and women in community because God's action is history is concerned with this. What form the relationship between the two cities should take has been long discussed in Christian theology and is still a practical issue in our society. To give just one example: should an avowedly secular nation-state fund so-called religious schools? Those of us old enough to remember the state-aid debate in Australia know how this issue gave rise to passionate debate and, to some extent, still does.

What we can say, I think, is that the imperial nation-state and the new city of God are both concerned with defining what is the human good and, therefore, the purpose of human life. Both are concerned with the question of how human life should be ordered to achieve the good each defines as its goal. But it should not be assumed that the notion of the good as defined by the new city and the nation-state are identical. In view of this a faithful Church, the embodied community of Christ, should 'perform' the new city. I use the word 'perform' because the city of God is a set of practices as

are the practices of the nation-state. As I indicated at the beginning Isaiah says that the citizens of the new city of God will act justly towards one another. It will be a community where every person is guaranteed security, dignity, and well-being. This public performance of the new community may come into conflict with the practices of the nation-state. But although this may happen the church as the new community cannot back down as the story we tell is a true story because it is the story of God's action in the world.

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