

SHALOM AND PLACE

In the 5th century B.C., the best and brightest Israelites were exiled from their place to Babylon where they camped together on the outskirts of the city. They did not want to be there. Their roots were in Jerusalem. They were in a foreign culture among a people they did not like.

They were told by false prophets that an army would come to rescue them, and so they were waiting for that to happen. One day a letter from the prophet Jeremiah dramatically challenged their mindset. It advised them to "build houses and settle down...multiply in number...seek the peace and prosperity (shalom) of the city into which I have carried you into exile" (Jeremiah 29:4-7).

This was a mind blowing concept Why? They were waiting to go home. I think this is a mentality of many Christians. Why would I seek the well being of this city that I am in? I will either move to another place or go to heaven. God is not interested in the city. He is just interested in my soul and spiritual things.

I want to talk about "shalom" today and a sense of place. Shalom is often translated peace. It is a complex word. A better translation would be "human flourishing". It is a wholistic word that covers every possible relationship: with God, with self, with others, and with creation. There is a link between blessing and shalom. If we bless someone we speak and work for their wellbeing; their "shalom." If we bless our enemies we are seeking their "shalom."

Lets start at the beginning of the Bible Genesis. We see a picture of shalom and place in the garden of Eden. Within the wider creation, there is a place set aside by God. A Safe place, a walled garden as it were. A place where God and humans lived in fellowship, where humans worked with nature, caring for it, a place of community, where humanity could flourish. From this safe place, humans were to spread outwards to the rest of the world, taking the creation mandate outwards to the world beyond.

We know that it all turned to custard. Humans rebelled against God. Soon we have Cain murdering Abel. (Gen 4) Cities go wrong. We read of Nimrod, setting up cities but he is warrior, so it seems to be connected to violence. (Genesis 10) This is replicated throughout history. We read of the Tower of Babel, where the human desire to honor themselves not God with their cities and tower. (Gen 11)

We read of Lot setting on the edge of the corrupt Sodom, where he feels the pull of evil over his family. The city had a hold over his wife who dies looking back as they flee.

(Gen 13) In the middle of this depressing story we see mention of Melchizedek. (Gen 14) Abraham tithed to him. He is described as King of Salem, priest of the most high God. We would probably just scratch our heads and forget about him except that he is talked about in Ps 110, and Hebrews. He is a mysterious figure, seen as a forerunner to Christ.

His Name means righteousness. The name Salem comes from shalom. When righteousness reigns over a city, there is peace. Righteousness is right living, no crime, no sin, no injustice. The ultimate king of righteousness is Jesus Christ and when he rules a city, it will know true peace.

When the Israelites were a tent city in the wilderness, at the center of the city was tabernacle, a place where God dwelt, like the garden of Eden. In the tabernacle was the presence of God. Out of that flowed right living in the community.

400 years later the people are in the land and the capital is the city of Jerusalem. The word comes from Salem. Jerusalem means "the foundation of shalom." It was to be a model city as it were with the temple in the middle as the heart of the nation where God's was present. It was to be a center of peace for the world. Which is hard to grasp when think of the Middle east at the moment. (1 Kings 11)

What happened? It went wrong. The Israelites worshiped idols, sacrificed their children to gods, oppressed the marginalized and stopped the year of Jubilee. These were the same sins as Sodom. (Ezekiel 16)

Prophets began to predict a coming Messiah who would restore all things and to paint a picture of God's vision for the city.

Zechariah . 8:4-6 paints a picture of the elderly watching the children play on the street. Not a picture of many of our cities today. Crowded, dirty, unsafe. No public spaces, Community, safety well being. Isaiah paints a picture (Ch 65:17- 25) in poetic language: new heaven and earth, new Jerusalem. We see celebrations and happiness, health care for the young and old, food and housing for everyone and no violence. It is a picture of Shalom human flourishing.

Meantime Jeremiah the weeping prophet witnessed the downfall of Jerusalem, with the brutal ethnic cleansing and exile. He weeps over the city in Lamentations just as Jesus later wept of Jerusalem as he foresaw what was to become. We too should lament over our cities with their crime and poverty and violence. But as the people



are in exile, Jeremiah makes this incredible call (29:5-7) Pray for the well being of this city. That would be like a modern right wing orthodox Jew seeking the shalom of Gaza today. It was outrageous.

But this call to shalom is an echo of the creation mandate And we see it in the call of the 1st century church in the Roman empire to seek it's well being. The early church did that in profound ways that influenced the Roman empire as they preached the kingdom (Acts 28) And the call the church today in the 21st century. Seek the shalom of where you have been placed.

Within the exile we have Daniel. He was taken as one of the brightest in Jerusalem and trained in the court of Babylon. A very challenging role being light in a dark place but he kept his faith within the govt circles of this foreign power. He had this dream of four beasts coming and then one like the son of man coming bringing this new kingdom. In hindsight we can see these four powerful empires: Babylonian, Mede-Persian, Greek, and Roman Each in its day would have appeared indestructible but to God they are but straw. (Dan 7)

In this new kingdom Isaiah 9:7 says. "Of the greatness of his government and peace (Shalom) there will be no end."

Then we come to Jesus. His message was to preach the kingdom and to announce it is here now. Diseases were healed, and people delivered from demonic There was a spiritual and physical reality to the kingdom. Heaven come to earth. When Jesus introduced his ministry. He said he was the Son of Man and that the kingdom had arrived. In Luke 4:18-19 we see the tangible restoration of shalom. No poverty. No oppression No prisoners so no violence. No blindness no disease. Year of Jubilee. No inequality.

As Jesus was leaving the disciples he said All authority has been give to me. That is Jesus is reclaiming the world as his kingdom. The church is to be a people called out of the world to accept responsibility for the world. That is we are to be kingdom agents, restoring the kingdom. Bring Shalom to every place we are.

In Revelation we have the picture of a city. The new Jerusalem. Picture language of Vast city. Within it is a garden. Ultimate place of shalom. No death, no crying. No pain Heaven come down to earth King reigns. All nations, tribes tongues. (Rev 22)

We have traced God's desire for shalom from Genesis to Revelation. God's desire to dwell with his people in a physical world. Renewed restored bodies. New earth. We might not understand all the details of how all this is going to eventuate. But the intention of God is clear.

To have a place of shalom. Out of this understanding of shalom comes our posture towards the city.

Church Centric Posture. The church wants to play a controlling role with the city or it will not take part. Why should we partner with other churches if they will get more people. Why should we partner with other organizations if they are not Christian.

Escape Posture; Sometimes the church tries to escape the city. It sees the city as sinful, as being the enemy and the church is holy. It stays outside any solutions but attacks the govt and society for all they do.

Correct posture is to see the church as part of the city and to work with the city. We are called to serve and love and pray for the city. This is the posture of humility. We don't have all the answers but we are part of the solution.

We are present in the city in four ways. 1. We live in the city. 2. We are part of every domain in the city: Private sector. (workers, media, business), Public sector (schools, health, police) Non profit. (Charities, sports, religion) 3. We are an institution within the city. The more we unite, more presence felt . 4. We are intercessors for the city.

Jesus says we are called to be salt. (Mat 5:13-16) I.e. Influence and Light. I.e. reveal truth. . How do we do this? Through our actions. Good deeds When Jesus came into the world, he said. I have come to serve I have not come to judge. Strangely the church is often taken an attitude of judgement., not one of service. Phil 2:6-8 talks of our attitude towards one another. Our attitude should be that of Christ Jesus who took the position of a slave.

It is this understanding of shalom and this understanding of posture that undergirds our Serve the City.

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REFLECTION + DISCUSSION

What theological ideas have lead to the idea that God is not interested in the well being of the city?

What spheres of the city are you involved in? What can you do in these spheres to be salt and light? To bring shalom?

What relationship; with self, others, God, creation is not "right" , not "at peace" at the moment? Or which one needs some attention?

Where is the most obvious absence of shalom in Invercargill? Why do these things often not cause us much grief? Take some time to pray into one area you have named.



CENTRAL BAPTIST

LOVE GOD : LOVE OTHERS