

Seek the welfare of the city

Jeremiah 29:1-4; II Timothy 2:8-15

A few weeks ago Edinburgh City Council published its Edinburgh 2050 initiative – looking to invite residents, businesses, partners and others to help develop a city vision. I'll be 88, so maybe by then there will be personal trams for everyone and the potholes in the roads will be filled in.

34 years from now, what kind of city do we want Edinburgh to be? The vision the Council is hoping to invigorate is one of a city with diverse needs, a thriving city that is a great place to live, work and visit.

It is a big question. What kind of city **do** we want to live in? What are the things that are important to us, and what are the things that we agree about? What are the things that we might disagree about, and how might we manage the difference and come up with a unified way forward? Should there be a gradual change, evolution rather than revolution? Or is it time to come up with something more radical? Who will arbitrate, and how will we decide? The Council's chief executive, Andrew Kerr, has said that they are starting with a "blank canvas." Of course, this isn't quite true. This city has one of the most substantial canvases in the country. A rich history and heritage, and an already diverse community with much in it that is good, and maybe much that could be better. Perhaps we might start with Edinburgh's Latin motto: *Nisi Dominus frustra* – which is taken from a contraction of Psalm 127 and means – Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain. That might be a little tricky for the more radical minority humanists, but I'm sure we could work with it.

And I think also part of the passage from the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah might help also. "Seek the welfare of the city."

When Jeremiah wrote these words, the people of Jerusalem had become refugees in the city of Babylon. They were far from their home, and traditions. They longed for their former life. They

were homesick. Jerusalem had not yet been destroyed, but soon it would be razed to the ground, city and temple. It is Israel's darkest night, and there seemed to be no light in sight.

Jeremiah does not give up hope, because God does not give up hope. Wherever God's people are, God remains with them. It might not feel like it, it might not seem like it, but it remains true.

There is one hugely important historical truth in this story of the broken, exiled people of Israel: they survived the Babylonian exile. They survived the ordeal. They made the most of where they were, because God was still with them. They were to build houses and live in them; they were to marry and have families. They, the refugees in the city, were to make their homes their, and pray for the city where they were exiled, and look to its welfare, because in the city's welfare, they will find their own.

Get alongside your captors. Get alongside the people you don't care for, or are afraid of, or don't trust, or don't understand, and pray for them and support them and help them. In that light this astonishing message is not so very different from Jesus saying, some 500 years after this historical episode, 'Love your enemy.' Jeremiah's message is not one of meek compliance with oppression, it is asking for a gearshift of the mind in understanding the God of Israel as no longer localised in Jerusalem, but rather being the God of all people, and all places. Not only of the city of Jerusalem, but of all cities.

Seek the welfare of the city. Seek the welfare of the native and the immigrant. Seek the welfare of the establishment and the refugee. Seek the welfare of the settled and the unsettled. Seek the welfare of those who have lived there for generations, and those who are merely passing through. Seek the welfare of the believer and the non-believer. Seek the welfare because where people live together in harmony, and peace, and understanding, and acceptance, and generosity and grace, then there is hope. And where there is hope, there is God.

It is a theme that remains surprisingly contemporary, particularly in the United Kingdom after the Brexit vote. After the party political conferences, with their in-fighting, and their charge of xenophobia, of their counter-charge of 'it's not racist to talk about immigration', of the businesses possibly being asked to disclose how many of their workforce is non-British; after all

of that the God Who transcends human boundaries and borders and distinctions, Who transcends pettiness and division and despair, still speaks and still gives hope.

God, through Jeremiah, challenges us to seek the welfare of the city. Whether we are citizens of Edinburgh, or Scotland, or the United Kingdom, or Europe, or the world. Politicians may see dividing lines – but God simply sees humanity. Edinburgh humanity, Scottish humanity, British humanity, world humanity. It is perfectly possible to be a citizen of Edinburgh and a citizen of the world. In fact, both should and must go together if we are to seek the welfare of this city, and the welfare of the cities of the world. We might see narrow nationalism, God sees only people, God's people. The white people and the black people; the Edinburgh people and the Aleppo people; the people we pass on our streets and the people we see on our television screens in hurricane-battered Haiti; the people in castles and the people in crofts. No room in God's kingdom for walls and barriers that divide and exclude. No hint of provincialism or parochialism in the teaching of Jesus Who tells us to love our neighbour as ourselves. We are citizens of Edinburgh and citizens of the world. Just as those Jews Jeremiah wrote to were citizens of Jerusalem and citizens of Babylon.

The postcode doesn't matter to God. God sees only God's children. And God wants His children to seek the welfare not only of the place where they stay, but the welfare of all those who stay there. We may say that charity begins at home, but what a miserly, selfish kind of charity it would be if it catered for our own needs before the needs of anyone else. What a poor excuse for charity it would be if it was less than generous to those around us.

What, I wonder, would the Edinburgh City Fathers and Mothers make of such a bold call like the one from Jeremiah? Seek the welfare of the city – all of it? What, I wonder, would Theresa May, or Nicola Sturgeon, or Jeremy Corbyn, or all the other party leaders, emblematic of so many of us, concerned with our own needs before the needs of others, make of this seismic attitude change that Jeremiah throws out from God, challenging each one of us to look at where we are, and who is around us, and how we relate to them and respect them and care for them and value them and love them – as God would have us do, regardless of their nationality, religion,

gender, sexuality, class background, health record, wealth, poverty, what school they went to, or even if they lived on the right or wrong side of Comiston Road!

The challenge is – if you believe that God is calling us to seek the welfare of the city – what is that going to look like; what is that going to involve; how is that going to be possible; what do we need to do and be?

This letter from Jeremiah, written two and a half thousand years ago, is dangerous stuff. It's dangerous because it still challenges our expectations and our prejudices, or little vision and our limitations. It takes the lament of exile, and brokenness, and shifting society, and personal disappointment, and political and economic volatility, from all those years ago, and lands it fair and square on our doorsteps in Edinburgh, and Scotland, and the United Kingdom, and the world.

Seek the welfare of the city. Dream about Edinburgh 2050. Look beyond Brexit. Embrace the place where God is still with us, and find ways to be faithful in your living, so that others might draw hope from us, and through us, see God still there, loving, caring, imagining, present.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen