

Quiet Spaces



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A Celebration of *Autumn*

The following extracts are from David Adam's book 'A Celebration of Autumn', an illustrated volume of personal reflections, poems and prayers (SPCK, 2005). The author of many books on prayer and spirituality, David Adam was Vicar of Lindisfarne until his recent retirement.

A sea change

*More than leaves fall
Countries, empires, people
Come to autumn and winter
Spiralling down from their heights
To become one with the ground
Compost and seed for the future
Renewing the face of the earth
Nothing on earth is ever truly lost
All goes through a sea change
Everything has tides and seasons
And in their present fall are seeds
The gifts and promises of new life
Every molecule knows it can become
Part of what it has never been before
Creator, with a wonderful precision
Seeding the world. Let us adore*

God's lost gifts

*When our eyes were dimmed
So that we could not see
Beyond ourselves and our little world
You gave us the microscope
To discover the mystery of our being
To see beauty and harmony in all things
To learn that we belong to each other
You gave us the telescope
To see far beyond our little world
To rejoice in galaxies beyond galaxies
To fill our minds with awe and wonder
So that we could bow before the majesty*

*We diminish it all in lack of vision
With myopic eyes, we analyse and count
We are not thrilled to the core
For there is a Black Hole within us
And sometimes that is all we can perceive*

No more tears

Stephen Rand gives most of his time to work with Open Doors, a charity supporting the persecuted church around the world. He is also the co-chair of Jubilee Debt Campaign, and he and his wife Susan help to lead a small Baptist church that meets in the Wimbledon Odeon.



I love cities. I was born in Birmingham (where ‘the iron heart of England throbs beneath its sombre robes’, according to my old school song) and have lived most of my life in London. I regularly walk across Westminster Bridge and can fully endorse Wordsworth’s response to the sight:

*Earth has not anything to show
more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who
could pass by
A sight so touching in its
majesty...*

Some years ago, I visited Paraguay. We travelled 300 miles by bus, then across dirt tracks by truck, and finally four hours on horseback. It was remote; it was enchanting. Not only were there grapefruit trees and flocking parakeets, there were small Indian communities who were now Anglicans and gathered for worship under the night sky, lit only by the fireflies skittering between the trees of the forest.

Two days later, I was in Buenos Aires. Bustling, throbbing, lights, noise, restaurants—and bookshops open at 10pm. Paraguay had been fascinating, but it was like visiting an alien planet. Buenos Aires was my kind of place.

It does seem a little odd to

**As he approached Jerusalem
and saw the city, he wept over it**

LUKE 19:41 (NIV)

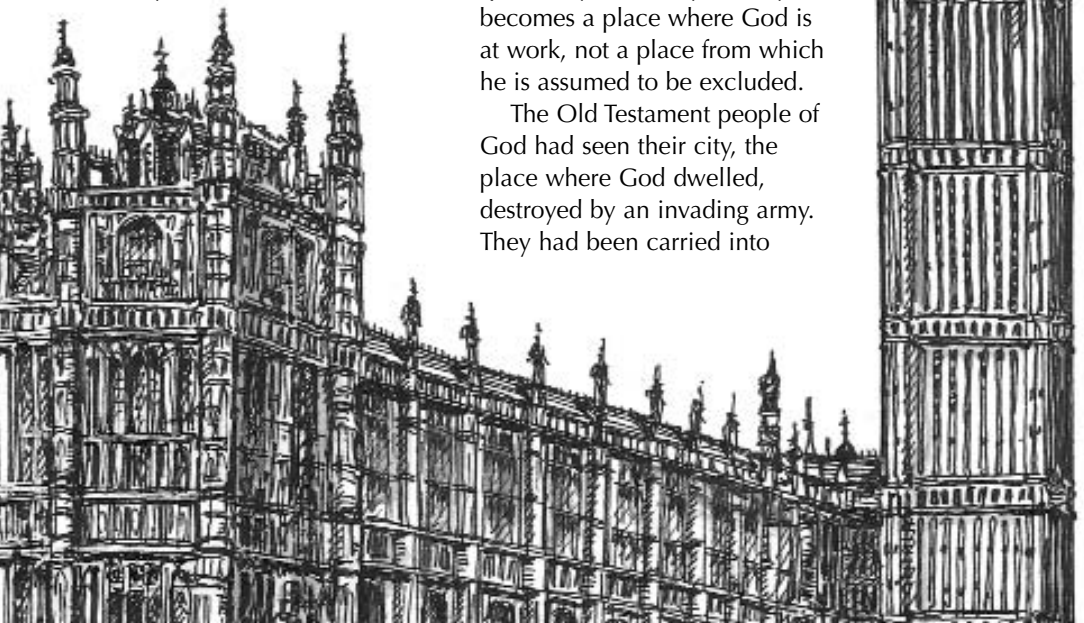
reflect upon cities in a journal called *Quiet Spaces*. Cities are not quiet, and there is often not much space. It is easy to assume, therefore, that they are God-forsaken. Many would readily echo the psalmist: 'Destructive forces are at work in the city; threats and lies never leave its streets' (Psalm 55:11, NIV). Cities can generate fear as easily as they can generate vibrancy.

Cities are, perhaps above all, about people—thousands of them. Even a man who loves the city finds that love stretched thin by the sardine-tin cattle-truck commuting experience. Then the vision of a walk in the open space of the rolling hills becomes a specially seductive proposition: it wasn't on Westminster Bridge that Wordsworth 'wandered lonely as a cloud'!

I have spent many a weekend in Christian conference centres set in idyllic rural locations, and at every one someone has prayed, giving thanks for the opportunity to get away from the bustle and be close to God in the glories of creation. I know exactly what they mean, but I fear that this is sentimental rather than biblical. Are we really 'nearer God's heart in a garden'?

It is worth reminding ourselves that people are the ultimate glory of God's creation, for they alone are made in God's image. Thus, cities are a concentration of images of God; a crowd is a different kind of opportunity for closeness to God. Seeing God in the people we meet—the people we know and the people we don't—can have a dramatic effect on our spirituality. Suddenly the city becomes a place where God is at work, not a place from which he is assumed to be excluded.

The Old Testament people of God had seen their city, the place where God dwelled, destroyed by an invading army. They had been carried into



exile, to an alien city in which they were refugees. Yet the prophet Jeremiah instructed them to ‘seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it...’ (Jeremiah 29:7, NIV).

How can we do this? What should be the characteristics of Christian lifestyle in today’s urban reality? What are the building blocks of an authentic spirituality for the city?

Encouraging community

The first, I would suggest, has to be community. Cities all too easily suppress communal life. Loneliness in the midst of the throng can be even more painful. Christians are put into the new community of the church; Christians know the

one. It is a wonderful testimony to the reality of God when the church is at the heart of bringing people together in community. I love to hear of the churches that have organized a local fête with no ulterior motive than that people should enjoy the opportunity to be together.

Susan and I have lived in our street for 24 years. For many of those years we promised ourselves that we would organize a street party—and we never got round to it. Then we took the plunge. We decided to have a barbecue in our front garden, right on the street. No one would have to come into our personal space; we would use the communal space—it’s a reasonably traffic-free street.

We prepared an invitation. I thought it would be best to knock on each door to distribute them, just so that people knew who was responsible. At the fourth house, the door opened and an elderly gentleman peered round its edge. I launched into my prepared speech: ‘We’ve lived in the street for 24 years and we thought it was time to get to know the neighbours.’ ‘I’ve been here for 40 years,’ he replied, ‘and I’ve never seen you before.’ Mind you, within two minutes he had shown me

Cities all too easily suppress communal life

A crowd is a different kind of opportunity for **closeness to God**

value of each human being; Christians know that we were created for fellowship with each other as well as with God—the God who himself lives in community as three-in-

his operation scar and we were making up for lost time.

The day of the barbecue arrived. The pavement outside our house filled with people—and with high-chairs: the local baby population is booming. There was conversation: people met up with people they had scarcely seen, let alone talked to before. And at 8.30pm someone said, ‘Why don’t we light up the barbecue again and have seconds?’ So now, as dusk fell, the high-chairs were replaced by a line of baby alarms on the garden wall. A small investment of time and vulnerability had reaped a positive reward.

Seeking justice

Cities are, by their nature, dependent. They draw in resources from all around. Our street is in an neighbourhood that used to be part of the market gardening area that thrived on the edges of London to feed the great metropolis. Now the market gardens have been swallowed up by suburbia, and the world has become the hinterland of the city.

The massive supermarket is a testimony to the demand of the city to be fed from around the globe. Martin Luther King said, ‘Before you finish eating breakfast this morning, you’ve

Cities can generate fear as easily as they can generate vibrancy

Cities are a concentration of **images of God**

depended on more than half the world.’

One of the defining experiences of my life was a few hours spent on a British-owned tea estate in Bangladesh. The workers were effectively bonded labourers, unable to leave, and living in conditions significantly worse than those of the Bengali villagers just down the road. ‘We would love to do more to help these people,’ said the estate manager, ‘but people back home just won’t pay more for their tea.’ They might have done had they seen the impact of leprosy on the workers no longer able to spend all day in the field picking the tips of the leaves for our morning cuppa.

A few weeks later, I was reading the Bible: 'Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty' (James 5:4). It was the moment I became passionate about fair trade. There was something I could do; even in the supermarket I could

A biblical response to the injustice of world trade

discovering the spirituality

of the street and the supermarket

PRAYER FROM LATIN AMERICA

*Lord, to those who
hunger, give bread.
And to those who
have bread, give the
hunger for justice.*

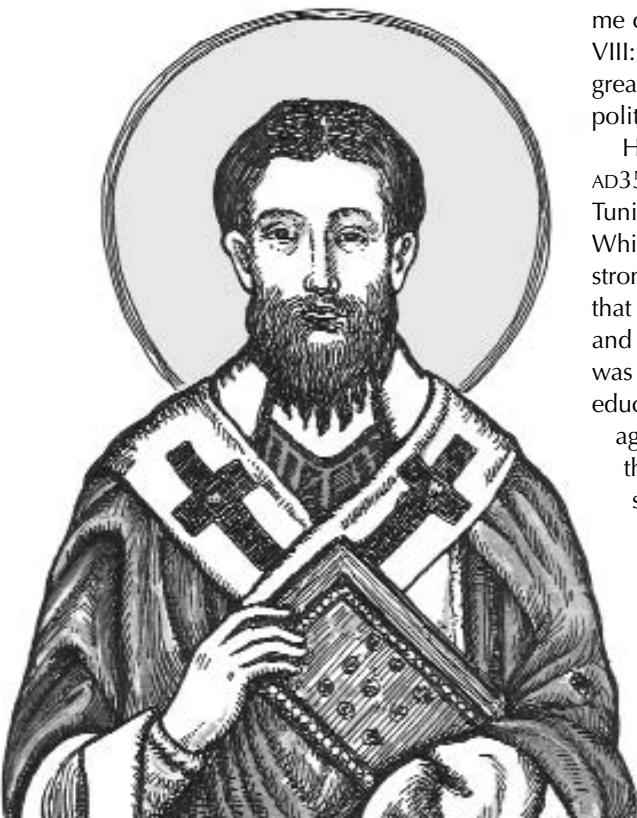
reflect and respect the value God places on each human being. I could ensure that at least some of the harvesters of my crops could know that God had heard their cry.

Now fair trade is big business: over 1300 products carry the distinctive 'Fairtrade' mark, and sales are more than £140 million each year. You can buy Fairtrade roses, chocolate, even footballs. Our church is a 'Fairtrade' church, serving Fairtrade wine for communion and at the heart of the campaign to make our borough a Fairtrade borough. This is not a politically correct fad; it is a biblical response to the injustice of world trade that is of direct benefit to half a million families across the world. It does not solve every problem, but it is a start.

Jesus came to a city and wept over it. He died on the edge of that city, so that we could live with him in a new Jerusalem where there would be no more tears. Our opportunity, our responsibility, is to anticipate that city of God through our concern to build relationships in community and see that justice is done by doing the right thing, discovering the spirituality of the street and the supermarket. ■

St Augustine: City of God

Dorothy M. Stewart is a writer and editor, and a lay preacher in the United Reformed Church, currently living in Suffolk.



Like the giant heads on America's Mount Rushmore, the Church Fathers, those men from early centuries whose thinking on theology became the groundwork of the modern church, can seem towering, barely human figures. But the one who lived such a lively human life that he cried out, 'Lord, give me chastity... but not yet!' (*Confessions*, VIII:7) and then produced some of the greatest works in Western theology and politics has to be worth another look.

He was born Aurelius Augustine in AD354 in Tagaste, Numidia (modern-day Tunisia), to Romanized Berber parents. While Augustine's father was pagan, his strong-willed mother Monica made sure that Augustine was brought up Christian and well-educated. At the age of 16, he was sent to Carthage to complete his education, and, with a group of similar-aged adventurous friends, he did just that, in every way. After a while, he settled down with a girlfriend and they had a son, Adeonatus.

Monica had had Augustine prepared for Christian baptism but, in Carthage, his study of the elegant works of the orator

Cicero made the Old Testament seem barbaric, poorly written and unspiritual in comparison. His interest in the spiritual remained, however, and was captured by the teachings of the Manichees, a gnostic sect. Augustine joined this sect and for ten years was an enthusiastic member, while working as a teacher of rhetoric.

Finally disillusioned with Manicheism, Augustine moved to Milan, where he was appointed Professor of Rhetoric. Because he wanted to improve his skills, he went to listen to the sermons of Bishop Ambrose, who was renowned for his preaching. Once there, though, Augustine was impressed by the content, especially as Ambrose taught that much of the Old Testament could be read as allegory. Augustine was also introduced to Neoplatonist thought and found a more satisfactory answer to the problem of evil than in Manicheism.

But all was not well. Augustine's mother, Monica, arrived in Milan, pressuring him to marry—not the girl who had come with him from Carthage but another more 'suitable' girl. The girlfriend from Carthage was forced to go, leaving behind their son. The marriage with the 'suitable' girl was arranged but postponed for two years—so Augustine installed another girlfriend for the interim!

During all this upheaval, complete with further pressure from his mother to be baptized, Augustine heard, through a child's voice in a neighbouring garden, what he took as a divine command to

read. And the book he was reading fell open at Paul's letter to the Romans 13:13: 'No orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy. Take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ; and stop giving attention to your sinful nature, to satisfy its desires.' Augustine says in his *Confessions*, 'I had no wish to read more and no need... For in an instant, the light of faith flooded into my heart and all the darkness of doubt was dispelled' (VIII:12).

The old gods had never given Rome any protection, and never could

He was baptized, aged 33, by Ambrose in Milan. Then, with a small group of companions and the indefatigable Monica, he devoted himself to an ascetic life of study. After his mother's death, Augustine returned to Africa. Although he was determined not to be ordained, he was overwhelmed in the city of Hippo (modern Annaba, Algeria) and forcibly ordained priest. When the incumbent bishop died in 396, Augustine took his place and remained bishop of Hippo until his death in 430.

From his conversion onwards, Augustine was a prolific writer. His *Confessions* was the first autobiography focusing on the individual's experience and relationship with God, setting the

pattern for future spiritual autobiographies.

In 410, Alaric the Goth and his hordes captured Rome. Many of the local people declared that it was the fault of the new state religion, Christianity. They announced that such a thing had never happened under the old gods. Augustine's response was to write *City of God*, a vigorous defence of Christianity. It was years in the writing and comprises 22 volumes in which he sets out to prove that the old gods had never given Rome any

Christians will be found cooperating with non-Christians in worldly, but worthwhile aims

protection, and never could—nor could they offer anything in the way of eternal salvation.

Augustine then examines the differences between Christianity and secular political life, and the long-term implications. He does this by defining two cities. One, the city of God, is made up of all those who are redeemed and will enjoy eternal life with God; the other, the earthly city, consists of everyone else. He makes the strong point that the city of God is not the same as the church, as not everyone in the church will be saved.

During our lifetimes, the

memberships of the two cities are mixed in together and nobody knows for certain who belongs to which. Their ultimate values and purposes are quite different, although they may share common short- and medium-term goals, such as world peace (or preserving the planet or ending Third World debt). Augustine makes it clear that members of the city of God will support any actions that serve their true values—so Christians will be found cooperating with non-Christians in worldly, but worthwhile aims. He also offers a warning, which may be salutary today as well: 'The kind of peace that is based on injustice... does not deserve the name of peace' (XXIX:12).

Augustine says of the two cities that one 'seeks glory from men' but the other considers 'the greatest glory is God, the witness of conscience'. He compares the two and paints a clear contrast: 'In the one... the rulers and the nations that it subdues are ruled by the lust for domination; in the other... rulers and subjects serve one another in love—the subjects by obeying, the rulers by caring for all' (XIV:28). Maybe this is a rule of thumb to apply to all politicians and heads of state?

In 430, with the Vandals besieging Hippo, Augustine died, aged 76. He had been a remarkably popular and successful priest and has had a lasting effect on Christian thought and the Christian church. Fifteen centuries after his death, his ideas still have a clear relevance to our lives today. ■