

Chapter 7 | Christ in the City

Having gone into some detail about what characteristics the emergent church might have, I want to return to the Christ-narrative. Firstly, given that increasingly the place that this emergent church is going to have to minister is in the urban environment, I want to look in more depth at God's evolving attitude to the city, and explore how conjunctivity will be vital to our urban ministry. Secondly, I want then to take just two aspects of Christ's ministry, gift and dirt, and use them as examples of Christ's own conjunctive outlook, going on to explain why I think they will need to be re-emphasised if the emergent church is going to take root in our cities.

The Christian story of the city can be traced back to Genesis 4, soon after Adam and Eve tumbled from Eden and in troubled family isolation, brother killed brother. In one flick of the knife Cain made three cuts, not only killing his brother Abel, but in the same slashing movement rejecting God and poisoning the earth with blood. When challenged by God he then added deceit to murder and so brought down a curse on himself: he would be 'driven from the ground which had opened its mouth to receive [Abel's] blood' (vs. 11).

God explains that the separation of Cain from the earth was to have two axes. Firstly, the ground would not yield food for him, and secondly he was to be a 'restless wanderer' (vs. 12). Cain recognises a third dimension himself, proclaiming that under this curse he would be 'hidden from God's presence' (vs. 14). However, his fears that anyone who found him would kill him are allayed by God, who puts a mark of protection over him. He then goes out of God's presence to the land of Nod.

Thus metaphorically separated from the earth and from God, Cain has to construct a new existence from scratch, and he does so by 'laying with his wife... and building a city' (vs. 17). This is the origin of the urban species: human hands take divine soil and build a declaration of independence, a statement of permanence. Told he would be a restless wanderer, Cain constructs an enduring group of residences, and having severed links with his family, he gets about the work of procreation, filling his city with his own kind. So Cain's city becomes the archetype for all our cities – frantically building in some frenzied attempt to escape the curse of loneliness.

In building, Cain is also trying to escape the curse of separation from the earth. Like the precursor to any modern-day city, we can imagine the structures Cain threw up as metaphorically 'raised from the ground'. We now have pavements and tarmac, drainage and

camber, foundations and pilings – all lifting us up from the soil and protecting us from the elements.ⁱ Cain knew he had poisoned the earth and thus the ground beneath his feet became his enemy: it was to be covered over, sealed under and strictly controlled. These concrete lids over the free ground were seen by revolutionaries in the Paris of 1968 as signs of urban oppression, of separation from the raw earth that was the symbol of the free spirit. '*Sous les pavés, la plage*', ran one slogan of the Situationist International, and in revolt against the forces that threatened their intellectual, spiritual and economic freedom, they ripped up the cobblestones, simultaneously revealing the earth beneath and creating missiles from the very materials that symbolised their bondage.

The earth, the soil that exists somewhere under the layers of urban history, is the source of life, the ground from which our life is sustained. By uncovering it these student rebels were reaffirming their rights to live freely from the land... And by covering it Cain was determined to put two fingers up to God's curse that the ground would not yield for him. We might perhaps pick up a hint of the origins of our modern agriculture here: If Cain was not going to be able to grow food, he would import it to his city and buy it from those who were. We can imagine him and his urban family exchanging their skills for crops, buying in God's blessings from the soil, and thus completing the circle back to Abel's better offering where the whole saga began. Thousands of years later, we city-dwellers, descendants of Cain, load our trolleys with exotic fruits and vegetables out of season, in Supermarkets with no fields for miles, swapping coins for the earth's bounty without ever having to toil in mud or get our hands dirty. We poison and cover our own earth and extort others for God's gifts.

With Cain's story, cities do not get off to a very positive start in Scripture. They begin life as statements of everything that is wrong with humanity: violence, damage to the environment and disregard for God. The trinity of God, creation and humanity is blown apart, and a city rises on the wasteland that results. And things do not get much better.

Having flooded the earth to wash it clean of evil, God then faces the rise of the city again in Babel. The writer shows us that the tower-builders' intentions were very similar to Cain's: 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.'ⁱⁱⁱ God does not like this much. Coming down to see for himself (and God does come over as highly masculine in these early passages) he also notices their unified language. Interestingly, it seems that this is perceived as the real threat – the tower stands simply as a symbol of humanity's urban unity and evident rejection of the need for God's presence to sustain them. Its spires poking at the underbelly of heaven, the tower gives God a wake-up call to the potential of what humanity

could do if they continued working together in this way. Seemingly at a loss for how else to change things, Jack Miles' adolescent divinity resorts again to revolution and hits 'escape' for a second time: the people are scattered, their language is confused and they stop their building... for a while.

We have seen that this sort of violent action is pretty characteristic of God in Genesis: casting out and cursing, flooding and scattering, circumcising and bartering over the destruction of Sodom. And like all revolutionary change its effects are not transformative. People are scattered, but continue to build cities. Languages are confused, but people still travel and communicate and share stories and myths. Just as the flood failed to flush out evil, so the scattering of the Babel-onians failed to stop humanity's attempts to build their Utopias east of Eden. If God wanted to transform his creation then he couldn't continue periodically pressing 'reset'. A different mode of change was required if the problem of the city was to be dealt with.

Jump forward an undisclosed period of time to a hotel room in New York City, where an African-American reporter on the *New York Times* is questioning the theologian Matthew Fox on the relevance of his 'creation spirituality' to her thoroughly inner-city roots. He asks her to look out of the window and describe what she sees: bricks. He continues to question: What are bricks? Just clay hoisted hundreds of feet by humans, supported by frameworks of steel mined from the earth, with cars below turning on rubber tyres, burning fuel distilled from the residue of dead plants from millions of years ago. He goes on, trying to get her to see the essential naturalness in the city and concludes: 'A city - as awesome a place as it is - is also earth, earth recycled by humans who themselves are earth standing on two legs with moveable thumbs and immense imaginations.'ⁱⁱⁱ

Regardless of the controversy surrounding some of his other writings, this is a stunning insight; one which I believe helps us to unlock God's evolving attitude to the city. And clearly it must have evolved, for between Genesis and Revelation God somehow becomes city-positive. At some point God sees that a policy of continually trashing the cities his creations are building is not going to work. Not only that, but God begins to love the city, to be upbeat about it, and having begun in the plains and fields of Genesis, Scripture ends up with the wonderful description of the Holy City, where 'the dwelling of God is with humanity and God will live with them.'^{iv}

The city started life as a statement of independence from God, but it ends up expressing perfectly the goal of divine and human co-habitation. The power of Fox's insight is that the division between the municipal and the rural is a totally false one, and in his conjunctive view

of the city he sees that everything that we have in it is made from the raw materials of the earth. In *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, Manuel De Landa goes beyond this. Though he does not suggest God's hand in it, he sees the emergence of bone in the organic world as the definitive moment which 'made new forms of movement control possible among animals, freeing them from many constraints, and literally setting them into motion to conquer every available niche in the air, in water, and on land'^v – which we might parallel with God's commission to 'fill the earth and subdue it'^{vi}. He then suggests that the invention of bricks and the emergence of the city – which he calls 'the urban exoskeleton' – performed a parallel function in the development of human society, allowing it to experience new levels of motion control, with trade, news, food and goods all travelling in new ways because of it. Hence we might see that our act of creating cities was in fact an imitation of God's act of creation – breathing life and bones into matter to command new levels of control – and if this is the case, then God's desire to end history in urban co-habitation with us is a profound affirmation of our roles as creators, created in God's image. God sees what we have made, and is pleased with it.

In building cities, human hands have taken divine materials and worked them to create new ones. Thus the very fabric of the city is testament to the co-operation between God and humanity. It is a co-creation, a partnership where God has provided the raw materials and we have worked them into fabulous architectural masterpieces full of light and space, allowing the free movement and congregation of people, exchanging ideas and technologies... soaring office blocks cloaked in glass, Edwardian squares and regency streets, expansive docks and arching bridges... and slums and tenement blocks and concrete monstrosities and gluttonous penthouses and temples to money and mean streets. In our cities, life's rich tapestry is woven altogether, and it tells the full story of the triumphs and disasters of our urban project. We have built perfect testaments to the human situation: taking God's gifts and simultaneously using and abusing them. Both our divine heritage and rebellious creativity are betrayed in our buildings.

Yet if we truly believe that God is present in the city and that the civic space is going to be the place God finally dwells, then we ought be able to find hints of God in our cities now. We need to train our ears and eyes to pick up these subtle traces, just as with Fox we need to re-imagine the buildings that surround us as reconfigured earth. In many ways the principles of Fowler's stages of faith can be paralleled with our journey as city-dwellers. There are those of us at Stage 3, where everything in the city is new and exciting and right – and there will be those who live silk-cushioned and air-conditioned lives in the sterilised 'nice' parts of our cities that will never go beyond that. But for most of us who have lived in a city for a while, we go through a Stage 4,

where perhaps we are a victim of crime, and the realities of the difficulties come crashing in on us. We either have the option to escape all together, or cocoon ourselves deeper into our ‘nice’ ghettos and make a note not to venture out again. Or we refuse to let go and refuse to let the city remain unchanged. It takes a long time committing to a city, but a conjunctive ‘Stage 5’ view of it does come, where we see beyond the mean streets and bad areas and inequality to the deeper issues and the essential goodness. It is only in doing this that the city-space can become a spiritual resource for us. The problem is that, just as many people spiritually never get beyond the naïveté of Stage 3, many seem unable to commit to the urban journey to reach the conjunctive view of the city, and resign themselves to the view that it is ‘godless’, talking about having to head to the mountains or oceans and rugged open spaces in order to ‘find God’.

It is undeniable that in the open country it seems easier to tune in to God and, more importantly, tune out of all the noise of the city and its constant hum of people. This has always been the case. In 1835 the English painter Thomas Cole wrote in his ‘Essay on American Scenery’ that ‘Amid those scenes of solitude from which the hand of nature has never been lifted, the associations are of God the creator – they are his undefiled works, and the mind is cast into the contemplation of eternal things.’ In his fabulous book *The Art of Travel* Alain De Botton writes of how from the 18th Century it became popular for travellers to seek out ‘sublime’ landscapes where they could experience what Cole describes. On his own travels to the Sinai desert De Botton tries to articulate just what makes the experience of the dawn rising there ‘sublime’:

‘What then is this feeling? It is generated by a valley created 400 million years ago, by a granite mountain 2300 metres high and by the erosion of millennia marked on the walls of a succession of steep canyons. Beside all three man seems merely dust postponed: the sublime as an encounter, pleasurable, intoxicating even, with human weakness in the face of the strength, age and size of the universe. [...] The sense of awe may even shade into a desire to worship.’^{vii}

This ability of raw nature to put our own weaknesses and pains into perspective is a valuable one, and we see in Job someone experiencing it in the extreme. Having suffered multiple calamity and loss, Job listens to his friends’ advice, but discards it as ‘proverbs of ashes’ and ‘defences of clay.’^{viii} Answers could not be found from those immediately around him. After all this guff, God finally answers the question of Job’s suffering out of a storm:

‘Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation?
Tell me if you understand.
Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know!

Who stretched a measuring line across it?
On what were its footings set, or who laid the cornerstone?
Who shut up the sea behind doors...?^{ix}

And so it continues for four chapters. Job gets no direct answers to his problem of pain, but in God's tirade of images about the raw power of creation, his suffering is put into a new context. As De Botton concludes:

'If the world is unfair or beyond our understanding, sublime places suggest it is not surprising things should be thus. [...] Sublime places gently move us to acknowledge limitations that we might otherwise encounter with anxiety or anger in the ordinary flow of events. [...] Human life is as overwhelming, but it is the vast spaces of nature that perhaps provide us with the finest, the most respectful reminder of all that exceeds us. If we spend time in them, they may help us to accept more graciously the great unfathomable events that molest our lives and will inevitably return us to dust.'^x

Time spent 'in the mountains' is therefore important for us when facing the 'big questions'. In the presence of raw creation, untouched by human hands, clear channels of communication seem to open up and we hear God's assurances clearly. However, the messages that we hear from God in these sublime places are similarly raw and straightforward: I love you. It's OK. I exist. These are important messages to hear from time to time, but they do not deal with the day to day complexities of life on the ground in the city.

William Wordsworth wrote much of his poetry almost as an aid to tolerating city life, considering his lines as daily doses of natural images which he believed improved his character and helped him resist the rat-race of urban anxieties:

'If, mingling with the world, I am content
With my own modest pleasure, and have lived
With God and Nature communing, remov'd
From little enmities and low desires,
The gift is yours [...]
Ye mountains! thine, O Nature! Thou hast fed
My lofty speculations; and in thee
For this uneasy heart of ours I find
A never-failing principle of joy,
And purest passion.'^{xi}

My trouble with Wordsworth's response to the problems of living in the city is that his poetry is an attempt to 'remove' himself personally from it. If our only answer to the obvious pain, greed and ugliness that the city presents to us on a daily basis is to remove ourselves, then there is no hope for improvement. One sees modern-day Wordsworths plugged in to headphones providing intravenous classical music as beggars shake tins unheard, or sitting aloof in swathes of leather, high above the dirty pavements in 4x4s, as cyclists choke and traffic jams... This is not so much 'passing by on the other side' as lifting into the air and floating over. They have solved the problems for themselves alone, and seem disinterested in getting involved in wider solutions.

In a similar way, if we only listen for God in the mountains we will hear only simple words and personal solutions. If we are really to engage with and tackle the problems that the city presents to us every day it is my belief that we need to take the time to listen out for God in the city. If Matthew Fox is right, then by tuning into the city we will begin to hear the message not of God alone, but of God's full and mature incarnate complexity, of divinity and humanity in co-operation. These are not me-and-God platitudes, but rich communications involving the whole spectrum of humanity, the people I work with, the troubles and doubts and rushes and struggles and highs and lows and crimes and injustices, messages about how God is working towards sanctifying and integrating all of this through us. Escaping to the countryside may be the place to work out the personal, the individual aspects of our spirituality, but the city is the place where we need to be working out our corporate life, for it is this work of preparation of the 'holy city' that God is interested in, above our own introspective holiness trip.

Our destiny is not a quiet place with just God and us in some highland croft. As Meister Eckhart advises, 'Spirituality is not to be learned in flight from the world, by fleeing from things to a place of solitude; rather we must learn to maintain an inner solitude regardless of where we are or who we are with. We must learn to penetrate things, and find God there.'^{xiii} We must learn to penetrate our communities and penetrate our work places. We must learn to penetrate our cities and find God in them, for the cities are our true destiny. They are where it will not be God alone, but God and us and him and her and white and black and rich and poor and illiterate and abused and gay and straight and protestant and catholic and the whole feast of life. And only in the city can we get that message. It is not an easy message to tune into with so much white noise and hatred and difficulty and screwed-up transport and mugging and division... But with practice, with a commitment to engaging positively with the city and looking to catch it doing good rather than always on the look out to knock it down, we can begin to see glimpses of why God is committed to the city as our future: because the redeemed city is the final expression of humanity and divinity in co-operation. It is the conjunction of God's creation

with our creativity, where we are building something together. In pursuit of this, I prefer Merwin's response to Wordsworth's:

Thanks

Listen

with the night falling we are saying thank you
we are stopping on the bridge to bow from the railings
we are running out of the glass rooms
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky
and say thank you
we are standing by the water looking out
in different directions

back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging
after funerals we are saying thank you
after news of the dead
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you
in a culture up to its chin in shame
living in the stench it has chosen we are saying thank you

over telephones we are saying thank you
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators
remembering wars and the police at the back door
and the beatings on the stairs we are saying thank you
in the banks that use us we are saying thank you
with the crooks in the office with the rich and the fashionable
unchanged we go on saying thank you thank you

with the animals dying around us
our lost feelings we are saying thank you
with the forests falling faster than the minutes
of our lives we are saying thank you
with the words going out like cells of a brain
with the cities growing faster over us like the earth
we are saying thank you faster and faster
with nobody listening we are saying thank you
we are saying thank you thank you and waving
dark though it is.^{xiii}

WS Merwin

If somewhere along the line God became 'city positive' then I believe that it is Christ's incarnation and subsequent ministry and passion that are the clearest signs of that changed attitude. In them we see the emergence of a new way of approaching the problem of the historical city as the place of rebellion against God.

Perhaps the word 'approach' is exactly the right one, for the mode of Christ's physical approach seems to suggest in itself a different way of dealing with the city than the rather rampant and violent way the beginnings of the Old Testament show us. This is no prophet whose immediate urge is to get into the city, into the main thoroughfares and meeting places and make huge announcements and slamming indictments. On the contrary, although Christ approaches the city deliberately, he does so slowly, gently and carefully. At a young age we know he had been taken to Jerusalem by his parents and was clearly comfortable in those surroundings, yet it is in the desert after his baptism that we first get a sense of his attitude to it.

In this series of three vignettes in the temptations passages^{xiv} we see another example of the necessity of waiting before change can occur. Even after the dramas of his baptism, with God appearing to confirm his status in the descending dove, Christ does not just get 'straight to it', but heads into the desert.

One can read these temptation passages as a battle between old and new modes of ministry. Was Christ going to default to the Old Testament ways of revolution, or begin a new era of spiritual evolution? There were clearly many options open to him, and it was vitally important that he got it right. In this passage, where the conflict between above and below is so pronounced, it is tempting to overemphasise Christ's divinity and forget his full humanity. It is too easy to see him as the powerful Messiah, doing away with Satan with snappy reposts to his testing questions. We ought instead to appreciate here more than anywhere his frail humanity: he had to make the right decisions; he had to face these genuine temptations to do things differently, and to do this required a mind so focused that he went without food for 40 days. In reading we are looking into the inner turmoil of God, tempted to revert to change by revolution – to go back to his violent adolescent past and go charging in to put things right... but this God now tempered by a fragile human heart, understanding and empathising more completely than before the human condition, the difficulties and complexities, the pain and condemnation of the Law and the need for a new way. We are looking in on Christ's own journey toward conjunctivity and beyond.

He is first tempted to turn stones into bread: what better way to spark a wave of interest, a stampede of support than with this miraculous provision. Follow me and you'll never need be hungry again! Free bread for life! No more work or toiling in the fields, no more worries about seasons or droughts or the world around you, because when stones can be turned into food we can all be satisfied and never be in need again. People want, and people want it easy – and this stunt would play right into their hands via their most basic desires... But true love is not easy, and relationships need work. Salvation is not an economic offer, an escape from the rat-race. It is beyond selling or buying and won't be received just because a stomach is full. Offers of something for nothing, bread from stones, riches overnight, £1000 a week tax-free part time, immediate weight loss while you eat what you like – all these great scams cry out to us daily in the city from lamp-post stickers and billboards, playing on our innate desire to leave work behind and enter the lazy nirvana of the lottery winner. But Christ knows that this is no way to bring people to God. They must choose to love, and we must resist the temptation to violate that free choice with dressy claims of cheap salvation.

Christ is then tempted to go to Jerusalem and climb to the highest point of the temple – the metaphorical centre and focal point of the whole city – and from there to fling himself down and be caught by a squadron of angels. A huge publicity coup, a demonstration of enormous power – this would be a guaranteed way to stun the city into noticing him, to whip up a froth of excitement and chatter... start a godly revolution! Christ knows that in Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, the city could be also won over with tricks and fantastica. He could wow the crowds and gain their admiration... but how to keep them? The city is easily bored and needs new distractions and ever more wonderful displays – jumping off the Temple once was great, but to top that and hold them he would need to do more and more and more – forget the spiritual stuff, show us a trick!! Do something amazing! Love will not be stunned into us, and we must resist the temptation to make church a spectacle, to put on visual feasts or sensational healings and blow people's minds and lead them thus mindless into the pews.

Finally Christ is shown 'all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour'. This is a different tack – the temptation is not so much to make the mission easier, but to give it up all together and settle for an easy life. Again, we must not underestimate Christ's genuine humanity and freedom of choice; this option was open to him. The city has the rich wares and splendour of the whole world on display on our doorstep. In many of our homes sit internet connections: portals to an infinite array of desires, passions and wants as well as instant information about the plight of anything anytime. We are overloaded and fragmented by this display. Our eyes can hardly escape the advertisements wherever we choose to gaze or walk; our field of vision has

been sliced up and sold off, our earshot shot full of messages about what we need and what we should want to want. It is a blitz of shocking intensity.

In the transcripts of his talks on contemplation at the Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton talks about the thesis of the German-born American political philosopher, Herbert Marcuse, which criticises modern industrial society as ‘one dimensional’. Merton explains that in such a society:

‘everything is reduced to the lowest common denominator and everybody fits into that. Things are organised so you can fit in easily and happily. The person who fits in painlessly, who does all the approved things... watches all the approved programs... is “one dimensional”. When everybody fits into this mould, then everything will work smoothly, everyone will make lots of money, the GNP will go up, everybody will pay their taxes, blacks will keep their mouths shut and we will win all our wars.’^{xv}

In this one-dimensional world freedom is an illusion. We are free to have any colour or model of car we like – but have a car we must. We are expected to have views on which brands we like, but no views on religion. Marcuse argues that the dominant power structures are able to construct and then keep the lid on such a society, keep everybody conforming and uncritical, by perpetuating three lies. The first lie is that things are too big, too complicated and too advanced for any sort of change to be possible. ‘We can’t change the system now, because it’s gone too far.’ The second is that if you do try to change things, you will pay the price financially – you will be worse off and won’t be able to enjoy your current quality of life. And the third is that if you *do* step out of line, people will mock you and laugh at you. Thus we are kept in one-dimensional bliss, unable to see the truth just beyond us in solid space that things are not right and we are being exploited by the powerful.

It will come as no surprise to learn that many reviewers saw the Wackowski brothers’ *Matrix* films as heavily influenced by Marcuse’s work. Others have seen the central character ‘Neo’ as a type of Christ figure. What is interesting to note as a quick aside is how Christ and Neo compare in their attempts to break people out of their one-dimensional captivity into multi-dimensional conjunctivity. Both perhaps start with the same idea that freedom begins, as Merton says, ‘not by telling slaves to be free, but by telling people who *think* they’re free that they’re slaves.’ However, their chosen routes from then on in diverge quickly. Neo’s solution is the classic Hollywood one of redemption through violence: *Matrix Revolutions* indeed. It is guns and bullets and war and fighting that will solve this problem and save the world. This contrasts to Christ’s refusal to fight the system. He would not be made a Zealot. He works a redemption

which suffers violence but refuses to use it, thus breaking the cycle of retaliatory bloodshed that is the curse of so many conflicts.

Having failed to win Christ round to the way of revolution, of violating their freedom to choose with shock and awe tactics, Satan's third temptation is to ask him 'why bother?' It is the temptation to remain in the first dimension, not to rock the boat and not fall out of line. One can imagine Christ wondering if change was possible at all: surely he was too small to make any difference. And then thinking of the price he would pay and the abuse he would have to suffer. All of these forces which keep us in check and stop us speaking on the Tube, helping the homeless, and making a stand – they all attempted to reign Christ in and stop him making the decision to accept his mission.

He was tempted to try the commercial line and feed everyone with bread, to try the celebrity line and stun the crowds with spectacular tricks, and to just give up. And like Christ we face those temptations – perhaps more in the urban church than elsewhere. And like Christ we must resist. We must show, like him, the miracle of restraint – shunning displays of might and power, stepping away from ideas of revolution and avoiding those who say nothing will change. Christ stepped away from the desert as a divinity determined to do things differently. God had turned away from violent revolution – in Christ he would approach the city in a new way, refusing to rain down plagues and march round its walls.

He knew that the city would resist him – that it still stood as a symbol of rebellion and self-sufficiency. That the priests in power and the money-changers in cahoots would not stand for his message of God and humanity co-operating in a holy city which had 'no need for a temple'^{xvi}. But he had to go. His whole ministry was evolving towards this finale: God's humble approach to the place humanity built in defiance of him, asking to be allowed in, like a parent approaching the room to which they sent their child in a flash of anger... Gently knocking.

Of course, we celebrated initially, thinking we had won some moral victory, and laid down palms and shouted in the streets. But soon it became clear that this was no abdication, no admission of guilt. Yes, he had come to us, but not to furnish our rebellion with legitimacy. And seeing this, the celebration turned to outrage, the shouts of joy to screams of crucifixion... Expelled like a foreign body, the organism of the city took Christ to a hill outside its walls and finally got rid of him. Cain's creation took up the knife and once more spilt blood, poisoned the ground and severed relationships... The 'urban exoskeleton' exposed and broke the bones of God.

Or did it? What they could not see when they split his skin was their weapons simultaneously ripping the curtain in the temple, pulling down the screen that had kept God boxed up, pigeon-holed, controlled and regulated. What they could not see was that rather than finally putting to death this God who had cast them out, they had inadvertently unleashed the complex Christ.

We will return to the issue of Christ's 'complexity' in the final chapter. For now I want to focus on the fact that Christ's attitude to the emerging city was not one of antagonism or annihilation. Quite the opposite: Christ approached the city in order to become a part of it, to infect it, to plant some seed within it that he hoped would take root and grow, drawing the city toward its fulfilled state: that of the place of divine and human co-habitation. This is not where our cities are now, but it is where they are destined to go. And for this reason we must not give up on them. Difficult as it is going to be, we must not abandon our cities or barricade ourselves into sanitised parts of them. If we are not going to face their troubles and stay around to try to improve them, who is? We must learn to appreciate that the very fact that there is pain in our cities is why they are so vital. The city is the place where we are forced to meet with and journey with 'the other': the drunkard, the asylum seeker, the lonely, the homeless; it is a multicultural melting pot – all of humanity is here. So we must stay and celebrate these things and try to make them work because this is what the destiny of the city is: to be a place where we can all live together.

As if echoing Fowler's admission that Stage 5 is only reached through the pain of Stage 4, Richard Sennet concludes his book *Flesh and Stone* by saying that the very thing that binds a city together into a community is the shared experience of difficulty and suffering, and only a city that has experienced that will be a compassionate place. The city will thus become conjunctive, become a place that can empathise with pain:

'only if it acknowledges that there is no remedy for its sufferings in the contrivings of society, that its unhappiness has come from elsewhere, that its pain derives from God's command to live together as exiles.^{xvii}

Having created the city out of Cain's painful rejection, humanity must come to terms with the fact that pain will remain in the city until God fully becomes part of it. There is no perfect urban configuration that will solve the problems we have in our cities, and no amount of razing and redesigning will make them trouble-free. Discussing the designing and rebuilding of Paris after the violence and oppression of the times leading up to and through the French Revolution, Sennet remarks that the 'revolutionaries believed that [...] pain could be erased by erasing place^{xviii}'; as the later student revolutionaries of 1968 testified with their ripping up of the

pavements, it could not then, and it cannot now. Christ had to come to be wounded by the city precisely because the city is the place where wounds are carried, where pain cannot be hidden, where people have to face their prejudices, their hatreds, their fears. But he also had to come to the city because it was the melting pot of cultures and ideas, and therefore the forge for outrageous creativity: music, theatre, clubs, galleries, bars, comedy, opera, discussions, lectures... listings and listings and listings of creative talent on show. The Creator had to come to the focus of creativity and celebrate it with us. The God who created the bones that allowed us to move, had to come to the 'urban exoskeleton' we had constructed, and affirm our status as co-creators.

For these reasons we are compelled to carry on the work Christ started, not shied by those who claim religious power or have vested interests in the dominant modes of being. The city is the place where our dreamy theologies must get their hands dirty and work themselves out in praxis. The temptations will be there to attempt revolution, to pour resources into big projects and 'top-down' structures, to try to impress people with our power and sell them salvation in exchange for needs met. It will also be tempting to do nothing, to say that everything is too big, too complicated for us to change; to move to the country where things will be easier. We will be told that if we do attempt change we will lose out and people will mock. We must ignore these one-dimensional messages. As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, 'The chief worth of civilisation is just that it makes the means of living more complex; that it calls for great and combined intellectual efforts, instead of simple, uncoordinated ones, in order that the crowd may be fed and clothed and housed and moved.'^{xix} It is to this complex task in the city that the Church is called. We must give ourselves humbly, give birth to new forms and organisms, allow the Church to emerge and adapt, to work its way through streets and subways, drawing, as the city always has, on God's created resources, working them with our hands, bringing our own creativity and technology to bear on them, not for our own glory, not to state our independence, but for the glory of God, for justice and equality, for celebration and unity. We are the community of the Creator, so we must create. We are the community that looks forward to the city where divinity and humanity will live side by side, so we must give birth to an emergent, conjunctive, self-renewing, adaptable church that can model this in inclusivity, generosity, creativity and flexibility, welcoming the Other, providing true space for pain, and real time for carnival.

ⁱ In actual fact, many believe it was only the protection of the top-soil that allowed cities to develop at all. As Manuel De Landa writes, 'Urban life began in Egypt and Mesopotamia precisely because the land was flat and hence not subject to erosion and soil loss' *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History, Zone*, New York, 1997, p 122.

ⁱⁱ Genesis 11:4

ⁱⁱⁱ *Creation Spirituality*, Matthew Fox, Harper, San Francisco 1991, p 7

^{iv} Revelation 21:3

^v De Landa, M., *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History, Zone*, New York, 1997, p 26.

^{vi} Genesis 1:28

^{vii} De Botton, A., *The Art of Travel*, Penguin 2003, pp 166, 169

^{viii} Job 13:12

^{ix} Job 38ff

^x De Botton, A., *The Art of Travel*, Penguin, London, 2003, p 178

^{xi} Wordsworth, W., *The Prelude*, Book 2.

^{xii} Meister Eckhart, (Davies, O. tr), *On Detachment and possessing God*, in *Selected Writings*, Penguin, London, 1994, p 11

^{xiii} *Thanks*, from *The Rain in the Trees* by W.S. Merwin, copyright © 1988 by W.S. Merwin. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House, Inc.

^{xiv} See Matthew 4:1 – 11

^{xv} Merton, T., *The Springs of Contemplation*, Ave Maria Press 1992, p 117

^{xvi} Revelation 21:22

^{xvii} Sennet, R., *Flesh and Stone – The Body and the City in Western Civilisation*, Norton 1994, p 374

^{xviii} Sennet, R., *Flesh and Stone – The Body and the City in Western Civilisation*, Norton 1994, p 376

^{xix} Quoted in Jacobs, J., *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York, Random House, 1961, p 2