



Choosing which Way to Live in the City

In the film, "Emerald City" David Williamson has one of the characters declare, "No-one in Sydney ever wastes time debating the meaning of life – it's getting yourself a water frontage. People devote a lifetime to the quest." From time to time we have seen just how real such a declaration is. Revelations of the underside of property development in the city, its shadowy liaisons, the wheeling and dealing, the accounts of alleged extortion and standover tactics, the implications of improper associations with government all surface from time to time. Regrettably, it seems that the playwright, Neil Armfield might be right when he once observed - in a way that echoes David Williamson's observation - "The Sydney Opera House is entirely Sydney: fabulous on the outside, truncated, confused and corrupt on the inside."¹ This may be, in part, due to the origins of Sydney itself. Outside the Sydney Hospital on the Macquarie Street footpath is a small plaque commemorating the site of the first hospital in Sydney, built by two businessmen in exchange for rum licenses. Thus it began, and thus it continues. Thomas Kenneally wrote in his early account of the city, *The Commonwealth of Thieves*:

Both our hedonism and our conservatism . . . derived from Georgian England rather than Victorian England. Sydney is still a very Georgian town with its exorbitant rorts, its passion for real estate. All we are interested in are the lucky stories, which is a very Georgian thing.²

The passion for real estate, the constant pursuit of wealth, influence, and ultimately, power make Sydney a very flashy city. Sydney flashes both its passion and its pursuits. This was the theme of Williamson's "Emerald City." Even though probably none of us have the where for all to generate such passion and pursuit, it is all around us. We can easily be seduced by them, albeit in subtle ways. In a Georgian kind of way we become fascinated by the lucky stories and in some quiet way hanker that our own might share in them.

Though such commentary might be characteristic of the city of Sydney itself the tendency to live in a way that places the pursuit of wealth, prestige and power at the fore of our aspirations follows wherever we live. We certainly don't need to live in the city of Sydney to experience the seduction of a life built on fame and influence!

Jesus stands before us to invite us into a very alternative way of imagining the nature of our pursuits and passions. Discipleship of Jesus thus brings us to a choice about which we are to live and therefore about the nature and orientation of our aspirations. In chapter eight, at the centre of the gospel of Mark, Jesus particularly brings his disciples to a choice about which way they are to live, to a determination about what might present as the foundation of

¹ Neil Armfield, An Address, "Creative Futures - Cultural Life in Sydney 2030," Sydney Town Hall, 24 July 2007

² From Steve Meacham "Regret and rejoice: this is Australia" *Sydney Morning Herald* 3 October 2005, on Thomas Kenneally: *The Commonwealth of Thieves: The Sydney Experiment* (Random House 2005).

their way of living. Setting his own gaze firmly on the direction of Jerusalem and the inevitability of the Cross, he brings them to a fork in the road. He invites them, and us, to consider that the way of the Cross is to become a way of life. As we know, his friend Peter resists such a prospect. The encounter between Jesus and Peter at this point in the gospel of Mark is the encounter between two different ways of living, two different sets of expectations about the way in which we find happiness. The theologian, Jürgen Moltmann puts it this way:

Peter wants what [we all] want. What is it, in this respect that [we all] want? [We] love strength, power and success. We want to achieve. We want to be immune from suffering, frustration and contempt. That is why many compensate for their uncertainties with omnipotent fantasies, and look for s[strength] and ideologies of power. It is only power which impresses. It is only success which succeeds. Therefore, those who idolize power, honour, success, must not suffer.

Here the altercation between Peter and Jesus proceeds. There is man wishing to be God, fleeing suffering, guilt and fear, pursuing honours, and a life of bliss, and here is the God who is man, taking upon himself man's despised and vulnerable humanity and permitting himself to be humiliated.

There is the man fighting his way up, who wants his gods and ideals to be impassable, powerful, victorious and promising success – and here is the suffering, swooning and crucified God who loves his people as they truly are: uncertain, mortal, at each other's mercy . . .³

The way of Jesus is not the way of success for success' sake; it is not the way of a lust for wealth, for influence, for power. In his dramatic way Jesus is teaching us that happiness can never come simply from the logic of what we accumulate in terms of money, possessions or power.

As those who follow the way of Jesus, the way of the Cross, we find happiness in another way. We find happiness not by filling ourselves, but by emptying ourselves as we give ourselves to others, for others. This is what the Cross means.

Living in as large a city such as Sydney, but indeed life lived in the company of others anywhere, will often present us with a choice between a Georgian way and an evangelical way. Only one of these ways contains the possibility of a life fully lived – simply perhaps, but nonetheless, truly.

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³ Jürgen Moltmann, *Meditations on the Passion*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 11-12.