

Collins Street Baptist Church
November 14, 2010
10.30am

A Community Worth Belonging To
Isaiah 65.17-25

Christian bumper stickers are not common in Melbourne. In Texas where Brenda's family live, they're all the rage. As you prowl the church car park on a Sunday morning, almost every car has a concise testimony to faith displayed prominently on the rear window. From the innocuous *'I love Jesus'* to the more sobering *'In case of rapture, this car will be unmanned!'* From the reassuring *'Jesus loves me and my tatoos'* to the perplexing *'As long as Romans 9 is in the Bible, dispensationalism remains a heresy—2 Peter 3.16.'* Now there's a winner!

I do remember exiting the church car park one Sunday morning behind a young woman in a black BMW convertible. Her bumper sticker read, *'I'm heaven bound! This world is not my home.'* As she pulled out into the traffic doing a dangerous and illegal u-turn right in front of me, I wondered if the truth of her sticker was more imminent that she realized. Regardless, the pithy theology of her sticker is very telling: *'I'm heaven bound! This world is not my home.'*

As we continue preparing for the State election on November 27, the degree to which we engage with the concerns of this election as people of faith depends in large part upon our theology of belonging. To which world do we belong? If our belonging is elsewhere—if heaven really is our home and we're just passin' through—then participation in such a momentary thing as an election is really beside the point. On the other hand, if this world is our home, one into which we are called as followers of Jesus, then our engagement with an election takes on a whole new significance.

Last week we listened to the prophet Haggai. Today our prophet is Isaiah and our text is taken from Isaiah 65. Isaiah pre-dates Haggai by more than 200 years. He began his career as a prophet way back in 740BC warning the kings and the people of Judah about the threat of the Assyrians (again, there is a timeline in your bulletin if it helps).

The book of Isaiah is commonly believed to be a combination of three books written over a period of 220 years, and by a number of different authors but all in the tradition of Isaiah. Three world powers dominate during this period: first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, and finally the Persians. The last ten chapters of Isaiah form the third and final book, written during the reign of the Persians and long after Isaiah's death. So the words we read today from Isaiah 65 relate to the same period of Judah's history as the words of Haggai from last week. Here we have a people with no king, a city and temple in ruins, a community suffering drought and famine and crippled under the weight of tributes owed to the Persians. The words of both Haggai and Isaiah are designed to lift the people's spirits. While Haggai presents a vision worth believing in—a vision of God who calls them forward into a new and hopeful future—Isaiah reminds the people of the sort of community they are called to be.

Our reading from Isaiah 65 begins with the words of God in verse 17: *'For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.'* There are some people in the Christian church who take these words as an indication that God is now through with this world and off creating a new one. Like the woman in the BMW, 'we're heaven bound! This world is not our home.' You could certainly understand the Judeans feeling that way. After more than 200 years of oppression and fear and domination and exile, surely the promise of a brand new place in which to start over would be good news.

One of the great theologians of the 20th century, Karl Barth, concluded that this view of God and our world is pervasive in the church. It's a view that sees the world as a

dark and evil place destined for destruction under the judgement of God and the church as a community called out to another realm. According to this view, the mission of the church is simple: train up the troops, send them back into the evil world to rescue the perishing and lead them out into a place of eternal security. From this perspective, any preoccupation with earthly life is beside the point. All that matters are the acts of proclamation and rescue. Everything else is superfluous. A State election? Frankly, it has nothing to do with the mission of the church: we are heaven bound! This world is not our home.

The trouble is, such a view ignores the rest of the text. In fact, it ignores the whole of Isaiah's prophesy from beginning to end. According to one of the great scholars of the Hebrew Bible, Brevard Childs, Isaiah 65 is, and I quote, *'not an apocalyptic flight into an imaginative world of fantasy, but the fulfilment of God's will for Judah taking shape through the entire book of Isaiah.'* God's will is made so abundantly clear in the rest of our passage as it proceeds to describe God's intentions for the future of Jerusalem. Verse 18: *'But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight.'* From there God describes the miraculous transformation of the city and the earth that's already there. Isaiah describes not a new heaven and a new earth, but the extraordinary renewal of what's been there all along. Isaiah's call to the people is not to leave Jerusalem behind for some heavenly place, but to believe in Jerusalem's renewal as the city of God.

Karl Barth's call to the church of today is very similar. Indeed the call of the Bible is the same. This world is God's good creation. There has been no surrendering of this world on God's part. Though it may well groan under the effects of decay and struggle, this world is to be gathered up in God's ultimate salvation. The call to the church is not a call *out* of the world, but a call to live more authentically *in* it, to embody the transformative presence of God at its very heart. This world *is* our home. And that's why elections matter. Our earthly life is not beside the point. It lies at the heart of God's concern.

As a Baptist church we have much to be proud of in our tradition, but in the last two decades there are Baptists in our worldwide association that have made decisions about the nature of our mission that grieve me. There are Baptists in other parts of the world that have ceased ministries of compassion and mercy concluding that they are marginal to the mission of the church. Orphanages have been closed, schools and seminaries shut down, ministries to AIDS victims and hospitals defunded, all because these ministries cannot demonstrate sufficient evidence of conversions to faith in Jesus. If all that matters is our preparation of souls for some future place, then what happens in this place will be forever second rate.

That is not the message of Isaiah. See how he goes on to describe the renewal of Jerusalem. It's a place where tears will no longer flow because it's one where children grow up without fear of unnecessary disease and premature death; a place where the elderly are honoured members of society, cared for and included; a place where neighbourhoods are safe and communities stable; a place where good health and just relationships are the marks of daily life; a place where everyone has enough to eat; a place where peace and harmony are more than just words of hope. It's a real, flesh-and-blood, bricks-and-mortar sort of place. The picture that Isaiah paints is not 'pie in the sky when we die'. It's now. Through Isaiah, God describes a community worth investing in because it's a community worth belonging to.

The policies of both major parties, as well as those of the minor parties, on issues like healthcare, access to public transport and education, services for the unemployed or socially disadvantaged are important policies for us to engage with. If ours is a community worth belonging to, it will be a community marked by inclusion, justice, stability and peace for all participants. As people of faith, this is what we work toward, this is what we are called to speak for and support in a democracy like ours. But it's also what we work toward in our own lives, neighbourhoods and relationships.

Ten years ago, a young Baptist couple Amy and Craig moved out of their eastern suburbs home, close to their families, to a small two-bedroom flat in what the police described as one of the worst streets in Melbourne's north. It was a common strip for drug trafficking and domestic violence, a mixture of government subsidized housing and low rent accommodation in various states of disrepair. Amy and Craig moved there with a sense of mission and a sense of God's call. As soon as they could, they purchased one of the free-standing homes that came up for sale. Over time they planted a garden, hosted neighbourhood barbecues, and hung out at the front fence as often as they could. Amy's kitchen bench became a place for other young mums to sit and drink coffee while their children played outside. Craig is a trained schoolteacher and began offering an afterschool homework club in his garage. As Amy worked on her own garden, others became interested. Soon Amy and Craig were helping others in planting their own. They led a group in negotiating with the city council to replant trees along the nature strip. Ten years later and the street has been transformed. Police responses to domestic violence have dropped. The drug trafficking on the street has almost disappeared. People know each other and are taking pride in their homes.

Amy and Craig are two ordinary people who believe that God's promises for renewal are as much for today as they are for tomorrow; that God's commitment to communities of hope and justice is a commitment for *this* day and *this* place as much as it is for any day or place yet to come.

Isaiah's words remind us again that our engagement with real people in real neighbourhoods, real citizens in real communities, is as much the calling of God as anything else we do. With God's help we can be about investing in and nurturing communities worth belonging to. The State election on November 27 is one opportunity among many for us to actively engage in intelligent discipleship as followers of Jesus and citizens of God's world. We may be heaven bound, but this world *is* our home and this world is the one to which we are called. Amen.