1-1-1999

Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life: A Sermon

Bruce E. Shields

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons, Christianity Commons, and the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss1/13

This Sermon is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized administrator of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact Kevin.Miller3@pepperdine.edu.
Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life

Bruce E. Shields

Within a few years, the most populous city in the world will be Mexico City. By the turn of the century, there are expected to be more city dwellers than there were people in 1960.

The city is crowded; it's full of selfish complaints; it's noisy; it's polluted; it's where the people are—and too often, it's where the gospel isn't.

In haunts of wretchedness and need,
On shadowed thresholds dark with fears,
From paths where hide the lures of greed
We catch the vision of your tears.

The city is a fearsome place, especially for us who have not grown up there. There is poverty in the city—and disease. There is violent crime in the city—and apathy. There is darkness in the daytime and light at night. There is temptation on every hand. We don't even want our children to see many parts of the city—although we find those parts strangely fascinating ourselves.

It is a profane place, the city. The few church buildings still in use seem starkly out of place. The people go about their business with no thought of God. “We don't need God,” their lives say. “What has God ever done for us?” Such pragmatism is a mark of the age in which we live. We tend to evaluate everything and everybody on the basis of what it or they can do for us. There are very few daffodils in the city, so why should anybody bother to try to smell them on the way to work?

From tender childhood's helplessness,
From woman's grief, man's burdened toil,
From famished souls, from sorrow's stress,
Your heart has never known recoil.

There is life in the city—too much life, perhaps, for our tastes—
but life nevertheless. There are children growing up, all too fast. There are working, grieving men and women. There are people bearing terrible burdens—people who seem to be sad all the time.

Most of all, there are lonely people. Women and men, young and old, who are cut off from their relatives and friends, who are afraid to try to make new friends. Many have never known a father’s love. Many have never been able to trust enough to develop a close relationship. There is sex, of course, but precious little love. People who cannot possibly get acquainted with all their neighbors find it difficult to get acquainted with any of them.

The cup of water given for you
Still holds the freshness of your grace;
Yet long these multitudes to view
The strong compassion of your face.

There is very little compassion to be found in the city, and even less giving of the self for others. Oh, there are individuals and (more commonly) organizations that offer food, drink, a place to sleep. But it’s hard to find a pat on the back, a listening ear, or a shoulder to cry on.

But there are so many people there, we say. Millions in New York City, in Los Angeles, in Tokyo, in Hong Kong. What can we do with so many people?

Does that question sound vaguely familiar? Five loaves and two fish. “What are these among so many?” Eleven half-ready men—to “all the nations”? How can we? It’s strange that the early church was not stymied by that question. They formed themselves in the nearest big city—Jerusalem—to await power. Soon after they received that power, they were making an impact on Damascus, Antioch, Caesarea, Ephesus, Corinth, Athens, Alexandria, and even Rome. The mission strategy of earliest Christianity was simply “Go where the most people are, establish churches in those population centers, and let them evangelize the countryside.”

Our recent strategy seems to be “Go where the fewest people are, establish nice homogeneous congregations in nice rural and suburban villages, and let the cities go to hell!”

O Master from the mountainside,
Make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
Among these restless throngs abide,
O tread the city’s streets again;

No, we really don’t want the cities to go to hell. We wish the Lord would do something about that great need. A few of his disciples are floundering out there, wishing he would return from that Mount of Transfiguration and cast this demon out, but the miracle is delayed.

Don’t we realize that if he did come he would ask why we couldn’t do it? Too much easy living and not enough praying, he said to those followers in the valley. Get serious: people, the nations, the world—that is our commission. And the power of his presence—that is our promise.

Do you see what we have really been singing about? Not the crowds and cries, not the helplessness and grief, not the longing and the pain. We have sung about the voice of the Son of Man, the vision of his tears, the love of his heart, the compassion of his face—his treading those city streets. The gospel for the street corner is not ours, nor is the ability to heal or to comfort, or to reconcile, or to save.

We can offer calm assurance, unconditional friendship, real comfort only as we offer the love of God.

Let’s stand and sing together stanza 6 of our hymn:

Till all the world shall learn your love
And follow where your feet have trod:
Till glorious from your heaven above
Shall come the city of our God.

Benediction: “And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Phil 4:19 NIV).

BRUCE E. SHIELDS is professor of biblical hermeneutics and preaching, and director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Emmanuel School of Religion in Johnson City, Tennessee.