

# The city of joy

*MUC@2pm: Con's Induction, 16 November 2025*

*Alison Sampson, reflecting on Isaiah 65:17-25*

A city of joy, its people a delight: this is what God promises through the prophet Isaiah. It sounds wonderful! So, what are the elements of this joyful city?

First, says Isaiah, health and wellbeing. No child will die young; no senior die prematurely (Isaiah 65:20). And we can imagine it. In this city, the air is clean, and the soil and waters, too. There are no coal-fired power stations; no rampaging wildfires; no unprecedented floods. No children or elders are struggling for breath through air yellow with smog; no one is sick from forever chemicals because these are forever banned; nobody is collapsing from extreme heat.

Instead, this is a city built for health, so it's built for walking and cycling. It's dotted with park benches, public piazzas, and free health clinics. Loneliness kills: so this city facilitates connection and community; this city is filled with laughter. It's a city of conversation and choirs; a city of green power; a city of cool shade; a city of community gardens. In this city, locally grown produce is abundant and shared, and everyone has enough to eat.

The second element to the city, says Isaiah, is economic justice. 'They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat ... They will not toil in vain.' (v 22-23). And we can imagine it. This city isn't cursed by a big gap between rich and poor. There are no fat cat landlords, no struggling tenants in sub-standard buildings, no people living in their cars. Instead, this is a city of affordable housing and reasonable rent, and it's a city of long-term contracts, fair wages, proper breaks, and sick leave for all. There's no insecure, casualized, struggling workforce, no exploitative bosses. Labour isn't funnelled towards the enrichment of the few; corporations and individuals are limited in their power; the minimum wage is enough. People can afford to live: for in this city, human services are for people not profit. Nobody need choose between food, rent and medicine.

The final element of the joyful city is peaceable relations. 'The wolf and the lamb shall lie down together ...' says Isaiah. 'They shall not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain.' (v 25). And we can imagine it. This isn't a city where some people dominate while others are brought low. It's not a city where predators roam and the vulnerable are turned into prey. In this city, women and kids are safe in their homes. Older folk are treated with dignity; men have gentle life-giving role models; gay and trans folk are thriving. The whites have dismantled their privilege, and everyone honours Treaty.

This isn't a city driven by competition and envy, or fuelled by division and hate. Instead, the vulnerable are raised up; the silenced are given a platform; the politics work for the common good. The relational health of this city means anxiety is

vanquished, and a kaleidoscope of people live alongside each other with curiosity, tenderness and ease.

More, in this city humans have learned to live in ways which are no longer destructive, exploitative or extractive. Instead, they come alongside other species; indeed, 'the lion shall eat straw like the ox' (v 25). So this city is renowned for biodiversity and butterflies, for regenerative farming and pocket parks, for simple living, for rewilding, for healthy wetlands, and for intricate landscapes returned to Indigenous management and care.

This, then, is Isaiah's vision of salvation: good health, good economics, and good relationships between people and each other, and animals, and the land. God's new creation? It's a city of joy and its people are a delight (vv 17-18). And yes, we can imagine it: but perhaps it feels like a pipe dream. Because while Isaiah's vision is very nice and all, surely it's a fantasy dreamed up in a simpler time and place? Surely it's not a vision for the City of Manningham, and the real world in which we live?

Yet the people who first received this vision weren't exactly living the dream. They were a devastated people living in a devastated landscape. A bit of history: Many years before Isaiah's prophecy, Judah had been invaded by the Assyrians. The cultural elite had been forcibly removed from their homeland; the peasants dragged into slavery. Houses and buildings were laid to waste, and crops seized and destroyed. The springs were salted, the forests cut down. The fields were trashed with rubble; young and old were shattered by war. Two hundred years later, the tide turned. Assyria fell, Persia rose, and King Darius of Persia sent the exiles home to rebuild. This is the moment when Isaiah speaks. So Isaiah's vision of peace and plenty was directed to people who had been displaced by war, who had been born and raised far from the land of their ancestors, and who were now being sent to a socially, culturally, theologically and ecologically battered land.

His vision is not for perfect people living in some Garden of Eden. Instead, it's for ordinary people who know war, violence, colonisation and displacement, and human and ecological devastation. This is a vision for shattered people who are questioning what it means to live faithfully; this is a vision for dislocated people who are wondering about their place in the land; this is a vision for traumatised people who are longing for justice and joy. It's a vision for people like many who live in the City in Manningham; indeed, it's a vision for us.

And what we see in this vision is that the joy-filled city needs God, who is pouring life into the world to create a new heaven and earth. But it also needs people who catch the vision and help to bring it about. Our task, then, is to seek good health, good economics, and good relationships not only for ourselves but for our neighbourhoods, our region, and all of creation, and in this way we will gradually build the world that we so deeply long for. And if the work is good and the timing is right and Isaiah's words are true, we shall not labour in vain or bear children for disaster: for they shall be children blessed by God (v 23).

How, then, do we get involved in the joyful city which God is bringing about? Well, we're doing it already, both those of us within the church and those beyond its walls: for Isaiah's vision is for everyone. What does it look like? Care for a child. Care for elders. Chat with a stranger, greet an outcast, build connection. Plant a manna gum; plant a garden; walk in the park. Lobby a bank, a politician, a corporation. Savour diversity. Do what you can to mitigate climate change. Don't be a slumlord. Be a good boss. Check your privilege. Welcome butterflies. Divest your super from fossil fuel industries. Join a choir. Cherish teenagers and be a good role model: grounded and gentle and strong. And in all things, don't forget to rest: because simply stopping heals all manner of social, cultural and climate ills, and the joy of the Sabbath is for everyone.

And even when your efforts feel foolish and ineffective, hold onto the vision and persist. For God is creating a new thing: a region created as a joy and its people as a delight, and no one will be left behind. It's a gentle, peaceful, beautiful city, for they shall not hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain, not Mount Lofty, not Templestowe Hill, not Doncaster.

So Con, Manningham Uniting Church, and all ye citizens of the City of Manningham, and all ye citizens of the kingdom of heaven: let us fix our eyes on this beautiful vision of salvation embodied in good health, good economics, and good relationships, and let us work and pray for the joy-filled day when this vision becomes reality for everyone. Con: go to it. Ω