

The Future of Blacktown

Who here has lived in or around the city of Blacktown for most - if not all - of their life? Is it fair to say that this city has changed a lot over the past 50 years?

This week I learned that around 50 years ago, Blacktown was home to the very first Westfield shopping centre. Since that time, it has been replaced by a much larger *Westpoint* shopping centre. All that remains of the original is that there is a street called 'Westfield Place', and part of one small building.

Blacktown Hospital first opened 54 years ago in what looks like a big, empty paddock. It is now a much larger complex, although some might say it's still not big enough...

Much has changed in this city in the past 50 years. And the rate of change has only increased. Who can imagine what this city will look like in another 50 years? 20 years? Even 5 years?

Change is inevitable in our city. Some of it for good, some of it perhaps not. But regardless of our personal opinions, the culture and the people of our city change.

As a church located in this city, if we are to engage with our city well, if we are to be a clear witness to the good news of Jesus, if we are to communicate the message of Jesus, it is vital for us to understand how our city is changing.

The good news of Jesus is certainly an unchanging message that is good news for all people across every time and place. What does change is the ways in which we communicate that news so that it is understood. What may have made a lot of sense 50 years ago doesn't necessarily mean it will make a lot of sense today. And what makes sense today might not make sense in 20 years time.

Today, we begin a Vision Series to help us think about the future of our church, and how we might bring the unchanging good news of Jesus to a rapidly changing city. This Vision Series is a time for us to remember why we exist as a church. To focus our hearts on Jesus and *his* desire and mission for us and for our church, and to begin to pursue a vision of what this might look like for us a church in the city of Blacktown.

These three sermons will be tightly connected together in shaping a way forward for our church. If you miss either of the next two weeks, let me strongly encourage you to listen online, or ask me for a copy of the sermon notes.

Here is what we are going to do today. Firstly, I want to explore what these two Bible readings teach us about how we should relate to our city. Then I want to help us see our city – the city of Blacktown – as Jesus would see this city. Finally, I want to speak to a statement about our vision for the future here at Blacktown Anglican, and share some implications.

The welfare of the city

Way back in the Old Testament, God's people Israel were captured by the Babylonian empire. They took the Israelites into exile to live in Babylon. In our reading this morning, the prophet Jeremiah brought a message from God to those Israelites living in Babylon.

It's quite interesting what God does *not* say to these Israelites in Babylon. He does not say "fight back and win your freedom". He does not say "ignore Babylon and focus on me". He does not say "forget the present, worry about the future". God says none of those things. Instead, they are told to build house, plant gardens and live as good citizens of Babylon. The heart of God's message is found in Jeremiah 29:7

⁷ But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.

God says two significant things here: seek the welfare of the city, and, pray for the city. God tells his people that their welfare depends on the welfare of the city. And so they should care about the city they live in, seek its flourishing, and it will benefit everyone. And they should also pray for the city, that God would work in the lives of the people who live in it.

We are all part of the city of Blacktown. We live or work or shop or at least do church in this city. Sometimes Christians are tempted to ignore the context where they live or work or church. We try not to get involved in what's happening around us. It might be because we don't want to be led astray by the sin of the city. It might be because we don't want to be distracted by it. Or maybe because we don't know how a Christian should be involved in the life of the city around them.

Jeremiah 29 reminds us that God cares for cities because God cares for people. And while it is true that we are citizens of a heavenly city, we also have a responsibility to seek the welfare of the city in which we live. A responsibility to the people in this city, to pray for them, and to seek their ultimate good by pointing them to Jesus.

Jesus seeks the welfare of people

Jesus shows this same care for cities and for people throughout his life and ministry. There are many examples we could go to and see this, but Matthew 9 is especially helpful for two reasons: it shows Jesus care for all people, and it offers a guide for us in how to follow Jesus in this way.

³⁵ And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction.

This verse is Matthew's way of giving a summary of Jesus' ministry. Notice that Jesus is doing three things:

1. He teaches.
Jesus teaches in the synagogues – the Jewish meeting place. He teaches God's people, the insiders, helping them understand what he is doing.
2. He proclaims.
Jesus proclaims the good news of God's kingdom. He is spreading the good news to those who don't yet know God, the outsiders, so that they would become insiders.
3. He heals.
Jesus heals every disease and affliction. He is giving people a taste, an experience, of what God's kingdom is like. The physical healing points in two directions. It helps people

understand the spiritual healing Jesus brings. And it points to the future of God's kingdom, where there is no more sickness, disease or pain.

Jesus goes through all the cities and villages to make known to everyone this good news. Jesus cares deeply for people. He wants all people to flourish in a right relationship with God, and so he teaches people and declares truth. Jesus wants people to flourish by knowing that God's way is the best way to live, and to experience the joy of life in God's Kingdom, living his way, and being freed from sin, suffering and death.

If Jesus died for the sins of his people, but never healed a single disease, what would be lacking? Would it make his death any less effective for us? No. The reason Jesus heals is because he cares about all of life, not just the spiritual part. He sought the welfare of the people in that time and place.

Consider this: Every single person that Jesus healed in his earthly ministry eventually died. Even Lazarus, who Jesus raised from the dead had to die a second time. Imagine his family having to go through that, twice!

Jesus cared about the physical welfare of people. He addressed their needs, and often in ways that are impossible for you or me. Jesus' healings are a signpost, pointing to something even more significant. But he never dismissed physical needs as not important. This is great for us, because it means that we can pray for our friends, family, and church family who are sick and suffering, because Jesus cares about that.

In Jeremiah, God wanted his people to care for the welfare of the people in the city of Babylon and to pray for them. And in Jesus' ministry, he too cares for the welfare of people, their health as well as their knowledge of God, in every city and village he visited.

In the last few verses in Matthew 9, Jesus helps us to see our city and its people in a new light.

Sheep without a shepherd

³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

There are 35 Christian churches of various denominations and languages located in our suburb, or just outside the edge.

There are, on average, 220 people across our three services in this church each Sunday. We would be among the largest churches in our suburb.

There are 47,176 people who live in the suburb of Blacktown, and 336,962 people across the city of Blacktown.

51% of the population of our suburb have no affiliation with Christianity at all.

49% of the population tick some form of Christianity on the census form. And you will know as well as I do that many people identify as Christian without that having any implication in their life. Many know about Jesus, but they do not know him or treasure him for all he is worth.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he considered them harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. They were burdened and weary. They lacked direction, wisdom and understanding. They did not know the purpose or meaning of life. They did not know the God who designed them, loved them, and wanted them to flourish.

What do you see when you look at the city of Blacktown? When you stand at the train station? When you hop on a bus? When you walk through Westpoint? When you swim at the pool? When you drive through the streets?

Do you see people who get in your way? Who take your seat? Who disrupt your plans? Who are strange because they are different from you?

We need to see the people of our city as Jesus sees them. They are sheep without a shepherd. They are harassed and helpless. They are lost – and many of them do not even realise it.

There is so much need in our city for people to know Jesus, for people to discover the joy of living according to God's good design, and to see that in practice in the life of a Jesus shaped church.

This city is full of people who need food – and who need the Bread of Life. People who thirst for living water and don't realise it. People who seek wisdom but do not know where to find it. People who are harassed and helpless sheep, who need the Good Shepherd.

And this is where it lands for us as a church:

³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; ³⁸ therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest."

If we are to seek the welfare of our city, we need to train more laborers, more workers, more disciples, so that we can serve this city well. And this leads us to a vision for our future as a church. As we pray, plan and dream of the future, what do we want to see happen?

Our Vision

We want to see our city flourish in God's good design through a Jesus shaped community.

There are three elements to this statement.

1. The flourishing of our city

We seek the good of our city and its people in a wholistic manner. We desire to see healthy marriages and families, the needs of the vulnerable in our city met, and a safe and welcoming community for those who call Blacktown home from every nation, language and culture.

2. God's good design

Ultimately, the most important way for people to flourish is to know Jesus as their king and saviour, to treasure his way of life, and respond to his grace by living obediently to God's commands. We seek godly wisdom being put into practice throughout the life of our city, its people and institutions.

3. A Jesus shaped community

We seek to be a church shaped by Jesus in our character and mission. In this, we become an attractive community in the way that we live, allowing us to point to the goodness of God's design for life. As a community, we increase our ability to serve together for the benefit of others in using our combined resources of time, energy and money.

We want to see our city flourish in God's good design through a Jesus shaped community.

So what does this look like? Over the next two weeks, we will explore in detail what our mission is as a church, and how we will pursue this vision this together in the coming weeks, months, years and decades as a church in Blacktown.

We want to see our city flourish in God's good design through a Jesus shaped community. There are countless implications that we can plan, pray for, and dream of together. And we will talk about them in the weeks, months and years ahead. But here is a video to give us a snapshot of just a few implications of where we are heading. Please watch this, and then I will pray for us.