

**weaving a stronger spell: Christ in the city?**



**a three part series for Benedictus for the season of creation 2024**

Sermon 2 "through the looking glass"

*Celia Kemp*  
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**READING:** Ezekiel 34:1-23

*What would become of us if everything that happens out there were quite clear to us.*

*Erich Maria Remarque*  
*All Quiet on the Western Front*

In 2024 I have been trying in Melbourne what I learned to do in the centre which is letting the river exegete the place.

And so I am spending time by the Birrarung –the river of mists and shadows.

In March I went on a tour on the cities' hidden heritage called Walkin' Country, Walkin' Birrarung by Dean Stewart - a Wemba/Wergaia man - and it was so funny and skilfully done it took a while to realise how subversive it was.

He said he wanted us to look at the city from an entirely different perspective by the time he was done.

And ended with 'I have been singing to you, I hope you take up the song'.

And so this sermon where I've taken some of what I learned from him but run in other directions – so this is different– if you come here I would recommend you experience his tour in its full glory.

Last week we spent some time with a Sculpture just East of the CBD – the blue arrow - today we wander West along the bank to the orange arrow - the tour started here at Enterprise Park.



I arrived early and sat on the concrete by the river.



There were sea gulls calling and something of the smell of the sea from the west.

Ducks and coots sailed by but though I looked for a while I couldn't see any life under the water.

I did see weed covered shopping trolleys and -eventually -a string of bubbles rising from the corner of one.

There was plenty of action above the water.

The shining metal skyscrapers of the Crown Casino Complex shimmered from the other side.

Traffic roared, trains thundered and a large red helicopter kept taking off and landing just downstream.

It turns out this noisy place was the start of settler-colonial Melbourne.

On August 30 1835 the ship Enterprize sailed up from Port Philip Bay and people got out right there.

It stopped because its passage was blocked by a waterfall, ancient basalt rocks stretching right across the river.

One side sea water, on the other fresh and people could walk across the smooth dark rocks so it was a natural bridge - and the only bridge for a long way.

The meeting of fresh and salt created a nursery that teemed with life.

This whole area was what Tim Flannery calls a 'temperate Kakadu' – there were Brolgas here once.

You can still see fish – if you pay – in tanks in the aquarium just downstream from Enterprize Park.

We get a sense of what early Melbourne thought it was about from its 1843 seal which you find all round the city today.



The four quarters of the shield are a fleece, a black bull, a whale and a ship.



The Latin motto was taken from Virgil's Aeneid and translates as *We gather strength as we go.*

And so it was, slowly to start but then there was the gold rush.

From 1851 people poured in on ships docking at Queens Wharf just next to Enterprize Park.

And the population swelled and gold was found and trade increased and from all this came many of the grand buildings and institutions that are Melbourne today.

We called the river the Yarra –based on a misunderstanding, the word actually means ‘waterfall’.

Which is ironic because the waterfall itself was blown up in the 1880s so ships could pass up the river unimpeded.



Queens bridge now crosses where it once was.

We walked across it and on the opposite bank Dean had us lean over a low fence and look down and there, rock from the original waterfall amidst the rubbish.



These are ancient rocks, he said, you now know where they are.

But – he said - most of the people already here died and the ancient stories held by the place are now lost.

The Enterprize was aptly named – it carried an entrepreneurial syndicate from Van Diemen’s land.

James Boyce writes:

*The colonisation of Port Phillip was fundamentally a grand property speculation financed on borrowed money. The risks were high, but the potential profits almost limitless. As will be seen.*

*James Boyce*

*1835: The Founding of Melbourne & the Conquest of Australia*

It was also an illegal enterprise under Colonial law at the time.

It is interesting that the scandal-ridden Crown Casino now sits opposite the original landing site.

The law is still being broken for private profit - you might say.

Crown was recently taken over by Blackstone Inc, one of the largest corporate landlords in the world which has been heavily critiqued for – to quote the UN - “exploiting tenants, wreaking havoc in communities and helping to fuel a global housing crisis.”<sup>1</sup>

The Birrarung itself- the reason we were here at all - was used as a dumping ground for household and slaughter-house refuse and became what James Boyce calls a ‘dangerous drain’.

On Melbourne’s early draining maps it is literally referred to as ‘No 1 Drain’.

Some of its tributaries were actually put into concrete pipes- so Preston Creek is now the ‘Preston Main drain’, and what was William Creek runs in a pipe under what is now Elizabeth St.

Melbourne people still speak disparagingly of the river.

It is the brown river, dirty water, the river that runs upside down.

We appreciate the natural life it brings to the city.

But there’s this lingering sense it is a bit shameful compared to, say, Sydney Harbour.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/mar/26/blackstone-group-accused-global-housing-crisis-un>

And what has all this to do with Ezekiel?

God tells Ezekiel he is using Babylon to take Israel into exile because Israel has become defiled or polluted or corrupted or unclean.

What is hidden in the heart of the temple— what they are worshipping - is not God.

So they are no longer holy and their city does not reflect God's character – 'the city is full of injustice' God says in Ezekiel 9.

Today's chapter vividly lays out what corrupted power looks like.

And it looks like plundering people and the commons for private gain.

A good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep.

This is the opposite – the Shepherds take and the sheep bear the cost.

Or as Ezekiel puts it in our chapter today:

Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture—and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? And as for My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet."

Ezekiel 34:18-19

In Ezekiel there is a particular focus on the ethics of the powerful – as there always is in Scripture - but whole communities are characterised, and fall, together.

I find it hard to think of cities full of people as a corporate identity in this way.

But people do think about this.

Hence the coat of arms.



Also this – the current logo for the city of Melbourne . There is a – strict – user manual (I am not sure a sermon complies!) which starts “the City of Melbourne corporate identity is a visual representation of our brand”.

Time with the river helps in thinking of the city as a corporate identity as the river is irreducibly a commons, water rises from its’ source and relentlessly flows down the whole thing.

So it speaks of our collective actions in a place.

It is brown downstream because we cut down too many trees upstream and topsoil is washed into the river.

And what we do in the catchments – which is to say suburban Melbourne - the chemicals we use, the rubbish we throw into the streets, the strange new phenomenon of dog poo put in plastic bags and left on paths– all that ends up together in the river.

Maybe we disparage it because we tend to look down on what we treat badly.

Or because if we took it seriously, we would see things that we don’t want to see.

Ezekiel uses the mistreatment of rivers to illustrate the mistreatment of vulnerable people.

The leaders would not have written their CVs to read like Chapter 34 –they had much wealth and success and building projects and the like.

But the treatment of the vulnerable is Gods true measure.



Jesus reworked Ezekiel 34 into the parable of the sheep and goats to make the same point – at our end our true measure is what we did ‘for the least of these’.

And there he went on to link how we treat the vulnerable to how we treat God.

What does all this mean for modern Melbourne?

Cities – as cities – still matter in the New Testament.

Jesus speaks of the rise and fall of Tyre and four other named cities – as cities - in Luke 10.

The bible starts with river emerging from a garden but ends in Revelation with a river emerging from a city.

This is Zion, the archetypal good city, with God at its centre.

But in Revelation there is also Babylon – the archetypal exploitative city – run by a dragon, with an abundance of faces, ‘that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world.’<sup>2</sup>

God uses Babylon for his purposes in the time of Ezekiel but – in a classically subtle theological position - this doesn’t make Babylon good itself.

So now I am going to turn to having a go at theologically branding Melbourne using images from Ezekiel so will see where that lands!



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<sup>2</sup> Revelation 12:9

Last week we spent some time with this strange creature by the river just East of the CBD – Deborah Halpern’s ‘Angel’ - which I think is an Ezekiel 1 cherubim.

I took my family to visit it –the perils of being related to me - they were unconvinced.

Fair enough. It is ambiguous.

Perhaps – option 2 - it is a Babylonian dragon - a mušḫuššu.



Here on the famous Ishtar Gate built by Nebuchadnezzar at the peak of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

It is possible Ezekiel saw this gate.



Or – option 3 - it could indeed be a cherubim but one that has been corrupted.



In Ezekiel 28 the image God uses to critique the King of Tyre is a cherub in the garden of Eden covered in multicoloured jewels.

But splendour corrupted wisdom, beauty led to pride and ‘by the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within and you sinned’.

Option 2 – the dragon - and option 3 –the corrupted cherubim - are perhaps in the end the same.

Is Melbourne’s theological brand more like Zion? Or Babylon? Or Tyre? Or some combination of them? Or something else altogether?

How would you even start to know the state of a cities’ soul?

One way is to listen out for prophets like Ezekiel who have the impossibly hard gig of speaking unwelcome truth to power.

Another is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer would call the view from the below

*We have for once learnt to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer.*

*Letters and Papers from Prison*

And a third way is listening to the river whose voice is unfailingly truthful, speaks only of its particular city and speaks of it as a collective.

In Chapter 9 - one of Ezekiel's more difficult chapters – and there is fairly stiff competition you would have to say - God prepares to wipe out a city full of people by ordering a mark to be placed on the foreheads of “those who grieve and lament over the detestable things that are done in it”.<sup>3</sup>

Those with that mark, and only those people, are spared.

The church fathers thought the mark was the sign of the cross.



I am wondering what it would mean if it were drawn with a finger dipped into the brown river water.

And to close – a quote from Carl Jung:

*There is a fine old story about a student who came to a rabbi and said, “In the olden days there were men who saw the face of God. Why don’t they any more? The rabbi replied, “Because nowadays no one can stoop so low.” One must stoop a little in order to fetch water from the stream.*

*Memories, Dreams, Reflections*

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<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 9:4