

# Communities

When we read the Bible, we can see a tension between community understood as a fellowship of interdependent people and the community of place, determined by buildings, trading-places, local government concerns and indeed by fixed places of worship.

The nomadic community of Israel developed by means of its strong ties: circumcision, the giving of the law and the presence of God bound the people into a sense of self which is absolutely enduring. As the people took possession of land, the task was to bring this sense of God's community to bear on actual settlement. Thus, the *places* of ritual circumcision, law-giving and worship of God become associated with buildings, most obviously the Temple in Jerusalem, the spiritual heart of the people of Israel.



But in the Bible, this association of God's people and place has an uneasy truce: unsurprising in view of such major events in Israel's history as the Babylonian exile and the Roman occupation. Out of such a tension, the New Testament tells us that 'The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head'. Jesus is itinerant and his presence in the city is famously to remove the traders from the Temple and put God back at the heart of things. His visions of the Kingdom talk about communities rediscovering their interdependence under God in ways which challenge the ethics of rulership, family life, landlords and tenants, and work. He talks about a proper discrimination: 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's'. Two sorts of community develop in parallel, one is earthly, one is heavenly.

**At last, Jesus comes into the city as if to take possession of it and to re-establish the community of God in the Holy City. But the community therein dispose their own version of ethical justice as over against the vision of a people oriented only to God. Jesus is crucified: cut off from his community and outside the city walls. By this means of our salvation, Christ teaches us that the most fertile place for the development of spiritual community is the human heart. The rock on which the Church is founded is a person Jesus loved and entrusted, and we are all of us stones in the building of the New Jerusalem.**