

## HOMILY

Easter 6C

Revelation 21.10,22-22.5

Christ Church Cathedral, Victoria

26.5.19

In 39 years of ordained ministry (I checked this), I have never once preached on the passage we just heard from the Revelation to John the Divine. In fact, I have only ever preached *any* reading from the Book of Revelation 6 times: that amounts to about once every 6½ years!

The Revelation to John the Divine (and please, it is *one* revelation, not several “Revelations”) is notoriously difficult. It is cast as a vision granted to a preacher named John (not the John who was one of the 12) exiled to the Isle of Patmos. So right away, we can assume an historical background of persecution in the Church, when the Christian movement had become enough of a threat to “peace, order and good government,” that the Romans moved without compunction to silence orators such as John.

John himself tells us that he is describing his vision. It is as wild as any dream you or I have ever had (and just as difficult to translate into words, images, and sequences of time that make any sense to anybody else.) This said – and this is for another day (of course, at a 6½ year interval, I may not even be extant!), the Book of Revelation is tightly and precisely organized, usually around groups of seven: seven churches, seven angels, seven seals, seven trumpets, seven bowls of plagues, and so on... It is fantastical, but it is by no means chaotic.

However – and this is important – it is clearly a kind of literature that cannot be read literally. Dreams may be true, but they aren’t real. The Book of Revelation is like that. As with our dreams, we may be able to learn something from it. We can assume that some of it stems from and in some way addresses historical reality (such as persecution) – just as our own dreams often rehash and serve up a version of something that has actually happened to us.

But it’s not just about the past, and this is where we can get into trouble with Revelation. Visions and dreams can also intuit a *future* reality, or the path ahead if we continue on as we are, or change course in some way. There was a time in my life, for example, when I had a recurring dream that I was driving downhill ever faster in a car with spongy brakes. I wasn’t a passenger in that car: I was the driver. It was my car. Clearly, I was rushing headlong towards destruction if I didn’t find a way to slow down in my life. Do you see that my dream was true – providing true counsel for the future, without being a literal prediction of the future. The Revelation to John the Divine can teach us something, but beware of

anyone who uses it as a literal roadmap to the present or to the future. Donald Trump is not the Beast, Slave Lake is not the lake of fire, and the rapture is not occurring in 2020.

Enough by way of positioning the Revelation to John the Divine in our Christian piety. What catches my attention in today's reading is that we hear the very language which inspired Christopher Wallis' spectacular stained glass window in our upper chapel – named, fittingly, the Chapel of the New Jerusalem.

Listen again to John (and I'll dip into one or two passages that weren't included in today's reading, but which are very familiar). John says – and I invite you to study the centre panel in particular of the window:

- *Then I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God (21.2)*
- *It has a great high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels... (21.12)*
- *The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width. (21.16)*
- *The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel... (21.18-19)*

What I love about this is that we are looking at Wallis' vision of John's vision – it is a refraction, a layering of interpretation... which is exactly what the work of reading the Bible, of imbibing its stories is all about. Every interpretation, whether mine, yours, Ross's or a commentator's is refracted through the lens of our own experience and knowledge.

John continues:

- *I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb (21.22-23)*

Here it is helpful to remember the historical context in which John has his vision. Remember, the church is under persecution, probably somewhere near the end of the first century under the Emperor Domitian, and many are dying by martyrdom. Some 25 years before, in the year 70, the armies of Rome had razed Jerusalem, decimating its population, and completely destroying the temple. It is difficult for a religion that has a church on every street corner to understand the magnitude of this loss – we love our buildings, but the truth is that if this cathedral burned to the ground tomorrow, we could access all the means of grace 500 metres up the road at St John the Divine. But in Judaism, there was but one Temple, one place to

offer sacrifice for one's sins, one place to pay your vows to the Most High. The loss of Jerusalem was an excruciating blow to Jewish worship and identity. The people were scattered, and needed to find new ways to worship. So, John of Patmos envisages a restoration of Jerusalem, but his vision makes a quantum leap in that there is no temple in the city, because *God* and the Lamb are its Temple [Note God enthroned, and the Lamb of God beneath].

John continues:

- *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, flowing from the throne of God through the middle of the street of the city. On either side of the river is the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree are for healing of the nations... (22.1-2)*  
[Point out river and trees]

There is a lot going on here, but let's focus on echoes of the Garden of Eden. In Eden, there was a river in the middle of the garden, and there was also a Tree – the *Tree of Life*. But whereas to touch the Tree of Life in Eden was forbidden and the cause of a curse, here we learn that the Tree of Life produces twelve kinds of fruit, one for every month of the year. In other words, its fruit is available in season and out of season; and more than this, so far from causing harm to those who eat of it, the leaves of this tree are for the healing of the nations. Which is why, if you look below, you will see a multitude of people heading towards the new Jerusalem. John's vision turns Eden on its head. Perhaps nothing signifies this better than the words of Jesus just a few verses later (and here, look at the very top of the two outer windows), when he will say, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

In other words, John's vision proclaims an immensely hopeful conclusion to the human story – a brand new Jerusalem, with new rules of engagement, new possibilities, and no darkness at all. A city that is open to all who long for its goodness and beauty. A place in the heart of God where, to quote Julian of Norwich, all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

Is it real? No. Is it true? Yes.

Dream, people, dream!