

Acts 16:9-15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21:10-14, 22-22:5

John 14:23-29

The art of living with the vision of the New Jerusalem

This week we had photos from Rod Mummery who is away in Turkey with the Horsfields visiting the sites of some of the earliest churches of the Apostolic age. Some of the places visited will include Thyatira, named in Acts, and the remaining seven churches John wrote to in the book of Revelation: Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Ephesus, Smyrna and Pergamum. This Easter season we have had a series of readings from Revelation, which is a difficult book to decipher and is often used by those who read into it their own sense of secret knowledge about happenings in the world today. While we may have difficulties with Revelation its message had currency for John's audience.

Revelation belongs within a tradition of Biblical apocalyptic literature, which includes Daniel, and passages from the prophets. The word "apocalypse" means "disclosure" or "revelation". The literature often expresses a negative view of the present world and offers hope for salvation in a new order, which is to be brought in by the gift of God. Apocalyptic literature gave the faithful a sense of radical hope as they struggled against death dealing opposition to their faith and life.

Revelation probably reached its present form towards the end of the reign of Emperor Domitian (AD 81 – 96) who demanded his subjects worship his image and address him as "Lord and God". Many Christians refused to do so and were executed, or exiled like John. One reason for couching the teaching of the book in mysterious and extraordinary metaphors was to prevent the authorities from understanding that it was protest literature. It offered a trumpet call to the persecuted, assuring them that despite the worst the regime could do, God is the true sovereign of the world and Christ, who died and has been raised, reigns for evermore with God.

The message of Revelation is that the power of God revealed in Jesus Christ is not like worldly power. This is made clear in the image of the Lamb who shares the throne of God. The image proclaims that the power of death has been broken by the suffering love expressed in the events of Easter. What is made clear is that what God seeks to bring in has already begun, and in the new regime God does not rule by coercion or by anything like our idea power. The Easter events, which show this, mark a crucial turning point in the destiny of humanity, and the universe – because God's love for the world in Christ is inclusive and cosmic in scope.

The transcendent imagery of Revelation is a result of John trying to express the unimaginable extravagance of life in the New Jerusalem, where nothing foul or dark will be allowed. Consider the power this would have had for people who had possibly witnessed the devastation of the earthly Jerusalem, and then come under persecution

from an evil regime in their place of exile. Every hope imagined and beyond imagination is referred to. God's presence is directly available in the New Jerusalem, which is a place of true diversity, unity and harmony. The picture is one of healing and life. In the New Jerusalem people are safe, secure, and they thrive. The events of Easter have resulted in gifts that are beyond calculating or describing, given by the hand of God whose sovereignty is far higher than the sovereignties of this world. In the New Jerusalem Kings and nations, will bring their tribute to God, who rules through the power to give and sustain life, represented in the images of the river of life that flows there, and the tree that bears with abundant fruitfulness, and gives its leaves for the healing of the nations. The New Jerusalem surpasses the old, and the river and the tree evoke the return of Eden or paradise.

The power of the reading from Revelation is that it spells out the consequences of what it means to say that *we believe in Jesus Christ, who was raised from death to sit at the right hand of God*. This is the sovereignty in which we live. This seed of knowledge is fundamental to the life of the church, and ultimately the world.

John wrote this vision down to help those who were likely to die for holding this faith. The art of living with this vision involves realising it was not created by us, but was given to us. It is for us to hold onto in faith and trust, allowing it to inspire us to faithful living now. But the fact that it did not come from us means it is not a human ideal, a wheel on which we break ourselves. We long for a vision to inspire our nation. And there is no doubt the Church is called to be a visionary community within the nation. It is led by a view of life that is hopeful and positive, and it understands the checks and balances needed in a sinful world. Our vision is, in a true sense, an easy yoke, which allows us to hold our head up in the hard places, to recognise shortcomings when they occur, and yet to thrive and live fruitfully when the going is tough, or not so tough.

We are not under the same immediate pressure as the people in the Seven Churches, but this literature has relevance for us today as we battle the many forms of death that confront us in our culture. Not just our obscene addiction to war, but our increasingly high level of personal indebtedness in search of our commitment to self-serving aspirational goals, the lack of any real concern in our national budgets for anyone but ourselves, our refusal to see that there is more to life than prosperity, and that while greenhouse effects are threatening the natural order, they have their equivalent in human terms as people steadily lose respect for themselves and for others and the level of dysfunction in social life expands.

At the time of our 150th celebrations we read some of Revelation and toyed with the image of the city, and the church as a life-giving source at its heart. This image still guides us. We are using these ideas to undergird our thoughts about improving the Campus around the church to make it more of a community centre. A fundamental piece in this plan is that the Church is central to this being a living precinct. These ideas also flow over into ideas we shall soon be asked to consider about the renewal of the Sanctuary space. The idea of the New Jerusalem is not an idea only for the sweet by and by. It is a guiding vision for life now, and was ever thus. It is not just a vision for us personally, or only for the church. It is a vision for all nations, and for the world as an eco-system.

In the Gospel Jesus is saying farewell to his disciples who will have to live with the vision he has left them until he returns. In the interim they have his words, and the Spirit will remind them of what he said. They will live in the gift of his Peace, which the world does not give. This is the Peace represented by the New Jerusalem. What Jesus asks is for his followers to repeat in their lives everything they have learned from him. Not just his words, but all they learned from who he was and how he was amongst them. They are to live in the world according to his pattern of faithful, inclusive, self-giving love that is manifest in the Lamb who shares the throne with God Revelation. This vision is our gift. It probably would not make it onto a corporate agenda. But our calling is to be faithful to it, and to seek to enhance the common good by being vocal, courageous and active in making the fruit of this vision available for others to share.