

All Saints
1/11/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 24

Revelation 21:1-6a

John 11:32-44

Caught in traffic

A traffic reporter on the radio remarked late last Friday afternoon: “Everyone seems to be taking advantage of the long weekend and, as a result, no one is going anywhere.”

We know what he meant and are probably happy in that respect, at least, that we (who are here) were *not* taking advantage of the long weekend! And yet, it has likely not occurred to many of us just how important traffic jams are for understanding the nature of the existence implied by Christian faith in “the communion of saints”.

In the book of Revelation we have a seer’s vision of the consummation of all things. Our reading today comes from the climax of that vision: the end, the goal of God’s work in Christ.

“I saw a new heaven and a new earth”. This is fairly straightforward so far as apocalyptic visions go, and something like it is to be expected at this point of the story. While the notion of a new *heaven* might catch a few by surprise, fundamentally, the vision relates a renewal: out with the old, in with the new.

But then comes the strange thing: there appears a city, of all things: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.”

Why is this strange?

The city is the human way of being. The city is the teeming human mass. It is extraordinary and tragic. The city is coffee shops and crazy people on public transport. The city is sirens through the night streets, and park benches. It is soaring architecture and backstreet graffiti. It is movement and exchange. The city is the traffic jam.

Or, *theologically*, it would be closer to the truth to say that the traffic jam is the city. The traffic jam is a kind of sacrament of human interconnectedness, although we *experience* it as a sacrament of that interconnectedness in its fallen state.

A loose definition of a sacrament is that it is something which looks like one thing – such as a meal – but denotes something else – such as the way God saves. In the case of the traffic jam, it looks like a clash, a choking, a knot; yet it denotes the way and the degree to which we are all inextricably interconnected and interdependent.

The traffic jam occurs because my being at work is made more effective by your being at work at the same time. This is, in turn, more effective if our kids are at all at school at the same time. As the city becomes more successful through this greater honing of mutual effectiveness, more opportunities for interconnection occur, making the traffic worse. The distance over which I can provide my services increases (meaning more time on the road), as does the possibility of being able to afford to send the kids somewhere other than the local school (meaning more time on the road).

And so it goes on, becoming more complicated and less manageable with each extra dimension of interrelatedness which takes place in the city, and with each success of that interrelatedness.

Now, of course, not everyone suffers the affliction of the traffic jam. Not to make too fine a point of it, at the risk of offense and possibly even of irresponsibly overstating the case, if the traffic jam is not a dominating feature of *your* existence then it is probably either because you are wealthy enough to be largely separated from the types of connectedness which sustain a city, or because you don't really matter.

Those who "don't really matter" in this sense may matter *in themselves*, but generally don't matter so far as the ongoing life of the city is concerned. They are not really participants in the city because they do not *engage*, are not actively interconnected. They include the sick, the elderly infirm, the shut-in, the disabled, the poor, the drug addict, the asylum seeker. It doesn't matter whether we might object that they *ought* to be able to participate in traffic jams. It is simply the case that they generally do not because they don't really have anywhere to go, don't have many connections to make.

The "wealthy" here are those whose continued existence does not *require* direct, active engagement: this includes the retired, the "kept" or those simply rich enough not to have to join the game if they don't want to. These, too, are generally not found in traffic jams; they can wait until rush hour is passed.

(And, just in case there are any here who smugly think that traffic jams are not an issue in their particular rural paradise or getaway, in fact the *size* of the city is not the important thing here. For the purposes of *government*, cities are *teeming* masses – the numbers matter. Theologically, however, a "city" need only be comprised of two people for John's vision of the new Jerusalem to be important. How can two people have a traffic jam, you ask? Well, marriage, for instance, which also happens to feature in our reading; we'll touch on that again in a moment.)

The traffic jam is the sign *and* the burden of engaged, interactive human life. It is what happens when more than one person *has to be* in the same place at the same time, when we *act* upon the fact that we are "made for each other". Every engaged, interactive life has its own kind of traffic jams.

This being the case, and given that John has a vision of a "new" city descending from heaven to earth, there presses forward an unexpected theological question: are there traffic jams in the new Jerusalem, in "heaven"?

The gospel suggests a surprising answer: Yes.

And No.

Yes, there are traffic jams because this is a real city; heaven is not everyone getting green lights all the way, although that's probably how we imagine it. Perhaps even stranger than the fact that God sets forth a new city is that it is Jerusalem, the basket case of all cities:

"Jerusalem, Jerusalem," Jesus cried, "the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!"

This is to say nothing of what has happened there since then. But the point is not to “pick on” Jerusalem but to understand why *it* appears here in the vision, and not some brand new, start-it-all-over Utopia. It is necessary that it be Jerusalem here because God is faithful to his promises, and those promises have to do with a people for whom Jerusalem is their heart and sign. It necessary that it is Jerusalem because Jerusalem is the sign of our failure and so of our need to be healed. The new heaven and the new earth and the new city are a wiping away of tears which does not wipe away the eyes which cry them. The new Jerusalem *is* Jerusalem, as she should be. The vision expresses this in the analogy of marriage: a bride for her husband, the husband the bride needs, complementary and engaged, two parties *necessarily* in the same place at the same time in order to be their true selves, but now without competition or conflict.

For conflict has been Jerusalem’s history. What else are Jesus’ clashes with the religious authorities but gridlock – a dispute over who has the right to be “here”? What else is the crucifixion but road rage, or perhaps the Great Divorce?

It is this history, identifiable by the name “Jerusalem,” which has been taken up into God and now descends again, cleansed.

Yes, there are traffic jams in heaven because our interconnectedness, our *needing* to be in the same place at the same time in order to be our true selves does not go away; this connectedness is the *very point* of heaven.

But No, this gridlock is different. In our normal daily traffic jams, the city’s *purpose* as making possible our being *for* each other becomes the city’s *burden*. Interrelatedness turns out to be more than we want to bear, even as it is the very thing which we need to flourish. This is the communion of sinners, in which the gift of the other person becomes a curse.

In the traffic jams in John’s *heavenly* city, the new Jerusalem, the burden of our interrelatedness is made into a life-giving thing. This is the truly unbelievable and amazing thing, much more so the mere proposal of a heaven, or even that there is a God who will bring it to pass.

It is not “heaven” as a time or place which is to be believed in but what it is said will *happen* there. This is the important thing because it is that heavenly happening which connects that time and place to this one, and allows heaven “then” to an impact *now*.

So how *is* it in heaven? To be in heaven is to be happy to sit in traffic. And, keeping in mind those we thought about earlier, who don’t really get to enjoy the traffic in this world, or who are free to absent themselves from it, heaven is *wanting* to be in traffic and *being able* to participate in it.

The communion of saints is not the collective of those who are “holy”, in the sense of somehow having abstracted themselves from the messiness of the world and the kinds of exchanges it entails. The communion of saints – promised for then and reflected even now – is the community which rejoices that its life is a life *together*, with all that costs and with all the benefits it brings.

The promise of a new Jerusalem is the promise that the bumper-to-bumper grinding of the communion of sinners will be made a communion of saints: our city, our life, but not as we yet know it.

The communion of sinners is a life which considers being caught in traffic to be the sign of death. Here, other people are hell.

The communion of saints is life “in the thick of it”, made enriching and life-giving by the grace of the God who created us for each other and who makes such a life together possible, even if now only as through a glass, darkly. Here the challenge of the needs of others becomes the possibility of unexpected joy.

This is the vision of faith, the promise, upon which we wait and towards which we point in words and deeds.

And so the prayer of the church is to give thanks for all the saints, and to pray to God that their number may ever increase, that we with all the world, might hear and see the life in all its abundance which was our beginning and will be our end.
