

Pentecost 2
19/6/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 21:1-6a
Psalm 42
Luke 8:26-39

Heaven is not our favourite things

In a sentence:

Heaven is where we are made by other people, not the absence of other people.

History has delivered many images of what heaven is like, which are usually connected to certain notions of what hell might be like, the one contrasted with the other. Hell is a place of fire and punishment; heaven is a place of sunshine and bliss – so the story typically goes. The book of Revelation has contributed considerably to these expectations!

Our Revelation text this morning provides a vision of heaven with elements of the blissful existence we might be hoping for: God will dwell with them, will wipe away every tear from their eyes, death and mourning and crying will be no more. These are things we all long for.

But there's another aspect of John's vision which may be more troubling if we consider its fuller ramifications: heaven is a place where others are. We might take some comfort in being in heaven with others if we could choose who else is there: friends, the family members we actually *like*, perhaps our favourite artists or musicians or thinkers. Yet not only they are there if heaven is a *city*. As a city, heaven is a *communal* place and not a place of isolated individuals with their narrow desires. This means that heaven may be a place where there will be people we don't like or have even learned to hate and who return that favour. And there doesn't seem to be very much heavenly about that.

Of course, if it's a *city*, we expect heaven to be pretty large. Perhaps we could be in heaven without running into those people who rub us up the wrong way. Yet, given that that's how we do things already *here and now*, there's still nothing very heavenly about this vision if we have to plot when and where we'll be to avoid being annoyed or threatened by others. If heaven is a city full of people, it could be just plain hard work. So, after a lifetime of being commanded to love people whom it's hard to love, we'll go to heaven and meet more of them. Praise the Lord.

This is all a bit silly but unpacking the ideas of the text in this way shows how they can be misunderstood. There are a lot of half-thought wishes and dreams about heaven (and hell) which have little relationship to scriptural imagery. Whatever heaven is, it is not our favourite things.

Day after day, our televisions, newspapers, radios and social media feeds fill the space around us with the cacophonies, the dissonances, the traffic of city life. What would it take for life in a city to be a *harmonious* reality, for the heavenly city John describes actually to *be* heaven?

The answer is that we cannot imagine. By this, we mean that we do not know how this could be possible and so we can't create this Utopia. The bad news the church has is that we are unable to save ourselves, to the extent that we would have to be alone in heaven if we were to be there on our own terms and not be hassled by other people – even by those we love and yet who are still quite capable of driving us up the wall.

Every dream of a new city, every vision of a new society, every “solution” for some communal problem creates *just another problem*. This is the dynamic between the left, the centre and the right in our politics, each crying out in turn “That didn’t work”, after every social and economic pendulum-swing solution.

But let’s turn all of this towards something more concrete and specific, and closer to home. What about us and our search for a solution to the problem of *our* future as a congregation? What do we dream of here? What is our vision? How will the next thing for MtE be “heavenly”? For indeed, that is what the next thing must be to be worthwhile.

In another reflection on our situation late last year, I quoted from a little book by Dietrich Bonhoeffer – *Life Together* – in which he makes a powerful statement about ideals and human community:

“God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who fashion a visionary ideal of community demand that it be realised by God, by others, and by themselves.

They enter the community of Christians with their demands, set up their own law, and judge the fellowship and God himself accordingly... They act as if they are the creators of the Christian community, as if their dream binds people together.

When their ideal picture is destroyed, they see the community going to smash. So they become, first accusers of the fellowship, then accusers of God, and finally the despairing accusers of themselves.” (SCM 1954, 17f)

This is to say that it is not a *brave* person who declares “this, and only this” is how to give shape to heaven, is the future of a Christian community. It is not even a *fool* who says this. It is a *blasphemer* who declares that God’s home is *not* with mortals (Rev 21.3) – that God’s home is not with those whose existence is indelibly marked by brokenness and death, who are prone to get it wrong: even us.

We worship a God who justifies sinners. This is not a declaration that there is a safety net for when we break the rules. To say that God justifies sinners *is* the rules. “Who-justifies-sinners” is God’s *name* and not merely what God sometimes happens to do. “Home-is-with-mortals” is God’s name.

The shadow-side of this is that if this God is *our* God, then we are those in need of being justified. Why? In relation to the need to decide our future together, it is because we mistake planning for hope, our work for God’s.

It is, of course, necessary that tomorrow have some particular shape in our imagination: we must *plan*. This is so that we have something worth doing today. But we can have *no* confidence that our planned tomorrow will not amount to a crucifying of the Lord of glory. Instinctively, we know this. It is what causes us so much anxiety in the whole process. We wonder, Will we get it wrong?, with particular ideas in our heads of what “wrong” looks like. That is, we have a clearer sense of hell than of heaven. And we wonder, how will we account for ourselves? Who will accuse us for what we choose and how it works out? Perhaps those who went before us, giving us so much, only to see it lost? Perhaps the Presbytery or Synod, which imagine they could have put the resources to better use? Perhaps those sitting in the row in front of, or behind, you, who advised that we go a different way? Perhaps most powerfully: Does God have a plan for us, which we are supposed to guess? Do we risk failing God in this?

To put the question differently: what is the relationship between what *we* have to do and what is said from the throne in John's magnificent vision: It is *done*? *What* is done? The "done-ness" is the revelation that God's home is with mortals. God home is with those who built all this, and then died, leaving it to us to sort out. God's home is with us who will decide what to do with it all, and will then die. God's home is with those who will have to live with our decisions before they die.

All this is to say: our decision is not the source of our life. The God named home-is-with-mortals – this God is the source of life.

We are a baptised people. The only death which matters we died in that baptism; there is no condemnation of those whose lives are hidden with Christ in God. Weekly we are fed with the signs of death – broken body and spilt blood – not because we are a cannibalistic death cult but because *with this God* death has no power but what God gives it.

The decisions before us cause us so much trouble because we are afraid that something will die, that tomorrow will be less than heaven. But God's home is with mortals, with those who die. There is nothing to fear.

"It is done" declares that death has no power; it is overcome, and there is nothing to fear.

What then are we to do? There is only one option. Let death be behind us by choosing life.

What kind of life? Life together: God's will *done*, on earth as it will be in the impossible, promised heaven.

*Based on a sermon
preached at MtE April 2016*

Related sermons

- 6 October 2019 – The life which is really life
- 27 October 2013 – To decide
