

Easter 5  
24/4/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 21:1-6

Psalm 148

John 13:31-35

### Heaven: an impossible thought

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Our history has given us a lot of images of what heaven is like, and those images usually have in connection with them certain images 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.

In the reading we've heard from Revelation this morning we're given a vision of heaven which has some sense of the blissful existence we might be hoping for, but which also, when we unpack it a little, some might consider to be rather like *hell*. The beautiful imagery is there: God will dwell with them, he 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 perhaps be more troubling, if we consider its fuller ramifications. Heaven is not a place where we are alone, but a place where others are. And here we make a connection with something of which a rather sad philosopher once reminded us: "hell is other people".

Now, we might take some comfort in being in heaven with others if we could choose who else was going to be there: friends, the family members we actually *like*, perhaps our favourite artists or musicians or celebrities for entertainment. And yet *not only they* are present in the image which John gives us. The old heaven and the old earth (note: the old *heaven* also goes!) are replaced by new ones, at the centre of which is a *city*. As a city, heaven is a *communal* place, and not a place of isolated individuals.

The problem here, perhaps, is that this will mean that heaven may be a place where there will be people we don't like or have even learned to hate, and who don't like us. There doesn't seem to be very much heavenly about that.

Now, of course, if it's a heavenly *city*, then it's probably something pretty large, and so maybe we could manage to be in the heaven without running into those people who rub us up the wrong way. But given that that's how we do things already *here and now*, again there's nothing very heavenly about this vision is we are going to have to plot when and where we'll be in order to avoid being annoyed or attacked by others. If heaven is a city full of people, it could turn out to be just plain hard work.

It gets worse. In the gospel reading we heard this morning, Jesus is talking to his friends just before he is about to be handed over to the authorities for trial and execution. He gives them a commandment: love one another. Being *told* to love someone implies that we don't or will find it hard, probably because he or she is unlovely, and so love just becomes another thing we have to do. More than this, it's not just a matter of loving one another, but loving one another in the same way that Jesus has loved us: totally, in self-giving sacrifice.

So, to summarise these readings this morning: after a life-time 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 might all seem a bit silly but I think it helps to unpack the ideas of the text in this way if we're going to understand how they can be *misunderstood*, and see just what the church's life is and isn't about. There are a lot of half-thought wishes and dreams about heaven (and hell) which have little relationship to what we find in the scriptural reflection.

The question is, if city life is how I've described it, and heaven involves another city, what would actually have to happen for the dream, the promise, to be realised? Day after day our televisions, newspapers, radios and social media feeds fill the space around us with the cacophonies, the dissonances, of life together. What would it take for life in a city to be a *harmonious* reality, for heaven as John describes actually to *be* heaven? The answer is that we cannot imagine.

The good news about all this has its ground at the end of our reading from Revelation: "Behold, I am making all things new." It is the "I" and the "new" which make all the difference. "I" – God – am the one who brings this about. As much as we can be told to love one another, it is hard work, and some of us just aren't very good at it. God, however, loves even those who reject him, as the risen Christ returned with forgiveness to those who rejected and abandoned him. It is *this* kind of love which brings this about and makes all things new. There is not merely *another* heaven and earth, but a totally *new kind* of heaven and earth, a place in which it has become possible for us to love each other, a place where life together is life-giving and not life-sapping.

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*.

But let's turn all of this to something a little more concrete and specific.

"Every dream of a new city, every vision of a new society, every 'solution' for some communal problem creates just another problem."

What about us and our search for a solution to the problem of *our* future – our accommodation and our work?

Will we worship in a re-fitted factory, making the most of the potent *ascetic* proclamation that enables, among other things? Or will we worship under a spire, with the potent worship *aesthetic* it makes possible, among other things? Or is there a special measure of righteousness in those who would try to find a balance between those two extremes, simply *because* it is a compromise, as if – because God reconciles extremes – he necessarily sits somewhere in the middle?

What do we dream of here? What is our vision?

In a marvellous little book called *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer remarks:

*"God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. Those who fashion a visionary ideal of community demand that it be realized 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)*

To paraphrase this, in the light of the problem with common ideas of heaven we’ve just noted: it is not so much that we cannot have what we want; it is rather that we are likely to want the wrong thing.

It is not a *brave* person who declares “this, and only this” for the future of a Christian community. It is not even a *fool*. It is a *blasphemer*: one who declares that God’s home is *not* with mortals (Rev 21.3) – with those whose existence is indelibly marked by death.

We worship a God who justifies sinners. This is not a declaration that there is a safety net somewhere for those times we break the rules. It *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 necessary that tomorrow have some particular shape in our imagination: it is necessary that we *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.

I suspect that, instinctively, we know this. It is what causes us so much anxiety in the whole process. There is a great deal at stake here, and the risks are great. We wonder, Will we get it wrong, with particular ideas in our heads of what “wrong” looks like. 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 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? (And they are thinking the same about you!). Perhaps most powerfully: Does God have a plan in his head, 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? God’s home is revealed to be 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.

The point is: what we decide is not the source of our life. God, in life and in death, is the source of life.

We are a baptised people. The only death which matters we died in the baptism; there is no condemnation of those whose lives are hidden with Christ in God. Weekly we are fed with broken body and spilled blood – the signs of death – 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 is going to die. But God's home is with mortals, with those who die. There is nothing to fear.

What is the relationship between the royal declaration, "It is done" and what *we* are do to?

"It is done" declares that death has no power; it is overcome.

What then are we to do? There is only one option. Choose life.

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

"Love one another, as I have loved you. By *this* – alone – will everyone know that you are my disciples".

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