

Easter 6
1/5/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 21:9-22:5

Psalm 67

John 14:23-29

God's life, inseparable from ours

"I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

Did ever a text seem so apt to the occasion on which it was read, considering the business of the meeting to follow worship this morning: "I saw no temple"?

The problem is that whenever what a text seems to be saying is *obvious*, we are at great risk of not hearing at all what the text is saying, but what the text confirms about what we were *hoping* it would say. That is, we never read the Scriptures innocently. We come to God with agendas. What joy when God's agenda seems to be ours!

And so what "obvious" thing does this text say to us about the matters before us? "Obviously", no temple means *no temple*. This, "obviously", means no church building.

Or, perhaps, something else is obvious here. Immediately following this verse we hear: "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." It is obvious that *our* city – here and now – *does* have need of a sun and moon. These texts, then, "obviously" cannot be about us in *this* time and place, which is not yet heaven and so requires still a people "called out", distinct in politics and presence from the rest of world. (The Greek word for "church" is *ek-klesia*, "out-called"). It is, then, not at all obvious that there is no place *now* for temples.

So, given that two potentially diametrically opposed conclusions are "obvious" from John's declaration about the people of God and their temples, let us set the obvious text for today aside and pick up another which is rather less so.

"They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads".

What is not immediately obvious, but a moment's thought makes clear, is that the people and God are looking at each other. This is one of the ways in which John characterises heavenly relationship to God – *gaze*: God in ours, us in God's.

From our perspective, there is something new here. At the start of John's gospel (probably a different John [author] from the seer of Revelation), we hear, "No one has ever seen God..." This echoes the Old Testament understanding that no one can look upon God and live, not even Moses. Here, however, something new takes place. "God's home is with mortals", as we heard last week (21.3). Heaven is seeing God – face to face – and seeing by, or via, God: there is no sun or moon.

But why is God's name on our foreheads? For whose benefit is this? If heaven is about the gaze – ours into God's, God's into ours – who is supposed to read this name?

The only candidate is God himself. It is God who reads God's own name on our foreheads.

Why does this matter? Is it possible that we might get lost, and God might have to rummage through a lost property box to find us, and know that we are his because we have his name on our forehead?

If the divine name merely *labels* us, then the implication of the text seems to be that God still might forget us or lose us: that there might yet be more death and mourning and crying and pain (*contra* 21.4), all of which are supposed to have been wiped away.

But the name written on our foreheads does much, much more than this. When God looks at us, he reads not *our* names but *his own*. It is as if God sees *God* when looking at us.

We have to say that it is *as if* God sees God when looking at us, not merely because we must preserve God's dignity, but also because we have to preserve our own. It is still *we* who bear God's name, we who remind God of himself and his promises, who call God to faithfulness. Whereas believers are accustomed to thinking and proclaiming that our life is inseparable from God's, the gospel puts it the other way: God's life is inseparable from ours. God, after a fashion, *needs* us if heaven is going to be heaven.

"The home of God is among mortals" (21.3) is not a declaration that God might live somewhere else and still be God, yet just happens to live here. It is a "property" of God – something *appropriate* to God – that God's life is with ours: with us who mourn what has been lost, who hope in things which cannot be realised, and who cause others to mourn and despair.

It is God himself who writes his name on our foreheads, and so nothing can wipe it away: no choice, no failure, no success.

And so *in all things* we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor tent nor temple, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In all things, God will "out" – and out as God for us.

This is the gospel, out of which we look to the future, out of which any choice can be a choice for life.
