

Pentecost
5/6/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 21:1-6a

Psalm 104

John 14:12-17, 25-27

Caught in traffic

*In a sentence:
Heaven is no escape from the command to love*

Whatever other benefits the lockdowns of 2020-21 might have delivered to us, one was the possibility of driving down the wrong side of the road entirely safely, if still illegally! The traffic disappeared, and getting to the few places we were allowed to go was a breeze.

Alas, the traffic has returned with a vengeance. Yet, though we say “alas”, the traffic jam is surprisingly important for understanding the nature of the promised future we hear about in the book of Revelation.

In Revelation, we have a seer’s vision of the consummation of all things: 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. But then comes the strange thing: “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 park benches and sirens in the night. It is soaring architecture and backstreet graffiti. It is movement and exchange. The city is the traffic jam.

The traffic jam is a sacrament of human interconnectedness, although we *experience* the sacrament in its fallen state as a clash and a choking. The traffic jam is a sign of 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 honing of mutual effectiveness, creating 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). Each extra dimension of interrelatedness in the city makes it more successful as a city, and harder to be in the city.

The size of the city doesn’t really matter. Theologically, a “city” needs only two people for John’s vision of the new Jerusalem to be pertinent. How can two people have a traffic jam, you ask? Well, marriage, for instance, which also features in our passage today and to which we’ll return in a moment. (But also siblings, neighbours, business partners, etc.). 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 traffic jams. Only the sufficiently wealthy and the sufficiently poor are outside the requirement of the traffic jam.

If this is how cities work, John's vision of a "new" city descending from heaven to earth gives rise to an unexpected question for faith: 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 how we might 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!"* (Matthew 23.37-39; Luke 13.34f)

This is to say nothing of what has happened there since then, and happens even now. But the point here 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 must be Jerusalem here because God's promises have to do with a people for whom Jerusalem is heart and soul. It must be Jerusalem because Jerusalem casts out the Christ, and so is the sign of both the failure of God's people and of our need to be healed. What else are Jesus' clashes with the religious authorities but gridlock – a dispute over who has the right to be here and now? What else is the crucifixion but road rage?

It is this history, identifiable by the name "Jerusalem," which is taken up into God and descends again, cleansed. The new heaven and the new earth and the new city are a wiping away of tears, but not a wiping away of the eyes which cry them. The new Jerusalem *is* Jerusalem, as she should be – *is us* as we shall be. John expresses this by analogy with marriage: a bride and a groom, 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.

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 usual daily traffic jams, the city's *purpose* of 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 we need to flourish. This is the communion of sinners, in which we experience the gift of the other person as a curse.

In the traffic jams in John's *heavenly* city, the new Jerusalem, the perceived and experienced burden of our interrelatedness is made into a life-giving thing. This is the truly unbelievable and amazing thing, much more so than 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. What happens in heaven is what connects that time and place to this one, is what allows heaven "then" an impact *now*: tomorrow, today.

So how *is* it in heaven? To be in heaven is to be happy to sit in traffic. The communion of saints which occupies heaven 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 a world entails. The communion of saints – promised for then

and perceptible occasionally 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. There, 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 promise of unexpected joy: other people not as hell but as the possibility of heaven.

This is the vision upon which we wait and towards which we point in words and deeds. The life of the church is to discern and to become, as much in the slow lanes as in the fast, the possibility of heaven.

This is so that we and the world might see how, in the end, all things will be found in God, and God in all things.

Adapted from a sermon previously preached at MtE, Nov 2015

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