

## THE HOLY CITY

### REVELATION 21.10-14, 22-22.5

#### Introduction

In life the end of things matter.

If you are acting in a play it is helpful to know where the action is going. In any scene we may know what has happened before but if the actors do not know where it is going then they do not know how to proceed. The scene we are in needs to be consistent with the past but also part of the future.

Of course we could play a part not knowing what has happened before or what might be the goal of the play. And the point would be...?

The same applies to the great drama that is the history of the world and the Christian faith. We are bit players in it, that is true, but we matter. If we do not know where the drama is going then we do not know how to act now. If we misread the end then we can foul up the present. It matters desperately that we grasp the matter as clearly as we can.

It does not do to sit around and shuffle our feet. We know the beginning of this great drama, we know some of the acts and scenes that have gone before us, both comic and tragic, and now we are in our own. Where are we heading with all this? How we answer that question makes all the difference in the world.

Hence the vision of the city of God. Hence the vision of the new heavens and the new earth. They are the gloriously imaginative conclusion that makes all the difference now.

Today we turn in detail to the City.

## **The City Jerusalem: the Bride of the Lamb 10-14**

An angel takes John on a guided tour. The city is on a mountain and is coming down out of heaven. The angel describes this city as the bride of the Lamb.

The city is always coming down from heaven. We do not go to heaven. Heaven comes down. That is God's graciousness always moving towards us, always coming down.

And it is like that because it is the bride of the Lamb. Just as marriage is a covenant of permanency and faithfulness this marriage is the commitment of the Lamb to his people to be with them forever. The Lamb is the lover who always moves towards his beloved.

The first thing about this city is its great, almost overpowering beauty. You will need to read the verses that the lectionary left out to get the full impact. You will need to sit with the text and let it flow over you just as you would with any great art.

But it is important to recognize that God is not interested in ugliness. God loves rich beauty. And every bit of beauty we see or hear or feel or read in this world is an echo of this great city. God loves beauty. We only sense beauty now very incompletely but when we do it takes our breath away and we have no words.

When we see beauty wasted or destroyed we want to scream in pain because the very primal being of the universe is being attacked. When we see ugliness or brutalism take over beauty in buildings or art or poetry our hearts wither. Something has gone deeply astray.

And yet at the end we find a pleasure in beauty that is exquisite but not fully satisfying. In our world what passes for beauty changes (look at art from the past). Helen of Troy's face may have launched a thousand ships but she would be lucky to launch a rowboat for us.

Beauty is destructible; it can be burnt, buried, shredded. Taste and perspective in complex measure as well as fashion dull our imaginations.

And yet...something sticks. Something says the sunset, the moonrise over the water, the great building, the painting, the poem are pointing us somewhere beyond ourselves, an echo touching a reality beyond our imaginations.

And John says it points to the City. And City is beautiful because God is beautiful. The City is the expression of the beauty of holiness. Holiness is the beauty of love and justice and peace and truthfulness that are the core of this City and the core of the character of God.

Part of the beauty of this city lies in its gates and foundations. The gates are the patriarchs, the tribes of Israel. It is through Israel and God's walking with Israel in the patriarchs, the prophets, the wise people, the poets, the historians that gives entrance to this City. It is wise for Christians to ponder these images carefully after the Holocaust and the persecution of Jews in Europe for centuries. It is wise for Christians who think that God's walk with Israel has no place in the Christian faith to think hard about the beauty of this city.

If the walls are beautiful so to are the foundations; the apostles. This city does not arise from nothing but from the great apostolic witness to Jesus in all its forms in the NT. That is its steel, that is its concrete. The apostolic witness to Jesus is not the city itself but it would not exist without it.

So, apostolic witness, the NT, and the patriarchs the witness of Israel, the OT, give this City its shape and strength.

Out of this beauty emerges two great constituent elements:

The Lord God and the Lamb are its temple  
and

The Lord God and the Lamb pour out the river of life.

### **The Lord God and the lamb are its temple 21-27**

One of the themes of the OT and the NT is the ambiguous nature of the Temple. At its best, in the psalms for instance, it is seen as the seat of God, God's very presence. It is a sacrament of heaven, God come down, almost an incarnation, God dwelling among his people.

But for some of the prophets it became a place in which scoundrels played out their crimes against the people, perpetrated injustice on the poor, despised God and ruined his people.

In this great City the temple is no more. God and the Lamb are the Temple. It is built as a cube (12-21), the same shape as the tabernacle; God's presence is here no need for temple or tabernacle. God is tabernacling now.

That presence gives the City its **light**. It does not need suns and moons because the light of God, God's glory and the glory of the crucified Lamb is more than enough. Light is a necessary component to flourishing life.

That light allows the **nations** to walk in it and go about their business. I have pointed out before the importance of these references to the nations. They may oppose God and the Lamb now but they will walk by their light in this great City. The city of humankind is not up for destruction but for renewal. They will bring in their proper glory and honour to the City and go about their business there.

The nations' politics, culture, history has a place here. Now that is very different from what a lot of Christians believe and I want you to

think about it. It is no endorsement of their evil of course but it is an endorsement of their right to exist and exercise justice and peace on God's behalf. They need redemption and renewal, they may resist now but their future is a place in the great City of the Lamb.

And the one thing they can be assured about is that this city is **secure**. There is no night, no darkness no danger that can enter. There is no need to shut gates to keep out intruders who may do harm. The light is too much. No shame or deceit or corruption can overcome its politics. It is all beyond it because of the Lamb on the throne.

But the City has another feature.

### **The Lord God and the Lamb pour out the river of life 22.1-6**

Once again the Lamb and the Lord God are the centre of the city as they were in the last vision. But something different is happening and yet it is the same.

**Water** pours forth from the throne. This great **river** runs its way down every street and every street flourishes. The **tree of life** bursts forth in an unending supply for the nurturing of life. Life abounds as light abounds.

Then notice this. The **nations find healing**. That is what the leaves of the tree of life bring to the nations; healing. How desperately needed is that? The nations are part of God's purposes. They will find healing or salvation.

But also there is **security and safety** in this City. God is with the residents face to face as they go about the business of serving him. His name (God and the Lamb) is stamped on their heads as a sign of ownership. Nothing can touch them. Once again there is permanent light. Everything can be seen: No conspiracies, no plots, no harm.

## Conclusion

The vision does not merely tell us that all will be well in the end and now we can turn to slumber. It tells us that things now are profoundly unwell and that repentance and change are required. The promise of the beautiful City is a judgment on the baubles of Babylon and its culture of death, where money and privilege can buy success and power, health and care and where the dignity and well-being of people, young and old, are subordinated to the demands of economic accounting and ability to pay.

How can we make our life together is to be relational and communitarian, not hierarchical and divisive?

How can we become channels of light and life?

How can we become channels of healing for the nations?

How will we serve a very unwell City of humankind in the light of its future in the City of God?

How can we be beacons of security and safety from all that corrupts and destroys our common human life or our natural order or the beauty of the world and society?