

Our journey to the heavenly city

Brian McKinlay

Pentecost 12, 19 August 2007

Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-59

Last week, we read in the letter to the Hebrews about the faith of our spiritual ancestors, Abel, Enoch, Noah and many others, especially Abraham. For them, and for us, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for” and “the conviction of things not seen” (11.1).

In today’s reading ... (v.39-40) “All these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” What are the promises? “By faith” we are told, “Abraham ... stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (vv. 8-10) Abraham’s descendants, Hebrews says, “died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.” (vv. 13-14)

So there was a natural land of promise, Canaan, and a heavenly or spiritual place of promise — a “city”, a “better country”. “As it is,” verse 16 of chapter 11 says, “they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them.”

The Old Testament people of faith did not have our historical experience of Jesus (11.39f), but the sacrifice of Christ makes it possible for them to receive “the promised eternal inheritance” (9.15) Hebrews says.

Hebrews suggests the idea of ultimate perfection at the end. Yet this has already been accomplished in Christ and its benefits can be enjoyed in the present (10.14). We can enter the heavenly sanctuary now and ultimately in person at the end (4.16; 7.5; 10.19ff). In the Spirit, we have received an earnest — a down-payment, essence or foretaste — of our full entry into the presence of God (6.19f; 12.22ff). The sacrifice of Christ achieves all that is necessary (2.10; cf. 9.15).

Yet, in another sense, our journey to the heavenly city is still a pilgrimage, as we seek to follow in Jesus’ footsteps (13.14; cf. 4.1-11) — just as Jerusalem, the earthly city of God, was the destination of Jesus’ journey described in Luke.

A pilgrimage requires perseverance. One great Christian pilgrimage is the Camino, to Santiago de Compostella in north western Spain — Santiago meaning St James. I read about this recently, as 25th July was the feast of St James the greater. The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella can be long and takes endurance and perseverance. Our spiritual pilgrimage also takes time and perseverance (but we are never asked to endure beyond our strength).

In chapter 12, the beginning of which we heard just now, the writer to the Hebrews continues the theme of perseverance in faith, describing those who had gone before as the “cloud of witnesses”, culminating in the example of Christ (12: 2).

There is a picture of an athletic contest, a foot-race. We are challenged to put off anything that handicaps us — just as a runner strips off before a race. Indeed in the ancient Greek arena the men ran naked. We should actively strip off everything, however good and innocent in itself,

that hinders our ability to run the race. We are also challenged to put off “the sin which clings so closely”. The writer is concerned with sin itself, rather than specific sins.

The “great cloud of witnesses” isn’t sitting around the stadium as cheering or booing spectators. Rather, it’s an inspiration to the runners — an example strengthened in us by prayer and contemplating Christ.

The example of Jesus to us and his achievement on our behalf is the great challenge of Hebrews — his way is the way to the cross, its humiliation, shame and disgrace, but also to exaltation and glory. Jesus endured the shame and suffering for the sake of the joy that was set before him. Our challenge is to have the same perspective on our journey.

In Hebrews, Jesus is not simply the best example to encourage the readers to persevere in faith. Verse 2 tells us that his journey to the glory of the Father makes it possible for us to follow. He made it possible for us to reach the heavenly promise. What he achieved for himself and for others is greater than the achievement of all the Old Testament saints.

In Luke’s gospel, we see Jesus pressing toward Jerusalem and the cross. The reading comes from the long central section of Luke’s gospel — ten chapters cast in the form of a journey by Jesus and his disciples from Galilee to Jerusalem. The section opens with a solemn announcement, in chapter 9 verse 51: “When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.” In today’s reading, Jesus says that he yearns to kindle a fire and that he has come to bring division. Fire can be a symbol of judgment, for example the fire that fell on Sodom, but fire also refines. “He is like a refiner’s fire” (Mal. 3.2). Refining of metals takes away the dross. It purifies. The rubbish is burnt up. When the vine is pruned, the prunings go into the fire.

The fire that Jesus brought was to purify God’s people as a nation. The refining fire of the Spirit purifies each of us individually. The Spirit work through the conscience; “Decide for yourselves what is right.” Much more could be said of this, but I would like to go on to another of the tough questions in our passage from Luke. What is the division that Jesus speaks of?

Elsewhere in the gospels we read of unity as well as division. In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed that we might be one even as he and the father are one. In Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus, the angels’ song was “peace on earth and good will”.

There’s a tension between unity and truth. In the church, division occurs when we insist that we must agree on doctrines and dogmas before we can be one in Christ. In the early church, there was division on the nature of Christ, the place of Jesus in the Godhead, the Trinity, and so on. In Luther’s day, there were debates, still continuing, about justification, about the supremacy of scripture and the place of tradition. Some of our sharpest disagreements today relate to equality, ethics and justice — the ministry of women, homosexuality and faith, abortion, the environment, social justice and so on and on and on. These things are important, but we will never agree about all of them all the time. Yet we are still one in Christ.

We can walk together simply if we each walk with Jesus, on his pilgrimage, toward the heavenly city.

When Luke quotes Jesus saying that he came to bring division, I don’t believe this is about division in the church. On the contrary, those who are joined to Christ simply are one in Christ. Rather, Jesus is speaking of the division between his way and other ways.

Here in Canberra, we are familiar with the Parliament. When a decision in the House or the Senate is contested, there is a ‘division’. The members move to one side of the chamber or the

other to indicate their votes on a question. Division comes from a need to choose one side or the other.

The division of which Luke writes comes from a choice — a choice between Jesus' pathway, the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, or another path.

The pilgrimage to Jerusalem leads to the cross. It's a pathway of self-sacrifice. It's a pathway in which we journey with Jesus toward God, toward a heavenly vision. And, as Rob shared with us last week, it's a pathway of action in the world, caring for others, demonstrating the love and goodness of God here, now, in this life.

In a materialistic and self-seeking world, this is not the common way of life — and to dream of a heavenly city is simply nonsense, many would say. To give ourselves to such a vision, to make it central to our lives, divides us from those who have another vision, a different priority.

We don't seek to separate ourselves from our society — quite the contrary. Yet it is wise to acknowledge Jesus' warning that our acceptance of his vision of new life may divide us from others in small ways and large. Sometimes this division can be quite sharp, even in family life.

And how many of us have been the butt of jokes from our friends and workmates because of our faith, because we spend so time in church life? Often we laugh them off, but sometimes it hurts.

The Holy Spirit is with us to comfort, guide and heal when such things are painful and difficult.

If we live as Jesus would have us live, our very lives present a choice, are a choice.

It's a paradox, for as we meditate and pray, as we give love and care, we demonstrate the division, the difference, between what is and what will be, in the Kingdom.