

NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH

REVELATION 21:1-6

(Acts 11.1-18; Ps 148; John 13:31-35)

Introduction

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wanted the church “...to be a community which hears the Apocalypse...to testify to its alien nature and to resist the false principle of inner-worldliness’, and so to be at the service of those “who suffer violence and injustice.”

In his situation the countercultural Confessing church had to raise its voice in protest at the treatment of the Jews resonating with Revelation’s imagery and proving alien to the liberal theology of the German Christians.

Why? Because the imagery of Babylon and the beast, the kings who serve that great city, reveals the underlying culture of death and violence and self-interest that have destroyed the creation. And it places the judgment squarely on the politics of death, violence and self-interest.

So to our passage.

Let’s begin with the end of the beginning

Revelation 21-22 are the last and perhaps the most stunning images of the new heavens and the new earth, the cosmic renewal that lies at the heart of the whole of the biblical narrative.

For us the trouble with just reading this passage is that we do need to read chapters 1-19 first. We have not done that but we have read a little bit lately even though that has just been a snippet. But it is a start.

What does this passage have to offer us in our ministry of the gospel today? In our story if we can get some sense of the end we might get some help in writing our stories now, living out the drama of redemption in our time and place.

Our story begins with creation and ends with a renewed creation (1)

The picture here is far removed from the popular Christian vision of the Christian going off to heaven as a soul naked and unadorned to meet its maker in fear and trembling.

It is not we who go to heaven; it is heaven that comes to earth. God is not separated from creation. Creation is not separated from God. The new heavens and the new earth do not simply replace and old one, as though God starts all over again. This creation, God's good creation, is not replaced but redeemed. God does make "all new things" but "all things new" (5).

The old creation is gone inasmuch as it taken up into the new just as Jesus' body is transformed in the resurrection. The image comes from Isaiah 65.17

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth: the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

In this renewed creation the old order symbolised by the sea is gone. The sea in Revelation is the source of violent power. It's mythological

and literary, of course. It is the chaotic force from which all the evil in this book emerges. It spews forth everything that destroys.

And the new heavens and the new earth will see no part of it; no tears, no death, no mourning, crying and pain (4). The chaotic source of death and pain is gone. It has no place in the renewed creation.

Our story begins with a garden and ends with a city

In the biblical story human history begins in a garden and first city is built by a murderer as the result of human sin. Human history like creation is not nullified and returned to the Garden of Eden in the renewed creation; instead it brings the garden into the city.

A city is human community. This inconceivably large city will house a community, not a series of individuals living in suburbs but a community.

One way of looking at this book is to see it as the story of two cities: Babylon and the New Jerusalem. The imagery of Babylon and the beast, the kings who serve that great city, reveal the underlying culture of death and violence and self-interest that have destroyed the creation, attacked and repudiated God's proper and loving authority, sought to destroy God's Son and savagely attacked the witnesses to his resurrection.

And John places the judgment squarely on the politics of death, violence and self-interest. Only in contrast with the New Jerusalem can we recognise the seductive splendours of that old and raddled whore Babylon whose chronic disease is death and violence. Whatever makeup and fine clothes she puts on she is the ideology of death and the symptoms are the pain, mourning, tears and crying that causes.

And the politics of this community is God's Presence

The biblical story begins with creation with its promise of fellowship, communion and friendship with God. That is the point of Genesis 1-2.

In Genesis 3 we decide we do not want that. We repudiate God's presence among us. And the result is what we experience now. The rest of the story is about how that can be reversed.

All through Israel's history this has been a constant theme: God dwelling with people. The tabernacle, the Temple, the law, the prophets all played out part of this drama. In the NT the Word dwelling among us and the coming of the Spirit are part of the same drama. All are incomplete, some more so than others but all pointing in the same direction: God longs to dwell with humans.

The covenant promise made in the Exodus was'

I will place my dwelling in your midst, and I shall not abhor you, and I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. (Lev. 26.11-12)

That now comes to its fruition but with no temple, no altars, no priests, just God is with us.

The binding force of this city is the creative holiness and love of God. No water shortage in this city. A spring of life emerging from the creative nature of God feeds it, satisfying thirst for beauty for love for justice for peace. This is a city of beauty as we shall look at next week.

In that case the politics of Babylon and the beast are repudiated and annihilated. The politics of death, violence, self interest and hate shrivel and die with their consequences of human misery in pain, death,

mourning and crying. The politics of death are the first things to pass away.

Well if that is what it may mean what is the import for our little bit of history writing in our time and place?

The other readings give us some three clues how we might write our chapter.

The beginning of the end

So let's take the view that the end of the drama can and must structure the present. Where we are going helps shape what we do now.

Worship

Ps 148 sings the praises of the God who creates so that even creation can praise him. Ps 148 calls the politics of death, kings and princes, to praise him and all peoples to praise him.

And we can see why. The end of all things is not annihilation but redemption and renewal. The end of it all is a renewed creation, a new community and a new politics.

So now when we celebrate the Presence this morning we recognise all the future promise that holds for us as described in Revelation 21. This is our future.

Love one another

The Gospel repeats the theme from last week; love one another. We like it; it seems soft and cuddly.

But in the light of Revelation 21 we see that this is future of the renewed creation. It is not some moral imperative lite, but a whole new world. It is the very opposite of Babylon

And we see why it is important that disciples love each other. Like God they love the world too. But if they cannot love each other they cannot offer any hope to the world.

They cannot show world what the future is. They cannot display what living with the Presence is like, the Presence we share this morning.

Witness

And that links to that Acts reading about Peter and Cornelius. This beautiful little episode tells us how the Gospel began its journey from its Jewish roots into the Gentile world. It's a snapshot.

It contains all the elements of mission; proclamation of Jesus and the resurrection, the call to repentance and faith, the acceptance of the invitation to become part of the people of God and the coming of the Spirit, the force of the new age.

It is a very visual story. Cornelius sees things, Peter sees things. It is story about people seeing things as they really are and not as they perceive them to be.

The book of Revelation requires us to refuse the predictable and demands we suspend what counts for normality so that we may perceive where the beast and Babylon, the politics and culture of death and violence and self interest and hate, are to be found. We are witnesses for the New Jerusalem and against Babylon and the culture of death.

It helps us to see so that we can repent of our allegiances to that politics and culture-whose power over our minds and our social and economic structures Revelation reveals- and to choose to stand with the risen Lamb.

Conclusion

The task of the church is to see itself truthfully in the light of those contested allegiances. That is where worship is so important, the constant challenging of our allegiances in the light of the conclusion of the story.

That is why the way of love is so important, challenging the politics of death with the politics of life in the light of the conclusion of the story.

And this is the way the church serves the world. It gives the world the chance to see itself truthfully. WE try to tell the truth about what we see - the word as God's creation to be renewed in a way that destroys the politics of death and violence and self interest.

And that is why repentance and invitation are so important, why the renewal of the Spirit is so central. We want to bring the life of the city to come to birth in our own little chapter, our bit of time and space.

Worshipping, loving, inviting become the vehicles of seeing truthfully in the light of the great beginning that is yet to be.