

THE HOLY CITY THE NEW JERUSALEM

Revelation 21.10-14, 21.22-22.5

Introduction

“...the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it.”

The ends of things matter. Think of all the good movies or books ruined by an ending poorly conceived and written. Think of the debate about the ending of the Game of Thrones recently.

We need endings so that we can figure out how to live. Because the answer we give to the question, where is all this heading, makes all the difference in world now.

If we think that it is going nowhere and ends in nothing then that determines everything we do now. As Dawkins puts it, take the end away and the universe has “no design, no purpose, no evil and no good, nothing but blind pitiless indifference”.

Or again if we think that the end is finding a way out of this stinking and sinking ship with the slick and cheap boarding pass of a conversion formula that allows us in through great celestial pearly gates then that determines everything now.

Scripture has another view. Christian hope is the engine driving the church’s engagement with the world. It provides us a picture of the infinite riches of God’s future for the world.

It is different from the increasingly threadbare ideology of the progress of utility where nothing is good or beautiful unless it has utility. The already changed earth challenges that

And it begins with Beauty

The Spirit takes John on a guided tour. The Spirit takes John out of the Roman imperial vision of power and peace wrought in violence to show John how things look from God's perspective of power and the new creation wrought from love and selflessness.

The city is on a mountain and is coming down out of heaven. The angel describes this city as the bride of the Lamb. **Love and beauty are in the air.** Human life and the new creation come together in this city.

This image is full of God's love for human society. He renews and recreates the smashed and broken non-human world to make it fit for his new city which is his bride. A flourishing new creation becomes the setting for a flourishing human society, human beings in relation and loving fellowship.

The city is the central point of the new creation

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, always renewing and remaking us.

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. He is the centre of the city.

The first thing about this city is its great, almost overpowering beauty. God loves rich beauty. Just as the new creation is rich beauty so the lamb transforms human relations into the rich beauty of love.

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, only awe.

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 or music 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). 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 and great love are pointing us somewhere beyond ourselves, an echo touching a reality beyond our imaginations. And we long for it, something lost in our memories.

The French philosopher Blaise Pascal noted this and suggested, "What else does this helplessness and longing proclaim, but there was once in each person a true happiness, of which all that now remains is an empty print and trace? We try to fill this in vain with everything around us, seeking in things that are not there the help we cannot find in those that are there. Yet nobody can change things, because this infinite abyss can only be filled with something that is infinite and unchanging-in other words, by God Himself. God alone is our true good."

It points to the City. And the 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.

The Spirit reveals this beauty to us in story of Israel and the witness of the apostles to the Lamb who takes the ugly violence of the present destruction of humans and non-human creation into the Godhead and transforms it.

This beauty consists of 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 first element of beauty is Presence 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. God's presence is here. temple or tabernacle are obsolete. 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 allows the **nations** to walk in it and go about their business. 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 into beauty. 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. It is no endorsement of present 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 second element of beauty is the river of life 22.1-6

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.

And only one thing is missing in this City. All human deceit and corruption is gone forever. At last the weak and the poor are secure. At last the creation is safe from the robbery of human greed.

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.

It tells us that all are works done now, bringing beauty, security, safety, life and healing in our communities, and in the creation, no matter how small, finds its place in the City. They are prize jewels to be built into the City's infrastructure.

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. It is a judgment on the rapacious destruction of the beauty of the earth.

So here are some questions to think about and maybe shape an agenda.

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

How can we become channels of light and life in community and creation?

How can we become channels of healing for the nations?

How will we serve the freedom and the beauty of 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?