

3 January 2010

Christmas 2C [New Years Day Readings]

Sermon notes on Revelation 21.1-6a

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"Heaven must be hell"

Our cultural history has given us a lot of images of what heaven is like, and those ideas often have in connection with them certain images of what hell might also be like: hell is a place of fire and punishment, heaven is a place of sunshine and bliss – or so the common story goes.

In the reading we've heard from Revelation this morning we're given a vision of heaven which has some sense of the blissful existence we might be hoping for, but which also, when we unpack it a little, some people might consider to be rather like *hell*! The beautiful imagery is certainly there: "God will dwell with them, he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, death and mourning and crying will be no more..." These are things we all long for at one time or another.

But there's another aspect of John's vision which is not immediately obvious but may perhaps be troubling for us: heaven is not a place where we are alone, but a place where others are. The troubling dimension is hinted at in a remark once made by a rather sad philosopher: "hell is other people". Now, we might take some comfort in being in heaven with others if we could choose who was going to be there with us: friends, those members of our family we actually *like*, perhaps our favourite artists or musicians or celebrities.

And yet not only *they* are present in the vision which John gives us. The old heaven and the old earth are replaced by new ones,¹ at the centre of which is a *city*. As a city, the new earth-heaven is a *communal* place, and not a place of isolated individuals all caught up in their own private eternal bliss. The potential problem for us here is that this means that heaven is cast as a place where there may well be – almost certainly will be! – people we don't like or have even learned to hate, and who don't like or perhaps hate us, and there seems to be nothing very heavenly about that!

Now, of course, if it is a heavenly *city*, then it's probably something pretty large, and so maybe we could manage to be in the heaven without running into those people who rub us up the wrong way! But given that that's how we do things already *here and now*, there's nothing very heavenly about having to plot when and where we'll be in order to avoid being annoyed or

affected by the presence or actions of others. If heaven is a city full of people, it could turn out to be just plain hard work.

So there's some bad news about heaven! But there's more bad news to be heard. In this morning's gospel reading we heard a text which will not exactly warm our hearts – a vision of the judgement of the nations. This judgement takes place according to the peoples' ability to recognise Christ in the poor and needy who dwell at the edge of every human community. Of this vision many things could be said – not least that neither those who are judged righteous nor those judged unrighteous knew that it was Jesus himself who was being served (or not) in their good works or selfishness. But the threat of the judgement itself is perhaps the most troubling thing in the reading – the implication that unless we do something for those who are not "us" nor part of "ours" – the poor, the sick, the imprisoned – we risk eternal punishment. Being *told* to that we should love someone in such a way implies that in fact we don't love, and this probably because we find him or her unlovely, and so love just becomes another thing we have to *do*. So, to summarise these two readings this morning: after a life-time of being compelled to love people whom it's hard to love, we'll go to heaven and meet more of them – Praise the Lord...(?)

Now perhaps I've over-stated all this a bit, but it's important to unpack the readings in this way if we're going to understand how they can be *misunderstood*, and understand just what the church's life is and isn't about. "Heaven" has become for us something of an idea of a *haven* – a place of escape from all that threatens us or has made us uncomfortable. Or, more to the point, heaven has come to be conceived of as a place which is *our* place – not so much in the sense that we own it as in the sense that we *define* it. Last week we joined other members of our family for our final Christmas gathering at a cousin's house within something quite close to what is called a "gated community". It seemed, at one level, a lovely place to live – well designed and maintained, lots lovely homes and waterways and streetscapes. And yet, if quietly so, it seemed nevertheless also to be an exclusive little community. Such a place is not a city in any cosmopolitan sense. A filtering has taken place, and something of a haven from the wider world has been established. In such an arrangement a change has certainly been

¹ Note that the old *heaven* also goes!

wrought in the way people live, but not in the people themselves. The environment is now a step closer to our sense of heaven, but the people remain unchanged. Yet, whatever we might make of the appearance such places, I suspect that the way many of us live in our homes today reflects either the desire or the effect on us also of such closed-community attitudes to life together.

From a typical human perspective there might be nothing especially comforting about the new heaven and the new earth in John's revelation, nor much good news in Jesus telling his disciples to love and serve those who are needy. For heaven is a place in which the *command* to love one another is just a much a part of life as it is a part of our lives now. That is, heaven has to do not with a change of our environment by a limitation of whom we might encounter in it. This is the heaven-as-haven idea, within which we stay the same and everything else shifts to form our ideal world. The gospel account of heaven involves a change in *us* or, to put it differently, a change in the environment of *others*: heaven is the place in which *I* become truly loveable, not the place from which others become excluded.

But there *is* good news, too!! While, on my account, heaven might not be what we want it to be, yet we *will* still want to be there, not because we're masochists and enjoy doing it tough, but because God will make it possible for us to love each other. God speaks towards the end of the reading from Revelation: "See, I am making all things new." It is the "I" and the "new" which make all the difference. "I" – God – am the one who brings this about. As much as we can be told to love one another, it's hard work, and some of us just aren't very good at it. God, however, loves even those who reject him, as demonstrated in the return of the risen Christ with forgiveness to those who rejected and abandoned him. *God* brings this about, and God makes all things "new". There is not merely *another* heaven and earth, but a totally *new kind* of heaven and earth, a place in which it has become possible for us to love each other. This is beyond *us* to achieve but, we confess, not beyond the God who loves us and gave himself for us.

The bad news the church has is that we are unable to save ourselves. There is, to put it another way, nothing "new" to be expected in the new year we have just begun. The *good news* is that the love we are to have for each other, and the heaven we might enjoy in that love, is something *God* provides us. "Love came down at Christmas", we sang last week, declaring not merely our hopes and dreams for peace and love, but the *presence* of that peace and love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and so the

beginning of something truly new – something which is still working itself out in us today.

What *will* make our new year *new* – *differently* new, rather than simply being the *next* new year following on from all previous "new years" – is if it is one which we enter filled with a sense that this year quite simply *can* be new, because although God is building a city with such building blocks as *us*, it is *God* who builds, and this God knows how to fit together all the odd and contradictory shapes and sizes that we are, who knows how to take what would drive us apart from each other and make it something which actually binds us together.

This is the miracle of the gospel, the miracle of Christmas: not simply that God does "something" wonderful, but that God does this wonderful thing by giving us yet another person to love, yet another thing to do, yet another argument to hear, another call to respond to. The miracle is that the *command* to love – the command to respond to another in openness and giving of ourselves – might actually *create* love. It is Jesus who fulfils this command, and so the apostle declares (1 John), *this* is love: that Jesus loves God, and loves us in *that* love, and here we find healing.

What is "new" about the times this God brings – whether a genuine newness to the new year, or simply a good reason to get up in the morning – is simply that *God* makes the times – and all things – new, and does this in the challenging and yet liberating humanity of Jesus, who is both a new heaven and a new earth: a new place for both God and for us to dwell.

For this Christmas gift, all thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.