AllSaints

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Step In! The City has Open Gates

Revelation 21:1–8, 22–27

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So how do you see the world now? How do you see the world's future? The future for your children and your grandchildren children. It's easy to see a world and a future of horror and fear. Even in the last week or two, we see in France, the fridges are switched off by some cyber attack, food isn't there. We hear Andy Burnham telling us to stock up our cupboards.

There is reason to be fearful. And how do we see the nations? Are they the thing we're afraid of, or the thing that is fearful. We see wars and rumours of wars: Ukraine, Sudan, elsewhere. Where is the hope in that, and where are the nations in that hope?

And that's what we're talking about today. We're talking about this vision, this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a hope, a new Jerusalem. coming down from heaven, where there'll be a dwelling place for God amongst us, where the glory of God will give us light, and the nations will be there.

Sometimes Bath can feel a very safe place. We've chosen to live in a safe place, far from what feels like the dangers of the earth. **But we're not called to ignore the earth.** The biblical vision is not just for Bath, it's of us being in this greater world. It's a key part of what God's vision is: that we are one of the nations and we are amongst them.

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So, what we're going to do today is we're going to talk about this vision of a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem that comes down from God. And we see that at the very end of the Bible. It's a vision of the future. When John saw that vision and that future, we are waiting for that.

But to understand that vision at the end, we also need to pay attention to the other end of the biblical story, the other end of God's story on earth. If this is the new creation, what happened to the original creation? And if the new Jerusalem is coming as a perfect city from heaven.

What happened to the first city on earth? We're going to pay attention to the first creation (and where it went wrong), and to the first city, (and where that went wrong). And we're going to need to think about self-promotion, man-made cities, and the problems that brought. There's problems that came after the first creation, and why it was no longer easy to dwell with God. And there's problems that came after the first city, and why it was therefore hard to dwell with each other.

So the Bible, really early on in Genesis, leaves us with these questions, questions that go throughout the whole Bible and come through the whole early church, and the church today.

Can we dwell with God still? Do we dwell with God? Do you dwell with God? And can we dwell with each other? I don't just mean people here, but also with the nations, with people around the world.

And then we'll move on to talk about the city of God and answer those questions of whether we can dwell with God and with each other.

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But I'm going to start with the self-promoting, the man-made cities and the problem that brings. Early on, we see in the beginning of Genesis, God makes the first creation. That is creation, until we get a new creation at the end. And he looks at his creation, and it is good. We hear again and again, it is good. And as part of that, he makes humankind: he makes man and woman, and they dwell with him in a garden, a garden where they walk with God. Just as you go for a walk with your friend, you go for a walk with your grandchildren, they are present side by side. He dwelt so tangibly with them.

But they were self-promoting. They did the one thing God asked them not to do and ate the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And the power that meant they could have meant God could not keep them in a place where they could live forever. He had to remove them from His presence and remove them from the garden. And so, they left Eden. So, from the beginning, God's creation was good. But people got it wrong and they left. But even when they left, sadly, that was not the end of their self-promoting mission.

Then we get this story a few chapters later of the first city. And it's interesting. It says:

Genesis 11:3

(NIVUK) 3 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.'

This is a technological innovation. We're moving on from stone and now we've got bricks. So, with this technological innovation, people are going to make a city. They've got this kind of pride: 'now we can make bricks, not just stone. Let's make something that's going to show how great we are as humanity. And they are going to build this tower from the ground up, maybe to see if they can reach the heavens.'

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But God sees this and he is horrified. They are self-promoting cities. It's for humans and individuals to say how good they are.

And He knows if He leaves them like this, they will cause pain and more pain and more suffering. So, he scatters them:

Genesis 11:8

(NIVUK) 8 So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.

The nations came. He scattered them. We were together, we were so proud, we wanted to build ourselves up. And to save us from the damage that would bring, God scattered us as the nations. We became the nations. We became people of different languages and different cultures. We couldn't understand each other anymore. God limited our power again because of the damage we could cause.

And so, it brings that question, can we dwell with each other again ever? of the city are though. I don't know if you, first of all you kind of think well why is that so, why is building the Tower of Babel and building the city really such a dangerous thing?

Why is it dangerous that they are self-promoting? It's because they ignore God, and also because cities like that exploit people. And to be honest, a lot of human cities do. We exploit people in different ways not just through building cities, but cities can rely on resources from beyond the city. We pull in food from outside, we pull in resources. If we decorate it with gold and gems, we rely on pulling it from outside. We rely on exploiting others.

And sometimes they might be freely given, but often when man becomes powerful, those resources are taken by force and through violence.

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So, at the time this passage was written, the city on people's minds would have been Rome, the capital of a massive empire. And it would have been glorious to see, undoubtedly, heights that people hadn't seen before, drama and parades that people hadn't seen, types of food maybe that they hadn't seen. But that was built on an underlying violence and extraction from the edges of the empire, and Jerusalem knew that because they were being controlled and exploited, and seeing all It's awful kind of torture. It's things like crucifixion.

So at the time of Revelation's writing, there was a big city, a human city, that was built on other people's suffering and exploitation. But we know that that's not where human cities end. If you think of London, if you think even of Bath, many of the beautiful buildings that we enjoy in our city, as in London, were built on money made from human slavery, from the transatlantic slave trade. We know that a lot of those buildings we treasure in our city's heart were funded by profits from slavery in the Caribbean. Laura Place and Laura Fountain were bought off the profits of one sugar harvest in the Bahamas. And sadly, that continues.

It's not that all the wealthy companies of London can say that they are free from exploiting people on earth, whether for or precious minerals or oil or other things. And this continues around the world. So, if you think about Moscow and Russia, over time they have also been culpable. Over decades, Ukraine has fed Moscow and has sold its grain to make Moscow rich and powerful. In the 1930s, there was a horrendous famine in Ukraine. Millions of people died, and partly because of the tax that was still demanded by the centre in Russia, even when food wasn't available. So, people died on the streets while they still sent food to Moscow. And again, wars around food and money and control have brought so much sadness to Ukraine.

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We can think about Sudan and gold. Gold is found in Sudan in different places and a lot of that is extracted and sent to Europe, but also to the Gulf states to Dubai. And that gold makes Dubai and London glitter and rich: and people profit from it. But it's people in Sudan that suffer to get that gold. People fight war to control the land where the gold is. Far, far from where we are. Far from the cities that are self-promoting and seem to be glorious but are built on the walls far away.

I work in Sudan quite a lot. And I work in a place called the Nuba Mountains. I was there last year. But last Christmas, about this time, I was in South Sudan with an amazing lady that I know from that area. She's from the Nuba Mountains, but she had the opportunity to go to Kenya for education, and she could have stayed living there. But when war and famine came in the 1990s, she chose to go back and to found a women's organization. So, there was a famine there in the 90's that killed about 200,000 people. And she went back, she created this NGO, and it's kept running over 30 years. I met up with her last Christmas, and we were going shopping before Christmas for her family and for my family and we bought shea butter, (a nice butter for moisturiser - my son loves it and her children love it). And we were going shopping in South Sudan to another women's collective, and we were buying, smelling all the nice smells of the moisturiser that these women make. They mix together lemon and shea butter, or jasmine and shea butter. It's just a very normal thing.

And then a few months later in May, a rebel group in the area said in their community (i.e. the community where she has come from), that they wanted to start mining for gold to make big money. They are funded by the UAE and they wanted to send gold to UAE to help make money and to keep that alliance strong. The gold that they wanted to mine was on the community's farmland and they would need to kick the community off to mine the gold. She opposed it and now she is in prison. Two weeks later the war broke out. We don't know what's happened to her. Her sister doesn't know. Her brother doesn't know. In Sudan, when people are in prison you take them food every day. The government, or the rebels as the case may be, don't feed them. *You* have to feed them. Her sister hasn't been able to go because the war has broken out around her. So all for gold. She is still in prison. And we don't know when she will come out.

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It feels a fearful world. And we shut the gates; we want to keep it out. But I don't think that's what God wants.

Then we have an alternative vision in this passage: a city from God.

Revelation 21:2

(NIVUK) 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God

They built the tower of Babel built up from the ground, they were trying to make themselves big and more powerful. The new Jerusalem comes from heaven down to earth. It is a humble thing. From heaven to earth. Just like Jesus came: he stepped down from his throne from heaven to earth. I think sometimes we can think of heaven as being up on a cloud, we're going to go there in the end and sit there with our hearts.

But actually, **this is a vision of earth itself being *regenerated*. Not of us escaping, like escaping in a rocket ship up to heaven. Actually, it's this earth that will be remade. God hasn't given up on it. It's not the end. He's going to make it new. And he's going to come down to earth and walk with us. And he won't need to exploit the nations. Because he will bring life with him. He will bring life and light. He will give everything that city needs. And so, he will dwell with us again. He will be in the city.**

There will be no temple. His light will be there. His presence will be there, there will be no fear. And we're now in this in-between phase, we are not there yet, that will come, but we are seeing the slow unfolding of God's new creation. And **we see that through the biblical story, slowly God dwelling more and more with His people. He tabernacles with them. At first He's in the tabernacle, then He's in the temple, He is close to his people and they can access Him. And then Jesus comes down from heaven to earth. He dies for us. And because of that we can again stand in God's presence. The curtain is torn and we can dwell with him. And we will see the full outworking of that in the new creation.**

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And so, the new Jerusalem:

Revelation 21:22

(NIVUK) 22 I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

The temple is gone. God is fully with us. This is our future. Do you think about that very often? That we will fully dwell with God again. The city does not need the sun or the moon:

Revelation 21:23

(NIVUK) 23 the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp.

And because of that, on no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night. No night, no fear. The gates are open. You shut the gates, you close yourself in: you hide in Bath, because you're afraid. But God will dwell, is dwelling with us, and will dwell with us. The gates will be open. always. No Night. And we need to be confident in that. Are you confident that those gates will open? Are you confident that God dwells with you now and you don't need to live in fear? And because of that lack of fear, we can dwell with each other. We don't need the nations to be scattered any longer, but they will come into the city. There is no night, no fear, and the gates will open.

Revelation 21:23-26

(NIVUK) 23 the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. 24 The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendour into it. 25 On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there. 26 The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.

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There will be no more tears, and the nations that have cried because we've got it wrong, because we have not sought justice. They will come. And they will be with us. And again, we see a slow unfolding. The promise that the nations will have hope. And actually, though many of our mission partners are going through the most difficult times, we still see their hope: their light and their hope. And in them, I see this ability to keep their eyes on the new Jerusalem, on the promise of God fully dwelling with us, being without fear and being in his light.

So just as we come to an end, we have this promise of a new heaven and a new life. A new Jerusalem that we will dwell in one day. We will dwell with God again, fully dwell with him, and the nations will be with us as we dwell there. But now we are in the in-between: we are waiting, we know the promise. Christ has come and made the way for us to be there because of the blood of the Lamb. that new Jerusalem. But in the in-between, it is easy to give up hope. In the unfolding, things can be frightening. We can want to shut the gate. We can want to hide away from it all. We can want to pretend that the world beyond Weston and Bath is nothing to do with us. The difficult stuff, even in Bath, we can just let it go and walk past it and say 'that's for someone else.' Or 'that's for the time in my life when I'm not so busy.' Or 'that's for the mission committee and the people in church who do that kind of stuff.' God makes clear that our mission is to look forward to dwelling with him, and in that, dwell with the nations and with the people that needed us, now. This is a key part of what we are asked to do, not an added extra. So, we will dwell fully with God and we will dwell fully with the nations. But we can do that now and keep the hope and the light that our mission partners have.

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