

## **‘Cities of Desire’ – A Homily on Revelation 21**

*And I saw the holy city,  
the new Jerusalem,  
coming down out of heaven from God,  
prepared as a bride adorned for her husband*

Earlier this week I had a fun chat with the parish priest of the Church of the Annunciation in Hanover, Brighton. We spoke about Brighton and Hove as a city of inclusivity and colour, a city of vibrancy and edginess. But there is a sense at times that we have it all here in Brighton and Hove, and that we are beyond critique or question. But if we’re honest, we have to balance the vibrant liberalism of the place in which we live, with the urban failures it represents too: the rising levels of homelessness and poverty, the failures of care for those struggling with their mental health, the rampant secularism of the place. Such are the dangers and delights of our urban landscapes.

Our second reading today is taken from the final visions that St John the Divine places before us, visions of a new reality opening up in front of us, visions of a once broken world now unified as heaven descends to earth and earth is enfolded with heaven. There are a few surprises in this vision, and perhaps the first is that this vision of the end is a vision of a city, rather than a vision of a garden. Paradise it seems, at least for the writer of the Apocalypse is a modern urban dream rather than a nostalgic return to Eden.

This might seem strange as other religions, indeed so often our own, describe heaven as the restoration to the natural. Indeed, this seems to be what comes most naturally to us also. When we look for renewal and restoration, our usual practice is to leave the city - that place of decadence, complexity, colour and noise - and

journey to the country, or wilderness or resort. Just like our parish retreat a couple of weeks ago in the beautiful surrounds of Worth Abbey. To quote Eugene Peterson: “In gardens we stroll and contemplate, smell the roses, pet the unicorns, and commune with God in the cool of the evening. A garden is life blessed and ordered by God. Paradise is a garden in Genesis. Love is a garden in the Song of Songs.”

Cities in the biblical narrative - as well as our own - are hardly places of spirituality. Rather they are noisy with self-assertion, forgetful and defiant of God, battering and abusive to persons. We only need think about Babel, built in an arrogant attempt to storm heaven and abandoned in a morass of broken languages; or even ‘the Holy City,’ Jerusalem, a city that promised so much, but was so quickly dishonoured with adultery and murder, a place that stoned the prophets, and that Jesus lamented over.

But here it is, a city descending out of heaven, carrying all the promise and splendour of the heavens, a city of light, of justice and of life. It is true that cities are always places of aspiration, places trying to reach up to heaven, places where people can dwell in harmony and peace; and yet what cities really seem to be good for is making money, acquiring power, practicing deceit. Our cities so often seem broken and compromised by human pride and cruelty, our inability to live together with difference; but now the holy cities descends into all this mess: redeeming, restoring, renewing.

The city in question is later described by John the Divine as having twelve foundation stones and twelve gates. The gates are inscribed with the names of the twelve Israelite tribes, the foundation stones with the names of the apostles. But just before we get caught up in all this majesty and splendour, and the trumpeting of a wondrous and courageous past, let us pause to reflect for a moment. Neither of

these 'sacred twelve' were up to much to be honest. The twelve tribes of Israel are unlikely material for gates into heaven, with our biblical narratives making it impossible for us to idealize these chaps: intractable, deceitful, unattractive as they could possibly be. And the apostles also are a random gathering of ordinary human beings: hopeful and fearful, sacrificing and grasping, courageous and inconsistent all at the same time. In all of this we are reminded of Jesus' words to Peter: 'you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church.' St John the Divine paints a picture of heaven as built on just as shaky foundations as this.

It seems that in the end, heaven is to be quarried out of the ambiguities, failures, broken dreams and battered hopes of all our human lives. Somehow, God will turn our brother-hating, God-defying, Christ-rejecting cities into something stunningly beautiful, something wonderfully whole, something incredibly life-filled. What is more, these unlikely foundation stones and gates remind us that the stuff of our life can be used by God too. You and I in all our wonderful ordinariness, crafted into the very building blocks of heaven.

The vision of heaven that John places before us is not a fantasy, or some escapist dream, but rather a vision that erupts from the centre of all that we are and all that we do. Into the hopes and failures of our human lives, into the broken dreams of our Christian Communities, into the splintering homes of our families, the city of heaven descends. This vision is incarnation: A God who descends into the promise and darkness of our humanity; a God who lifts everything of what we are - not just the nice bits, but all of us - into his beatifying and transfiguring presence. For in this city, there is no condemnation, only welcome, no exclusion, only embrace, no darkness, only light. AMEN.