

Heaven has Already Come Down

Introduction

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is the 6th Sunday of Easter – in addition to the readings from Acts 16 and John's Gospel 14 - the set Epistle is from The Book of Revelation 21 & 22 – which I will now read.....

Some thoughts from this passage:-

1. The writer of this book has been presenting the universal significance of Jesus and who he is – and now in his final Chapters, he develops this further in his vision/picture of the holy city that comes down from heaven to the earth – at the centre of this holy city is Jesus, described as the Lamb.

This picture of the holy city coming down to earth is a clear echo of the words found Chapter 1 of John's Gospel:

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

*¹⁴And the Word **became flesh and lived among us**, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

That is, when Jesus he was born in Bethlehem in the days of King Herod, we could say that in that event heaven came down to earth – and this coming down of heaven is symbolised in Revelation 21 as a heavenly city coming down to earth.

2. We note that this heavenly city has some very unusual features:-

- No temple, no cathedral, no church, or chapel – they are not needed, for God and Jesus the Lamb supply that role in a direct way.
- No need for sun or moon – for the glory of God supplies all the light that is needed. At Christmas we sing the WC Dix carol 'As with gladness men of old' – the last verse expresses the picture in Revelation: *In the heavenly city bright need they no created light; thou its life, its joy, its crown, thou its sun which goes not down (last verse).*

So, the writer is speaking of a situation where the natural order of the earth is transformed by the presence of heaven coming down to earth in which people have a direct experience of God and Jesus, the Lamb.

3. But significantly, alongside these unusual other-worldly features, the writer's picture has features that very much still belong to life as we know it here and now on earth. His picture shows nations and kings going about their daily business, and people who need healing and love and care:

Revelation 21:24: *²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.*

Revelation 22:2: *On either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

4. We tend to think of heaven as something that belongs to the end of our lives or to the end of the world – that is, that we only experience heaven for the first time when we die.

But the Incarnation of God in Jesus, the coming of Jesus into our world through the Virgin Mary, tells us something very different.

Heaven itself came down to earth over 2000 years ago when Jesus was born of Mary. This means that the life and transformation that heaven brings has already begun and entered into our world in Jesus – and, through Him, is able to enter into our human experience in our here and now.

God will not take that back, or withdraw what he has done in Jesus, but he will complete what he has begun in the coming of Jesus. No human being can stop what God has done however dark the current world situation appears to be.

This is the significance of the words of Jesus in today's Gospel reading from John Chapter 14 to his disciples on the evening before he dies:

23 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.....25 'I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the

Advocate, the

Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.

²⁷Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

On the Day of Pentecost, the Risen and Ascended Jesus fulfilled that promise and the first disciples experienced the powerful life of heaven coming upon them – it transformed their lives - and the church was launched into the world. Heaven came down that day in a very special way.

5.As I was preparing this sermon, the words of an old Gospel Song came to mind – written in 1961 by an American songwriter, John W.Peterson - a song which has helped many people use to express their Christian experience:

*Heaven came down and glory filled my soul,
when at the Cross my Saviour made me whole
my sins were washed away and my night was turned to day
Heaven came down and glory filled my soul.*

We may not use these exact words, but the essence of Christian experience the same for all of us – that heaven has come down and touched our lives –

that God’s love has come to us and has made all the difference to our view of life here and now.

In Jesus, heaven has come down to comfort those who, on this day, grieve and mourn the loss of a loved one. God does not leave us comfortless or to face the trials and challenges of life on our own, rather in Jesus he comes near to us in and through the Holy Spirit.

In today’s Acts 16 reading, we heard the story of the conversion of the first gentile Christian convert in the city of Philippi, in Macedonia, a prominent business-woman called Lydia, who became a leader of the first church in Philippi.

Luke records how *‘The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul’* (v14). This is a way of saying that ‘heaven came down and glory filled Lydia’s soul’ that day. She would have been able to sing a 1st Century equivalent of John Peterson’s song to express her new-found faith.

6.So, the message of the writer of The Book of Revelation is that, wherever the risen and ascended Jesus, the Lamb, is present by the Holy Spirit, there heaven is present to convey the life of heaven in the here and now of earth, in the midst of our daily lives. This coming of heaven brings healing to our lives, helping us learn to live in love and peace together, and calling us to treat our neighbour with righteousness and justice.

This is what this Table of Holy Communion says to each week - that here at this Holy Table, the risen and ascended Lord, makes himself real to us in the here and now, in broken Bread and outpoured Cup. This Table declares

that heaven has already come down into our midst, and is open to all who come in faith to receive its blessings and its joys – even to each of us who do not deserve it.

7.We should note that the Church of Jesus is called to be a living sign to this fact. That is, as Christians, we are called to make this world a different place by the way we live our lives, by the choices we make, with our prayers, by our rejection of greed and lies, by our commitment to truth and social justice, and in caring for God’s earth.

Close

In the coming of Jesus, God came as a human being, and in doing so surprised earth with heaven (totally!). God loves this earth, this world and all who live in it – this love took Jesus to the Cross for all humankind so that he might conquer our sin and evil with that love.

We are called to follow in the steps of Jesus – to surprise our society, our neighbours with the presence of heaven by the way we live – to be living signs that heaven has indeed come down to earth.

The Lord is Risen, Alleluia!