

Revelation 21.1-6

I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life."

John 11.32-44

When Mary reached the place where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."

When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. "Where have you laid him?" he asked.

"Come and see, Lord," they replied.

Jesus wept.

Then the Jews said, "See how he loved him!"

But some of them said, "Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?"

Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. "Take away the stone," he said.

"But, Lord," said Martha, the sister of the dead man, "by this time there is a bad odour, for he has been there four days."

Then Jesus said, "Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?"

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me."

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face.

Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go."

2 Magnets (Morgans) – repel or attract
Twins or rivals? Orientation
Lord's Prayer; on earth as in heaven
Aim: for the earth to become the new heaven (new Jerusalem).
(Adversarial living)

Capital: The Proud Boys: storming it, partly in God's name
The old creation will be cast off
Rev: The new future is here on earth
Don't dishonour God's commitment or foul his creation (God's creation has a future)

Lawrence of Arabia's tomb: The hour is coming
Proved to be true by the raising of Lazarus: we are never beyond God
Both heaven and earth form part of God's world
Death cannot separate us from God (God is never beyond)

Revelation production at Cuddesdon: dream or nightmare?
God will dwell in our midst – the new city
He will be our light etc – healing of the nations etc
The incarnation will become permanent (make connections!) (A new incarnation)

Us; Iona where the veil is thin: where is Bede?
Paul calls the Corinthians "saints" because God has called them
The saints are our supporters (Hebrews): they share our world
If God has called you, what are you going to do, and where? (Called to be saints)

Sermon preached at Arle Velley Benefice service All Saints 2021

Revelation: I saw a new heaven and a new earth (Full text on website)

Lots of people are having to have an economy Christmas this year. Our family have warned us not to hang up our stockings and to settle for flat packs in the post! Well, if you have to buy a cheap toy for your children, grandchildren or spouse, you could do worse than buy a pair of magnets. You can have infinite enjoyment with magnets. They attract one another and, if you reverse them, they repel one another. The magnetism works through cardboard and thin wood and you can do all sorts of clever things with them.

*But the question one has to ask is "are they adversaries?" – always driving the other one away. Or are they twins, like some of the stars, always bound together, attracting the other. Of course, magnets can be both which is what makes them so fascinating. In this country we place a lot of value on adversarial thinking: on two lawyers laying out their case in search of the truth with one rather than the other. And in industrial cases where the popular understanding is that either the management or the work force will be the issue in any particular problem. Life is more complex than that, and so are earth and heaven.

*We say the Lord's Prayer so often: "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven". This is the dream that lies behind the Bible narrative – that where we live now will become heaven. Heaven is the place where God's will is done. When that happens on earth there will be no separation between heaven and earth, they will not be adversaries.

*In the reading from Revelation this morning John, in his vision, sees the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven to earth. It is earth where it is all going to happen – yet so often we turn that on its head. Heaven and earth are only different when God's will is not done on earth. When God's will is done on earth we shall have only one world.

The other evening I watched again on television the storming of the Capitol building in Washington on January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany. Many of those who stormed the building, injuring police and others, were shouting “Freedom” and invoking the name of God. One of the Proud boys was explaining how reasonable they are – yet that storming of the building caused 5 police officers to commit suicide shortly afterwards.

*“We have a problem, Heuston!” Many of these people take Jesus as their Lord, as we do. Many of them see the world we live in as something that is finished, spent, exhausted, fit to be abandoned. You and I probably do not come across this, but if you lecture on the New Testament in America you will come across such beliefs. They read the New Testament as saying that God is going to take us off the earth to live in heaven while the earth goes to its destruction. They don’t care about climate change.

*You may not see the point of this debate, but it is very important. In the first instance it is partly about reading the passage in Revelation that we have had this morning. “I saw a new heaven and a new earth coming down out of heaven” – NOT going up to heaven, but coming down to where we are now. That says to me as clearly as possible that the future lies on this planet. It is not to be abandoned or allowed to fall into ruin for good reason.

*Firstly, we should not dishonour God by doubting his commitment to his creation. The “righteousness of God” in the Bible is that God never, never gives up on his creation. Whatever awful things we do he works to redeem his world. He remains committed to the world of his creation. Secondly, we should remain committed too. Look at all the beauty of his creation: Do we really believe we do God honour when we wash our hands of climate change, shrug our shoulders and say “We will be going to live in heaven”? God’s creation has a future, and we have to work with God for that future, COP 26 and all.

Back in 1998 I was given a Sabbatical lasting three months. For our last week Liz and I went to Jordan and, as we planned, I began to think about T. E. Lawrence and his time there. As part of that we went to the churchyard extension at Moreton in Dorset and looked at his grave. His headstone is a text from John chapter 5: “Jesus said: The hour is coming and now is when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God”. I can’t put into words how powerful I found that.

*Our Gospel this morning is about the raising of Lazarus. Jesus cries “Lazarus! Come forth” and out shuffles Lazarus still in his grave clothes. In John chapter 11 he is proving the truth of what Jesus had said back in Chapter 5. The dead do hear the voice of the Son of God. It is a reminder that we are never beyond God’s world unless we choose to be. However dark our world is, however final death seems to be, they both belong, life and death, to God’s sphere of influence, his world.

Heaven and....what? Some people will complete the sentence as “hell”. Other people will complete it as “earth”. In the Temple in Jerusalem the heavens were represented there because it was the place where heaven and earth met. In John’s Gospel Jesus is the new Temple because he has become the place where heaven and earth meet – where, in his own life, God’s will is done on earth.

*It is a deeply held human belief that God is somewhere “beyond”. Either in the sky or somewhere else out of reach. It is St Paul’s fervent belief that there is nothing that can separate us from God. No barriers, no world system, no powers. In the epistle to the Romans St Paul reminds us that the love of God is known in our midst in Jesus Christ, in the reality of Jesus Christ. For St Paul in the midst of all his travels and tribulations, in all his preachings and persecution, the reality of Christ in his life taught him that God was there with him. God is never beyond, somewhere out of touch. Death cannot separate us from God.

Adrian was a great actor. I first met him directing a play in a college cloister one summer. Then he was chosen to play the Pope alongside Liz Taylor and Richard Burton in Dr Faustus. Then he arrived at Theological College and we didn't know the half of it. He dramatized the Book of Revelation and some 60 students and girl trainee teachers acted out the great narrative of the book. Some of it made your hair stand on end. Was it dream or was it nightmare?

*Liz and I have sat outside the cave where St John reputedly had his great vision that is the Book of Revelation. One imagines him, exiled to a rough island, reflecting on the violent persecution of the church by the Roman empire. What he sees is the new Jerusalem, maybe a new Rome. He doesn't give up but sees so much of what Old Testament prophets saw. Here among us will be the new city in the midst of which God himself will dwell.

*And that presence will transform our world. John uses picture language to convey this enormity. It will be a place of light because God himself is light – he will provide all our light. The city will be so safe that they will not need to lock the gates by day and there is no night. And along the river of life that flows through the city there is the tree of life whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. See how simply the things that make for darkness are reversed.

*But perhaps the most significant part of all of this is that in this development the incarnation becomes a permanent feature of our world. In Jesus God comes to share our humanity, our hopes and fears, our trials and triumphs but it is not for ever. The Book of Revelation ends with God tabernacling with us, pitching his tent among us. It has so much in common with the world we know – but his presence makes it all quite different.

Bede the Venerable used to say that he was in church even when he felt ill because otherwise the angels would ask “where is Bede?” As we drove across the island of Mull back in 1993 en route to Iona it seemed that the veil that separates earth and heaven became very thin. That is true of many holy places – God is much closer to us than we think. The noise and hubbub of modern society simply drown out his presence much of the time.

*In his epistles to the church at Corinth St Paul refers to them as “The saints”. Let me be clear. He has no illusions about the Corinthians. They have wounded him in a very crushing way, they have stabbed him in the back and derided him. Worse, they have also been indulging in some behaviour that would have made even irreligious people blush. But he still calls them saints. Not because he simply overlooks what they have done, but because the reality is that they are saints because God has called them. Not because of their goodness or their piety, but because God has chosen them, and Paul reminds them that they were people of little consequence!

*In the Epistle to the Hebrews we are told that the saints are on their feet in the spectator stands as we rush around the stadium of our journey of life. They are shouting us on as though we were running a marathon. The epistle to Ephesus tells us that we are part of the household of God, along with the saints. Indeed, we are saints if God has called us.

*Today I have tried to lay out the big picture, at the start of COP 26 and of Prof Brian Cox's “Universe”. The tragedy is that for many people science and faith are opposites, whereas we both treat God's world with respect and we need to work together. Against that background we are but dots. BUT, if you are called by God to be one of his saints, what are you going to do, and where are you going to do it? Time is running out for all of us, but we live in the belief that God never, ever, gives up on his creation and calls us, his saints, to work with him.

