

The hope of things to come

Heaven. Paradise. The afterlife. The next world. The New Jerusalem.

It's something that is much speculated about, and it's a topic that often prompts people to say what they think it must be like – or what it isn't like.

Sometimes you hear non-Christians say things like “I wouldn't want to go to heaven – it doesn't sound like much fun, sitting around on a cloud and playing the harp. I'd rather go to hell – after all, all my mates'll be there”.

If you're confronted with a statement like that, it's really hard to know how to respond, not only because there is so much wrong with the statement, but it's hard to come to grips with what we do know about it, let alone try and explain that to someone outside our faith.

Because what the future holds for us, what God has prepared for us, is really beyond our understanding – after all, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived – the things God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

There are many things we do not know about what our ultimate future will be like, because it is simply beyond our ability to comprehend. But from what we do know, from the glimpses the scriptures give us, it will fulfil our greatest longings, it will dazzle us with beauty, it will wipe away our problems and fears, it will be greater than anything we could imagine or dream, it will be a place where love and joy will reign forever.

And we, and all Christians who have gone before us and will come after us, have a place in that future, and we will be led to that place by Jesus, who said, “I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:3)

But for all we don't know about heaven or our future, there is unfortunately no end to the people – non-Christians and Christians – who will fill in the gaps and make up details, quite possibly with the best of intentions. There's a common perception of heaven as a place where people sit around on clouds wearing halos and wings and playing harps. Or some see it as a huge cathedral where people do nothing but sing hymns for all eternity. Or a place where it's all sort of warm and glowing. Or we float about as bodiless spirits. It's all otherworldly, ethereal and mystical. No wonder so many people see heaven as a place of

neverending boredom, or think, deep inside “That’s not the sort of place I’d want to go for a relaxing weekend, let alone spend eternity”.

There’s a far side cartoon which shows the afterlife: there are two queues of people. One queue is of people going to heaven, the other is of people going to the other place.

There’s an angel greeting people as they get to heaven “Welcome to heaven” he says, “Here’s your harp”.

And sure enough, at the end of the other queue, is a minor demon “Welcome to hell” he says, “Here’s your accordion”.

That’s actually not too far from what a lot of people think.

For all we don’t know, though, there are some things about our ultimate destination and indeed God’s ultimate plan for the world that we do know.

And we see a wonderful picture of what we do know in chapter 7 of Revelation that we’ve heard read this morning.

Revelation can be daunting. Apocalyptic writing is scary, and there are so many aspects to what John writes, and so much symbolism throughout the book, that it can be really hard to read, let alone understand.

Sometimes Christians become preoccupied with the book of Revelation, and quite frequently, simply choose to ignore it. Famously, the great reformer Martin Luther didn’t think Revelation deserved a place in our scripture at all – he called it called it "neither apostolic nor prophetic", and it’s the only New Testament book on which John Calvin didn’t write a commentary.

If you struggle with Revelation though, one suggestion that I’ve found helpful is this: Read it. Not just bits of it, but sit down and read it in one go. Read through, from beginning to end, without taking a break. And if you find something particularly difficult, just keep going. Pick up the big picture, the big themes, of what John writes.

Of course, that approach doesn’t work well for a Sunday morning church service. But if you are interested in learning more from the book of Revelation, you might find that approach helpful.

Even though we’re looking at only eight verses this morning, the first one starts with “After this I looked...”, so we really need to go back to the section before, which has four angels stationed at the four corners of the earth, holding back

the four winds, and the God's faithful servants from each tribe of the nation of Israel receiving God's seal. John tells us there were 12,000 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel. Often in the bible, numbers are symbolic, 12 tribes of Israel, twelve apostles, seven days of creation, seven signs in John's gospel, the forty days of Noah's flood, the forty years in the wilderness, the forty days in the wilderness, and so on. 144,000 is a lot, so the faithful among the nation of Israel is not a few and not merely a remnant of 'the chosen people'.

But here in today's reading, 144,000 is nothing compared to those that are praising God – the Christians of all generation. "After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count". So, I think, if numbers are significant, then countlessness is even more significant. The scope is beyond John's comprehension.

And the vast throng isn't uniform, there are all different, they are all individuals: they are made up of all tribes, all peoples and all languages. It is not just people like us (whatever your definition of 'us' might be), the hope, God's future is for all people. As the old Sunday School song says, "Red and yellow, black and white, they're all precious in his sight".

But what brings this multitude together, is their focus on Jesus. And in that focus, they are one: they're dressed in white robes, they have palms in their hands and they shout in praise in unison "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb"

It's a wonderful picture – and in many ways it's similar to Palm Sunday which we celebrated only four weeks ago. There's a crowd, attention is centred on Jesus, they are cheering and praising, they have palm branches.

But we remember that Palm Sunday didn't last: the crowd soon turned away from Jesus.

Not so this crowd. They are shouting not only a hope "Save us!" but they are declaring victory: Salvation belongs to our God.

Not only is the multitude in white with palms here but so are the angels, and the elders and the four living creatures. And together, they all bow down and worship God. Verse 12:

"Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!"

That is the culmination of God's plan for creation.

One of the elders turns to John, and asks “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?” (7:13) He’s an elder of the nation of Israel – one of God’s chosen people. He’s effectively asking John how this crowd with their white robes and their palm branches got to be part of the new earth. How come they’re saved, not just me and my elite 144,000 of Israel?

But John points out to him, that he knows – or at least that he should know, and he realises that

“...they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” The sacrifice of Jesus, once and for all on the cross, has enabled them to be right with God. As we often say in our communion liturgy “The blood of Christ, poured out for you and for many”.

And because we are washed in the blood of the Lamb, we will be changed: as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52)

Because of Christ’s sacrifice for us, we get to be amongst the countless multitude. Verse 15 tells us “Therefore, they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence”

There is a distinct echo there of God’s promise “You will be my people and I will be your God” made back in Exodus (6:7).

And those people – us – will all be transformed. We will be restored, along with the faithful of all generations, to the way things were supposed to be in the beginning.

John tells us that “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (7:16-17)

The new earth will not be different world of fluffy clouds and angels playing harps - but the real world we have known, perfected. All things will be made right. “...There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” John tells us later in Revelation (21:4).

Or we can go back to the prophet Isaiah, who wrote: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (Isaiah 65:17)

The corrupted, fallen elements of the world will be gone, and God will restore the world to the way it was in the beginning and was meant to be — unspoiled by our weakness and failure.

Our fallen, imperfect nature will be healed, and we will be in perfect relationship with each other and with God.

But while we look forward to things being put right, we continue to struggle in this world. Things are not fair. We know only too well that justice does not always happen in this world.

People despair and wonder at the point of following God. They work hard. They are faithful to God. They do their best. They avoid temptation, and seek forgiveness if they do wrong. But things still go wrong for them. Ill-health. Broken relationships. Failed businesses. It’s as the psalmist says “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence” (Psalm 73:13)

In the vision of God’s plan that John shares, our selfishness and our love for all the distractions of the fallen world will be gone. Our love for God and our relationship with him will be perfect. There will be nothing between us — no separation. Our sinful nature will be taken away, and we will no longer struggle with temptation.

And while the popular perception of heaven might be that it is boring, the vision John presents is anything but. In the book of Revelation, John does the best he can at describing the new creation, but he is limited by language and experience. He has never seen anything like the visions God gives him, and he struggles to describe what he witnesses.

He talks about walls made out of translucent gold built on foundations made with precious jewels; gates made of a single pearl (the “pearly gates”) and streets of gold. It is so rich and real that the things of greatest value on earth are commonplace. It is so beautiful that he describes it with the best comparisons he can make.

It is awe-inspiring and wonderful. John in Chapter 21 of Revelation writes: And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now

among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3)

Most of the time, when we open the scriptures, we look to find what we should do – or should not do – but sometimes we just need to listen to God’s word. To be assured by God’s word. Perhaps to learn something we didn’t know before, or come to a new and deeper understanding of something, or even simply to be reminded of something we already know.

I think that this today’s passage from Revelation is one of those times. To be reminded of what God has in store for us. To be reassured. To be confident. And to stand in awe and wonder God’s love for us, and his plan for each one of us, and for all of us.

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, and we – humankind – turned away from him; we chose our own way and turned against God... but God sent his son into creation – not to destroy it, but to save it. And to do so, he died on a cross. And in that, we are washed in the blood of the Lamb.

And Jesus rose again – the firstborn of the new creation, the new creation that we all get to be part of.

Friends, there are many things that we don’t know about the shape of things to come, but be assured that things will be made right, that we will be there together with those we love and those we have cared about - including those who have gone before us, that being there will be rewarding and magnificent, and most of all, God will be there with us, and we will be with God.

Near the end of the book of Revelation, John writes: He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. (21:6)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and in the end, God will bring about the new heavens and the new earth.

There are many things we do not know, but there are some things that we know for certain.

As Paul says to the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

Amen.