

Sunday 15 May – Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sermon by Harold Toms

I am an avid reader. I suppose I had better qualify this, bearing in mind my “job title” here in church, by this I mean that I’m an avid reader of books. (Not that I want you to think that I’m any the less committed to my ministry in the church - but that’s not what I’m talking about today.) As any member of my family will tell you, I find it impossible to pass a book shop without going in. Only last weekend, whilst visiting our son in Cardiff, I was inevitably drawn in to a bookshop in the city centre. However, one thing that I never do when I’m reading a book is skip to the end, the final pages to find out how it’s going to turn out. I know quite a few people who do that, which they tell me they do to help decide if a book’s worth reading. I must admit that I’d feel, if I knew the ending I’d probably feel it was no longer worth reading. I like surprises and I like to be taken on a journey.

In a way, that’s what it feels like with today’s reading from Revelation. Skipping to the last page to find out how it all turns out. We know, of course, that Revelation is the last book of the Bible, and it’s not put there for alphabetical reasons, or like the Koran which has its sections in order of size. No, Revelation comes at the very end because that is its subject - the last days. Because it seems to be concerned with the future, a lot of people get very excited about it, it must be the favourite book of those people who come knocking on your door trying to convert you to their particular brand of Christianity. They use it almost to threaten you: “Look! If you don’t join us you’ll be thrown into a lake of sulphur”.

If we look at today’s reading, we have a vision of the New Jerusalem. This vision is among the most beautiful and precious of all those in this book of visions. It is very easy to get wrapped up in and carried away by this heavenly city, and to forget that this book was written for the Church here and now. Revelation begins with greetings to the various first century churches in the Eastern Mediterranean to inform their life on earth and not to distract them with dreamy pictures of the future. As Jesus said as He began His ministry on Earth “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand:” (Mk 1:15). So, where is this “New Jerusalem”? Well, just look around you, as Peter says in his first letter “like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). This city of the future is but the final outcome of the spiritual city that is now being built among men. So if we were one of those readers who skip to the end to find out what happens we’d be disappointed. The Bible isn’t like other books, go to the end and you find a vision of the future that’s actually about the present!

So, if we reject the literalist interpretation of Revelation, and particularly the passage we read today, what do these visions actually tell us? First, the coming of a new heaven and a new earth involves the disappearance of many old landmarks and institutions and distinctions, but, one institution remains, in fact it has become all-embracing, and that is the Church. The little society that started with a few frightened people in that “upper room” in the old Jerusalem has reached maturity. But although the Church is all embracing, the individual is not lost in the community, the invitation is “Let those that will take the water of life freely” which is in fact both an invitation and a promise. Also, although the barriers which divide us are broken down in the heavenly city, they are not reduced to a dead level of similarity. The vision in Revelation still talks about “the nations” which suggests that those in the city are still what they were before, even in matters of race - or nationality. It seems reasonable to assume that if these distinctions still exist then so will our other distinguishing features.

But perhaps, the most important lesson to draw from this revelation is that the consummation of human life is revealed as being a social thing. The Bible begins, in Genesis, with a garden but it ends, in Revelation, with a city. Here is the answer to those that say “you don’t need to go to church to be a Christian”. The whole of the Bible, the Jewish scriptures, the Gospels and the New Testament are about the relationship between God and humankind - and between person and person. The new commandment, that we heard about in our Gospel this morning, is that we love one-another as Christ has loved us. The very summary of the law that Jesus gave us is "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength. And love your neighbour as yourself".

So, as I’ve already said, I don’t believe that Revelation is just a vision of the future, it’s a vision for the here and now. We are the living bricks of the Celestial City. It has already come down from heaven - when the Holy Spirit came upon the Church at Pentecost. We must not sit back waiting for the “New Jerusalem” or even the “New Tiptree/Gt. Braxted”. If we do that we’re missing the whole point. We are the body of Christ, and these must be more than just words to us. When Christ lived on earth He went out and about into the streets and market places to meet people; He healed people; He fed the hungry; He visited those that needed Him most and comforted them. Now we are his body and if we want to know what that means we should do then we need look no further than to what He did - and then do the same ourselves.

For many churches, as here in Tiptree, our Church building is set in the heart of our community, physically. But if we are to take the Gospel seriously then it’s up to us to place the Church at the heart of our community spiritually by truly being the body of Christ. By continuing His work, right here, right now;

knowing what we believe; worshipping in church week by week; trying to live a righteous life. These are all necessary, but God's greatest desire for His people was that they should be one in love for Him and in love for each other. When Jesus has finished teaching the disciples, He said to them "Do you know all these things?" and when they replied "Yes" He said to them "Blessed are you if you do them". The blessing was not in the knowing - but in the doing. There is knowledge that isn't attended by action, and this is no use to us. As individuals, and even more so as a worshipping community let us rededicate ourselves to doing the will of the Father. Let our Holy city be the place we live in now and not just a celestial one in the future.

Amen.