

Revelation 21:10, 22—22:5**The eternal heavenly city**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Many Australians would have woken up this morning greatly disappointed at yesterday's federal election. For some, it was because there was no sausage sizzle at the polling booth. I'm sure others don't like their local member or who is forming government. But even if you're someone who's not all that interested in politics, there are plenty of other reasons to be disappointed or disillusioned. Many through NSW and Qld are still dealing with the aftermath of flooding, or with torrential rain still threatening. Farmers in other places are waiting for rain so that this season's crops will grow. Food prices have gone up, house prices have gone up, Russia is still fighting in Ukraine, not to mention countless other conflicts that don't even make the news, Covid is still hanging around, and then there's this new threat of monkeypox.

With all this in the background today we heard some of John's vision of the heavenly realms from the book of Revelation. It's not always easy to understand what John is describing. Sometimes we're tempted to read it in very physical terms as a vision of the city map for heaven, and where we'll find the streets and buildings and water sources and so on. I think a better way to read it is as an image of the qualities of life that make up the new heavens and the new earth. It's a vision of the ultimate goal to which God will bring his creation. It's a reflection of the nature of eternal life, and so we can contrast it to the nature of our current earthly lives.

If we look at our political leadership and the turmoil and infighting that we often see there, the contrasting vision in Revelation is simply of God and the Lamb reigning together from the throne. There is no change of government, no princes and mortal men whose plans die with them. Just the divine rule of an almighty God who loves his people and provides for their every need.

If we look at our Australian landscape with floods in one direction and drought in the other, the contrasting vision in Revelation is the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne down the middle of the city and supplying the tree of life. No hint of it flooding the city and causing destruction and death. No hint of it ever drying up and causing famine and death. It is a river of life that supplies the tree of life which brings healing to the nations. Its very source is God, and it brings perpetual life to the city.

This river of life brings to mind the prophecies of Ezekiel 47 as well as Jesus' promise of giving living water to those who believe in him. And the tree of life takes us back to Eden, before humanity's fall into sin. This will be restored in the new creation, the effects of sin undone, and the people of God once more enjoying unbroken fellowship with God. There will be no temple because the entire heavenly city will be filled with God's presence, and everyone will live in God's eternal light.

But what about outside the city? If we look at the wider world at the moment, we see nations at war and countries facing internal upheaval, but the contrasting vision in Revelation is a city whose gates never need to be shut. This is an image that doesn't immediately bring great meaning in our lives, but for much of history, a nation's safety depended on the strength of the walls of its cities, and the ability to resist invaders. In times of war, those who lived outside the city would retreat within its walls, the gates would be shut, and the enemy hopefully defeated and unable to enter. The most dangerous time would be at night when the enemy could approach under the cover of darkness, but this danger does not exist in the eternal heavenly city because there is no night and there are no enemies.

John writes, "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." We could hear this as a warning, a threat that we will be on the outside if we're not good enough. But that issue is dealt with earlier in the book of Revelation. God's grace is sufficient for us, the blood of the lamb has cleansed us from all unrighteousness, and our names have been written in the book of life. Nothing impure or shameful or deceitful entering the city is actually a promise. A promise of God's protection, God's provision, and God's healing. A promise that God provides healing for the nations, healing from the idolatry and falsehood that had infected them.

Kings and nations will enter the city, but not in any way that is threatening, and not with any of the selfishness and evil that brings so much harm to our world today. This is the promise of life with God brought out of the long story of human sin and rebellion and suffering. From God comes light; from God comes the tree of life; from God's throne flows the water of life. God's presence is everywhere, sanctifying and healing the entire community.

We have a foretaste of the presence of God and of the eternal heavenly city today as we gather in worship. We know God's life-giving waters when we come to the baptismal font. We receive God's healing and forgiveness when we gather around the Lord's table. God's eternal light shines through us, and even though often obscured by human sin, the nations do see the truth of God's love.

We know that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are made a new creation, perfect and holy in God's sight. And the things that cause us distress and disappointment in this world will one day pass away and all that will remain are the perfect and holy things of God. This is our future. This is our great hope. And for that, we give thanks and praise to God almighty knowing that he calls us his own, saves us through the blood of the Lamb, and promises us an eternal future where nothing can separate us from his loving presence. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.