

Texts: Revelation 21:1-22:5

Sunday 13th October 2019

Brightons Parish Church

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

This is the last week of our sermon series about ‘the kingdom of God’, which we began back in late August. At that point I introduced the series by asking whether ‘the kingdom of God’ was of much importance to us, because often we do not talk about, or even use the words, ‘the kingdom of God’ very much. In particular, I highlighted the need to make decisions with a ‘kingdom of God’ mentality, that a kingdom-focused analysis and discussion might help us discern what is the best way forward, even if it doesn’t suit everyone. At that time, I was talking about the summer services, but isn’t it really interesting that on the final week of our series, we get the news about future Presbytery plans ...

and the realities that we have to work within going forward? I'm going to come back to the insert you found in your news sheet today about the reduction in ministers in the Braes area, later in the sermon – so, hold onto that thought for a bit.

But when I introduced the series, I also said it was my hope that our kingdom-focus would sharpen, like putting on a pair of glasses to see better, and also that we might see the kingdom of God as a binding theme throughout the Scriptures, from beginning to end, with each part adding a distinctive contribution to our understanding. And so, from Genesis, through the history of Israel, with Abraham, Moses, David, the prophets, and then into the New Testament, with the coming of Jesus and then the age of the Spirit and the work of the church.

Last week, we reminded ourselves that the Kingdom of God is still growing, Jesus is still extending His kingdom by the Spirit of God, through the Church of God. And that period runs through much of the New Testament: from Acts to the book of Jude.

And so, on our journey through the Scriptures, we come at last to the final book, the book of Revelation. Most likely this book was written by the apostle John, for his name is used a number of times, and we are told in the first chapter that it was written on the island of Patmos, where John was likely imprisoned. We cannot be exactly sure when John wrote this book, but the content suggests a time of great trial, maybe a time of persecution.

It's style of writing is that of 'apocalyptic' literature, which uses symbolism to convey its message. We often think of 'apocalyptic' meaning destruction or disaster, but actually, 'apocalypse' means 'revelation' or 'unveiling' in the original Greek language. Within the book of Revelation, then, God gives John a series of visions in which the Lord pulls back the curtain to reveal what is going on behind the scenes of human history. These visions were given to strengthen believers in their trials, particularly trials of persecution and suffering.

One word of caution with interpreting the book of Revelation, is that it is not really written as a timeline, even though we would really that, because we humans like to know what is happening and so gain a greater sense of control.

But instead, Revelation invites us to lift our eyes to Jesus, to His Kingdom, both present and future, and in doing so find peace and hope, even amidst times of uncertainty.

I clearly do not have time to go through the whole of Revelation today, which you'll be glad to hear, but the portion we read today summarises much at the heart of the book. And like with our other weeks we'll take our four **headings of: God's people, living in God's place, under God's rule and enjoying God's blessing – and we'll going to see what Revelation says about these. Because much of our reading today spoke of a future place, that's where we're going to begin, **with God's place.****

This vision in chapter 21 **begins with John seeing “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, 'Look! God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.'

(Rev. 21:1-3)

God's place, quite clearly, is now among the people, in a new and fuller way, and we are given pictures to try and help us grasp something of what this means for God's people. **In verse one, we are told that John sees 'a new heaven and a new earth', which echoes the prophecies of Isaiah, where God said He would make a new heaven and a new earth, and so what we read here is an affirmation that those great promises will be fulfilled.**

In this new heaven and new earth, there are echoes of the Garden of Eden, **for we read:**

‘Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal...On each side of the river stood the tree of life.’ (Rev. 22:1-2)

The deliberate inclusion of some features from Genesis chapter 2, highlights Eden will be restored: what once was, and has now been lost, will be once more.

****But this future place is not only a new heaven** and a new earth, a restoration of the Garden of Eden, it is also described as ‘the Holy City, the new Jerusalem’ (Rev. 21:2). Yet this is no ordinary city, for it is on a scale that we can barely imagine, and it needs no light. And both these features point to something special about this city.**

We are told that: ‘The city was laid out like a square, as long as it was wide. He measured the city with the rod and found it to be 12,000 stadia in length [1,400 miles], and as wide and high as it is long.’ (Rev. 21:16)

So, the new Jerusalem is a perfect cube, with its height being the most dramatic feature since the top of Mount Everest is less than 5.5 miles above sea level. But by being a cube, the new Jerusalem echoes the shape of the Most Holy Place in the first temple, the temple built by King Solomon. And that was the place where God’s presence was focused; it was a small place and only one person, once a year could enter.

But here, in the new Jerusalem, the whole city is the Most Holy Place, and the point we are meant to see...

is that there will be no special place where God's presence is concentrated, for God will be everywhere, indeed, **as we read**: 'God's dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.' (Rev. 21:3)

We won't have to go to a holy building to meet with God, the whole of the new creation is His place, and so that's why **we read in verse 22**: 'I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.' There will be no distance between God's people and Himself any more; they shall know Him perfectly and in His light they will live, and so the city needs neither sun nor moon, for the glory of God gives it light.

But who will live in this new creation, this new Jerusalem? Well, **Revelation shows...**

that the people of God will come from all nations (Rev. 21:24), indeed in an earlier vision within the book, John shares that ‘there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.’ (Rev. 7:9)

Earlier in the chapter we are told that the number is 144,000 but this isn’t meant to be a literal number, simply as verse 9 says, it is a number beyond reckoning, full of people from all ages and countries, from all cultures and all races, a perfect community, united in worship of Jesus.

And it is Jesus who truly takes centre stage here and throughout Revelation. A number of times we read of the ‘throne’, that ‘throne of God and of the Lamb’,...

the Lamb being Jesus, the one who was slain, the one who was given as sacrifice for our sins - He sits on the throne – and so, Jesus rules perfectly, and all submit to His rule, giving Him full worship.

The outworking of this complete and total rule of Jesus within the new creation is that all God's people will know God's blessing. As such, we read today that:

“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.’ (Rev. 21:4)

The cycle of life followed by death will be broken. There will be none of the things that spoil life currently here on earth, which is good, because our future there will be a physical one. What is more, we read that ‘no longer will

there be any curse' (Rev. 22:3) – that curse, beginning in Genesis 3, which was God's judgment on human sin, is completely removed, we will return to knowing life eternal, with none of the hardship or pain that we yearn to be free of now.

What we have here in Revelation is the perfected Kingdom of God, a picture of what will be, a picture of hope to give strength and perspective in the present time.

But we might ask: when will we get to enjoy this perfected Kingdom? The answer to that depends on a number of factors. If we die before the new creation comes then the Westminster Confession, which is affirmed by the Church of Scotland, **summarises the biblical teaching this way:**

‘The souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.’ (Q. 57)

And that picks up on words of Jesus, such as:

‘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) or...

‘Jesus [said], ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’ (Luke 23:43)

Or the words of Paul:

‘I...would prefer to be away from the body and at home with the Lord.’ (2 Cor. 5:8)

What it means to be at home with the Lord, what it means to be in paradise, is not fully revealed to us. At **our annual Bereavement Service** in May this year, I read a portion of a book written by one pastor, who wrote of a conversation he had with his father, and I'd like to read that again just now.

A few years before my father died, he asked to see me. I went into his study and we sat together. He was not well at all and his thoughts were much concerned with dying and death. I remember so vividly the questions he asked me.

'Son, is there time as we know it in heaven?'

I remember replying that I doubted it. It seemed to me then, and it seems to me now, that heaven is a dimension beyond space and time. Therefore, the measurement of

time, with which we are concerned, does not concern those in the heavenly realms.

This provoked a second question.

'If there is no time in heaven, there must be no consciousness of time passing, and that means there can be no sense of waiting for something future to come to pass.'

I remember replying that this seemed logical, though heaven's mysteries may not be unlocked by the key of logic alone.

Then Dad asked me his final question.

'If there is no time in heaven, and there is not consciousness of waiting, won't that mean that when I

die, I won't have to wait for you in heaven, even though you are still living here on earth?'

That was some question.

(Mark Stibbe, 'The Father You've Been Waiting For', pages 39-40)

A little food for thought, but as the Westminster Confession said, we may be in glory, yet we still are not in the full new creation. For that new creation, our new home with our new bodies, **will not be realised until Jesus returns. We are told repeatedly in Scripture that we live in the last days, the days between the first coming of Jesus and His second coming, His return.**

We have been waiting 2000 years for the return of Jesus, but the delay will not go on for ever...

The Scriptures affirm that this world is heading for a conclusion, and that just as God fulfilled His promises in the first coming of Jesus, so He will also fulfil His promises about the return of Jesus.

The apostle Peter predicted that sceptics would arise and wonder whether Jesus will ever return, and so Peter writes to fellow Christians in **his time about such matters:**

‘...in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” he promised? Ever since our ancestors died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’ (2 Peter 3:3-4)

But Peter goes on to give **encouragement by saying:**

‘But do not forget this one thing, dear friends: with the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.’ (2 Peter 3:8-9)

Two thousand years is not long from God’s perspective, and He is deliberately delaying the return of Jesus so that as many people as possible find salvation in Jesus. For not everyone gets into heaven. Our reading today affirmed that: ‘Nothing impure will ever enter it [the new Jerusalem], nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.’ (Rev. 21:27)

Only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life. It's a stark reminder: only those whom Jesus knows, only those who have relationship with Him, are allowed to enter the new creation, the new Jerusalem.

And in our day we don't like the sound of that – we want the good bit, the new creation, but we would rather leave to the side the bit about a final judgment, and that some, indeed maybe many, will not enter God's new creation. We wonder: can't we have one and just leave the other?

Well the Scriptures don't allow us – we have to gloss over or cut out so much of what is there to do away with the claim of Scripture that there will be a separation. What is more, do you really want a God who overlooks impurity, who overlooks sin?

When it comes to terrible acts of evil, we all want that judged, but when it comes to ourselves, to our loved ones, we want a different set of rules. We want to make a religion, and a God, of our liking; we want to make it possible to earn a place in heaven.

But we all know we're a mixed bag, that each of us is a mixture of good and something less than good, and as we read, nothing that is impure, nothing that is less than perfection can enter the new Jerusalem. And so, God must exclude it, but it does not make Him lacking in love. Indeed, as the apostle **Paul reminds us, 'love...does not rejoice in evil' (1 Cor.13:6) – it is because God is pure love, and completely holy, that He must judge and bar anything impure from entrance to the new creation.**

We don't like this, but to some degree, neither does God
– He disliked it enough to come in the person of His Son and give His life, in our place, to face our judgment, our eternal separation from Him, so that we would never have to face that reality, and could be sure of having our name written in the book of life, if only we trust in the Lamb who was slain, the Lord Jesus.

Friends, one day the perfected kingdom will come, when Jesus returns, and on that day, there will be a final judgment, and a separating of all peoples. Are we sure that our own names are in the book of life? Have we placed our trust in the salvation offered to us by Jesus? Have we recognised Him as our King, and bent the knee to Him? For that is the mark of all who will be with Him.

And when we bend the knee to Jesus, brothers and sisters, all fear can go, peace and joy can come, hope of that new creation, of that new home, can come as well – and we can have reassurance of our place in that perfected kingdom of the Lord Jesus.

And if that is our destiny, if that is the destiny to which God has called us, to belong to the perfected kingdom of Jesus, then it should make an impact now, and we should live accordingly now.

Remember, the apostle John was given these visions to encourage his fellow Christians and help them orientate themselves amidst a time of great trial and uncertainty.

Our time may not be as terrible, but I'd be surprised if anyone who read the insert in today's newsheet about the future Presbytery Plan was not taken aback.

For the Braes Churches are being asked to consider what ministry and life as a group of churches might look like if, and likely when, the number of ministers is reduced from 4 to only 2. And Brightons will be affected by this, we won't forever be able to be on our own and have one minister for one congregation. And so, we need to engage in the conversation, and work with our brothers and sisters from the Braes area to imagine and to dream what church might be like, and what opportunities might arise, with fewer numbers of ministers.

I'm not saying I like it – because, if anything, it is going to increase my workload, which is already busy; it is going to take me away from some things I would rather do; it is going to change what ministry looks like for me and for you; it is going to mean I have less time among you and less time to journey with you.

Our challenges are not like that of the first century Christians, but Revelation is just as helpful, I think, because it reorientates us to what is truly important, and what is upon the heart of God. **Revelation reminds us of the fundamentals:** of Jesus, the kingdom and salvation. As such, it also challenges us to hold lightly to more temporal things, to the ways we have liked things, to the way things have been but which, one day, will also pass away.

I wonder, as we go into uncharted territory as a congregation, can we be a people who make decisions and have conversations with a kingdom of God mentality and heart? We'll only be able to do so, if we know that our own names are written in the book of life and as such, that our true home is with Jesus in His perfected Kingdom. I pray we may be such a people. Amen.