

As a priest you often have the privilege of answering the most curious questions. There always seems to be a child who asks “Fr Robert what is heaven like?” Even though I haven’t been there yet (and I don’t intend on going there any time soon!), they must think that one such as myself grey haired, one who dares to speak for God, must somehow know more about heaven than anyone else. The stock answer will refer to angels sitting around in the clouds playing their harps and singing songs. There must be streets paved with gold and lined with precious stones. It always seems, just when I start to have fun with my imagination going wild with heavenly speculations, the child wants to know if his pet cat that was run over by a truck last week will be in heaven. Or if that isn’t enough, what about Grandma or Grandpa? And what about Uncle George who was cremated and whose ashes were scattered on his favourite golf course? How is God going to find all those ashes that have long since been washed into the creek and put George back together again in heaven? In heaven will Auntie Polly still have a limp and walk with a cane? What can I do? I always try to comfort them with answers that assure them that all will be well, even though I have never been to heaven.

Today’s reading continues our journey through the book of Revelation in these Sundays after Easter. Like all the others, today we have another picture of heaven. The book of Revelation is filled with wild, fantastic, and bizarre images of heaven and what it will be like when God finally brings the world to an end. The images are not meant to be literal pictures but imaginative poetry and metaphor that make it almost seem as if the author, Saint John, the Divine, was on some kind of psychedelic drug when he wrote it. In today’s reading John gives us another picture of what it will be like when that last day arrives. There will be an end to the suffering and pain that has afflicted life in this world. Instead, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. Even the seas, which in the minds of people of the ancient world were places that harboured horrible and dangerous monsters, would be no more. And most of all, there would be no more tears, mourning, suffering, or pain.

What makes the imagery of Revelation even more challenging to decipher is that it is written to persecuted Christians at the end of the first century in a kind of secret code. At that time many Christians in the Roman empire were suffering under the brutal persecution of Roman Emperor Diocletian, who hated the Christians and wanted to blame them for many of the problems that were afflicting the empire. The secret code was used in order to protect the Christians from further persecution by their enemies. The code disguised a marvellous message of hope intended to comfort these Christians in the midst of their terrible ordeal.

In a world that literally seemed to be under the control of beasts and demons, John comforts his readers with this wonderfully subversive message: Contrary to appearances, the hated decadent Roman empire and its supporters were not in control of the world and would not be able to crush the Christians. These beasts and enemies have already been destroyed. Christ in his death and resurrection has already disarmed all the powers of this world. The day is coming when Christ will make visible to all the victory he achieved on the cross and at the empty tomb. Now that victory remains hidden, but the day is coming when it will be visible to all. In the meantime the Christians addressed by this book can live with hope. Even though they must endure great suffering, they can look forward to the day when God will finally deliver them to a new heaven and a new earth. In spite of appearances to the contrary, a blessed future awaits the people of God!

Over the centuries, Christians have been criticised for propagating an “other worldly” hope at the

expense of the suffering and pain of this world. Karl Marx in his infamous *Communist Manifesto* attacked a society in which religion had become “the opiate of the people.” Religion anaesthetised people, making them numb to the suffering and injustice of this world. Christianity promised heaven in the next life at the expense of justice in this life.

Today’s psychedelic reading seems to justify just this kind of criticism. It seems focused only on life in heaven. The other-worldly images of a new heavenly Jerusalem can easily numb people to the suffering of this world. However, the focus of this reading is not this at all! In fact, it speaks a meaningful and comforting word to this world, to people suffering here and now.

In verse 3, John hears a voice from heaven announcing to the suffering Christians of the first century that God is coming to “dwell” on this earth among his people. The word “dwell” actually means “to pitch a tent.” To Christians familiar with the stories of the Hebrew scriptures, this word would immediately remind them of God literally “dwelling” among his people in the tabernacle. The tabernacle actually was a tent pitched in the midst of the people of Israel as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness.

This is also the same word that John uses in the opening chapter of his gospel. Speaking of the birth of Christ, John writes “The word became flesh and dwelled [pitched a tent] among us” (emphasis mine). John is not talking about the end of the world but the Jesus whose coming brings about something wonderfully new. With his coming there is a new Jerusalem, a new universe, a new heaven, and a new earth.

In these words John is assuring suffering and persecuted Christians at the end of the first century that their hope is not just up in the clouds or when they die and go to heaven ... but already now, here, in this world, in this time and place as Jesus Christ “pitches his tent” among them.

In today’s gospel, Jesus is with his disciples in the upper room, the night of his betrayal and arrest. The disciples are anxious about their future. Jesus has openly spoken of his departure. But Jesus assures them that they will not be left behind. He will give them the gift of his Spirit who will continue his work among them. In addition he gives them “a new commandment.” This commandment is not like the old commandments, filled with threats and demands. This commandment is new. It is something they get to do. They will get to love as Jesus loved them. In so doing, the world will see in them not only Jesus but also (and this is the shocker!) ... heaven on earth! In their love for one another, they will reflect the new kind of world that Jesus has made possible.

That same gift is ours. In the midst of lives that are often confusing and painful, in a world that is often dangerous and deadly, Jesus is among us making a new world, a new heaven, and a new earth. I wrote to you last year about a visit to a shanty town church in Lusaka Zambia when I was a young man. The Church had one simple stained glass window with a simple image of the heavenly Jerusalem. The shanty town was wracked with crime, but the congregation had decided not to flee but to stay in the shanty and serve the needs of its crumbling community. The congregation had decided that in order to save souls, it had to start by saving its community. As a result, the parish council decided that instead of repairing its stained-glass window, it would simply replace it with a more functional clear glass. Repair would not only have been costly but also would have meant repairing the glass of an image of the heavenly Jerusalem. The council felt that such an image was outdated and old fashioned too otherworldly for a congregation committed to its work.

Then someone pointed out that when you stood in the sanctuary and looked out through that stained-glass image of the heavenly Jerusalem and saw the shanty surrounding the church, suddenly that decaying shanty appeared in a whole new light. That window literally reflected the mission of that congregation. Through their ministry of compassion and to the needs of their community, they would be a bit of heaven on earth. Through them the people in their suburb, struggling to make sense in a hostile world, could catch a glimpse of the victory already won through the blood of the lamb.

Is that not what all of us will get to do through our daily work in the week ahead? As you leave this utterly beautiful place, renewed at the Lord's table, refreshed by his promises, strengthened by his Spirit, through your deeds of love and kindness you will give this world all too often suffering in its own kind of hell ... a glimpse of heaven on earth. Because Christ has triumphed, already now a new world is beginning to take shape, a world in which every tear will be wiped away, where death will be no more, where mourning, crying, and pain will be a distant memory, where there will be heaven on earth. Amen.

Fr Robert Newton