

Honley Parish Church and Brockholes S. George

16.vii.2017 — *Revelation* xxi.1-8

When I was in London, one of the things the Bishop was fond of saying was that the Bible begins in a garden, but it ends in a city. I applaud the sentiment, but of course he isn't quite right. As we saw a few weeks ago, when we looked at the first chapter of Genesis, right at the beginning of the Bible, the Bible doesn't begin in a garden. It begins with God, and apart from God, all that exists is a sort of watery nothingness: 'the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.'

That said, a garden does appear in the following chapter, which in the narrative of Genesis forms an alternative creation story; and the Bible does, indeed, end in a city. John is in prison on the island of Patmos, and he experiences visions of heaven and earth, and of the new heaven and the new earth – the new creation God is bringing about through Jesus Christ. 'I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem', he writes. Whatever else we can say about the eternal destiny of the world, we can say this: it is urban.

And that makes complete sense. It is not trees and flowers or fields and valleys that are made in the image of God. It is humanity, male and female. So where do we see God? Not in the garden or in the rural wilderness; not even in the manicured countryside of the gentler parts of England; but in one another, in other human beings. I get rather tired of those posters with

Bible quotations on them alongside a soothing picture of the Lake District. Why not put them on a picture of King's Cross station or a supermarket on a Saturday afternoon? John's vision is not of the Holy Meadow. His vision is of the Holy City.

But what is especially interesting for our purposes is that the Holy City is not a coastal city. On Friday I was in Newcastle, and we went to Tynemouth to have fish and chips for lunch. If you know the geography of Newcastle, you'll know that the city essentially extends to the east through Wallsend and North Shields all the way to the coast. If you've been to Brighton, you'll know that the city centre spills on to the pebbles of the beach. But the Holy City isn't a coastal city. John tells us that 'the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.'

As we have seen over the past few weeks, the sea is a place of chaos in the Bible. It is a place God restrains, so that there is a distinction between the sea and the dry land, and so there is somewhere for us to live. The sea teems with life, but it is also the means of God's judgement when the barriers are taken away and the whole creation is flooded. God's promise, signified by the rainbow, was never to flood the world again. The final fulfilment of that promise is seen here in Revelation 21, as the sea is no more. The place of chaos and judgement has been eradicated, and God's dwelling-place is among the people. The old order of things has passed away.

There is no sea. But there is water. The Holy City is a place of refreshment. The risen Christ says, 'To the thirsty I will give

water without cost from the spring of the water of life.' You know what it feels like. It's a hot day, and you've been walking for ages carrying bags of shopping. You get in the car and you roll down the windows but it doesn't make much difference, because the air is warm and there is no wind. But when you get home and run the tap and have a glass of cold water, the refreshment it gives is life-giving. The new creation is like that cold water. It is the water of which Jesus speaks when he addresses the Samaritan woman at the well: 'Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.' I wonder who needs to drink that water this morning? There are so many dry wells in the world, promises of refreshment and life that in the end fail to satisfy. As Samuel Rutherford, the Scottish Puritan, said: 'Dry wells send us to the fountain.'

There is no sea in the Holy City. But there is a spring, a fountain. And there is also a river – not in the chapter we read this morning, but in the chapter which follows, the very last chapter of the Bible. 'Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.'

The Holy City has a tree-lined avenue with a river running down the middle. The image is not of many trees but of one enormous life-giving tree – the tree of life, the leaves of which bring healing and wholeness to a world of pain. In the garden at

the beginning of the Bible, in the second chapter of Genesis, there are two trees. There is the tree of life, and there is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God's command was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: 'when you eat from it you will certainly die.' The woman and her husband did eat from it, and shame entered the world for the first time. But in the Holy City, it seems there is only one tree – a tree which brings not death, but life for the whole world.

Through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God is bringing about a new creation. The Holy City will come down out of heaven from God. Everything that spoils the world will be excluded from the Holy City. The chaos of the sea will be no more. There will be no place for 'the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practise magic arts, the idolaters and...liars' – because this Holy City will be a place of courage and truth and life. There will be a spring, a fountain, for refreshment. There will be a river to water the tree which brings healing. And most of all there will be people: '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.' The great promise of the new creation is not that it will be a place of entertainment or jollity. It is not even that it will be a place of refreshment and life, though it certainly will be that. The great promise of the new creation is that God will be there.

Does that thought fill you with joy? The old Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly begins with the question 'What is the chief end of man?' The answer is, 'Man's chief end is to glorify

God, and to enjoy him for ever.' The purpose of the world is not to advance the cause of humanity, but to glorify God. The promise of the new creation is that it will be a place where God is enjoyed for ever. If that thought does not thrill you, I plead with you to repent of your sins and believe in the gospel; to turn away from everything that spoils the world and to put your trust in the good news of God's unconditional love in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Bible begins with God and watery nothingness. It ends with God and his people in the Holy City. There is no more sea, but there is water – kept in its place, bringing refreshment and healing. And we shall enjoy God for ever.