

The New Jerusalem
Easter 6
May 26, 2019
Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23

Dear Friends in Christ,

It has been said that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Today's reading from the Book of Revelation turns that definition around. In this reading we see a heavenly vision with an earthly meaning.

The description of the heavenly Jerusalem is really a "parable in reverse" — intended to fortify and give courage to God's faithful people of every age, especially in times of distress and persecution. But before we get to that, we need to have a little background.

First of all, what does this city, the heavenly Jerusalem represent? The book of Revelation is filled with all kinds of images and symbols. The heavenly Jerusalem is also a symbol. In last Sunday's Epistle we read the opening verses of this same chapter where John describes the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a "bride beautifully dressed for her husband". The Bride of Christ is the Church, the faithful people of God. And, my friends, that's you! Washed in the blood of the Lamb through Holy Baptism and connected to Him by faith, you are the bride of Christ.

That image was already used way back in Old Testament times where Isaiah describes the city of Jerusalem and its inhabitants as the bride of the Lord. No longer will she be forsaken, but the Lord will restore her, rebuild her walls and sustain her people. Isaiah wrote at a time when God's people needed a new vision. Jerusalem had been destroyed by the Babylonians. The city's walls were broken down and the people who were returning to resettle Jerusalem needed to know that God was going to restore them: "Arise, shine, for your light has come", Isaiah writes in chapter 60. "And the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn...no longer will they call you Deserted, or name your land Desolate...for the Lord will delight in you and your land will be married. As a young man marries a maiden, so will your sons marry you; as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

Jesus also spoke of himself as the bridegroom. In the parable of the wedding banquet, the king invites many people to join in the wedding feast for his son, but they refused to come. In the parable of the 10 virgins, the five foolish virgins are shut out of the festivities when the

bridegroom arrives, because they were not prepared. In the verse that comes just before our text we read these words: One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' Then the angel takes John to a mountain great and high, and showed him the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. The city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem, is the Bride of Christ — the Church, inhabited by you and me and all who await His coming!

The second thing we need to understand about this text is the historical situation in the Mediterranean world at the time this was written. Most scholars date the book of Revelation to around the year AD 95. It was clearly written during a time of great persecution of the Church, probably under the Roman Emperor, Domitian. Twenty-five years earlier, a most significant event had taken place — the Roman war against the Jews which saw the siege and total destruction of Jerusalem in the year AD 70. So at the time Revelation was written the Old Jerusalem was no more. It had been completely desolated, abandoned. The people had been killed or driven away. The temple had also been destroyed. The only thing that remained in Jerusalem was a Roman garrison. What a blow that must have been to those Jews who saw Jerusalem as the place where God lived. Even His special dwelling, the Temple no longer existed.

With this background in mind, we can look a little closer at our text.

The old Jerusalem can no longer meet the needs of God's people. But John sees the new Jerusalem, the home of God's people, coming down from God. In stark contrast to the smoldering ruins of the old Jerusalem, the new Jerusalem "shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. This place just radiates with the glory of God.

It has a "great high wall". Old Jerusalem's walls lie broken and crumbled. But the new Jerusalem, the Church, has strong, secure walls. It is a place of eternal safety and security. We remember Jesus' response to Peter's great confession: "upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The wall is great and strong, but it has twelve gates — three on each side. The gates represent the twelve tribes of Israel. The last chapter of the book of Ezekiel in the Old Testament has this same description where each of the gates is given a name of one of the sons of Jacob. The Christian church did not come out of a vacuum. It is inexorably connected to the history and faith of God's Old Testament people. There are twelve angels, an angel for each gate. After Adam and Eve disobeyed God, they were driven from the Garden of Eden and an angel with a flaming sword was stationed at the garden's entrance to keep them from returning. The angels at the twelve gates, however, are not there to keep people out, but to welcome them home.

The walls of the New Jerusalem, the Church, are built upon twelve strong foundations upon which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. Elsewhere in the New

Testament the Apostles are called the foundation of the Church. In Ephesians 2, St. Paul affirms that the citizens of God's household and family "were built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets," with Jesus Christ as its cornerstone. The clear joining of the twelve tribes of the Old Testament and the twelve apostles of the New Testament into one Holy Structure clearly shows the unity of ancient Israel and the New Testament Church. John is being reminded that there has always been only one covenant of grace embracing the entire people of God — those of old by faith in the promise of the coming Messiah and those who now embrace by faith the fulfillment of that promise in Jesus Christ.

In the New Jerusalem there is no temple. John writes: "I did not see a temple in the city because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple". God had abandoned the Jerusalem temple long before its destruction by the Romans. In fact, God had come into the world in human form. Jesus Christ is the temple. He is its Great High Priest and He is the Great Atoning Sacrifice for Sin. All that was accomplished in the earthly temple has been accomplished in Jesus Christ.

"And the city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp." The sun and moon are created things. The Church of God does not depend on any created things to give it glory. The glory of God and the Light of Christ is what gives us hope and joy. There is no more gloom. No longer can clouds hide the sun or sadness and grief overwhelm us because we have a light and hope that can never be destroyed.

The vision of a New Jerusalem was intended to give believers a strong confidence in God — especially during trouble and persecution. Within the church there was a hope and joy that nothing could destroy. Yes, you could be hurt if you claimed to be a Christian. Your property could be seized, your business and home destroyed, your very life and the lives of your family could be threatened or even taken. But in the end you had an eternal home, a heavenly home that was built on solid foundations and with strong walls where you would be safe for all eternity in the presence and glory of God.

When you grow discouraged and when life throws you another curve, when evil threatens to overwhelm you and trouble causes you to grow discouraged, remember the heavenly vision of the New Jerusalem and be strengthened in faith. You and I no longer live in the old Jerusalem — falling apart when threatened, crumbling when persecuted. We now live in the New Jerusalem, the Church, protected by God and sustained no matter what may befall us. Let us rejoice in that assurance and take comfort in God's strong city which will be ours forever. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.