

# The Heavenly City

Evensong 10<sup>th</sup> May 2026 – Canon Neil Patterson

## Zechariah 8.1-13, Revelation 21.22-22.5

This evening's readings are among the most beautiful and memorable of the many word-pictures of redemption offered to us in the Scriptures. The book of Zechariah comes from the era of the restoration of the Temple after the Exile, but includes much mysterious and inspiring imagery, to which I shall return. But our passage this evening is a simple and lovely depiction that echoes the hope of the exiled and troubled in every age – a return to the restored city, where the old can rest and reflect, and hope for the future is assured in the children playing happily in the streets. Coincidence of translation makes it ring particularly well here in Bristol, with the assurance that the Lord will save people from the West Country. It doesn't mention the middle-aged, who are presumably still doing the work!

And then we had the well-known imagery of the heavenly City from Revelation, that finally comes after all the plagues and woes and beasts that may or may not represent various emperors and the like. Apart from what is almost an aside about excluding those who practice abomination and falsehood, it is one of joy and redemption. I think these have been set in the Lectionary as a sort of happy culmination of the Easter season, before we move on to Ascension and Pentecost. So I want to consider how such imagery is made and evolves, because we need to keep renewing it in every generation.

The images of the restored Temple and city in Scripture are, of course, related, and develop in successive texts. It is not a strictly linear progress, but there is a movement from the simpler, more literal hope of seeing Jerusalem restored and worship in the Temple resume, to something more mysterious, which can only eventually be fulfilled in a spiritual reality. Zechariah is something of a mixture – alongside texts like our reading tonight, chapter 14 includes dramatic oracles of mountains moving and a plain being formed around Jerusalem. Or like the last section of Ezekiel, which contains a detailed description of the restored Temple, there is the image of water flowing out to heal and renew the land. And there are suggestions of how the blessing of the Temple will be extended at the very end of Zechariah, that “the cooking-pots in the house of the Lord shall be as holy as the bowls in front of the altar; and every cooking pot in Judah and Jerusalem shall be sacred to the Lord of hosts.”

But this tentative extension of the holiness of the Temple is transformed in Revelation by those critical opening words, “I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.” We do not know exactly when Revelation was written, but it

seems very likely that it was in the first generation after Jerusalem and the Temple had been destroyed by the Romans. And so, by contrast to the prophets of the first destruction under the Babylonians, who promised a restored earthly city and temple, John proclaims the eternal Jerusalem, which has no need of a city because God is visibly present to everyone, with no need for mediating sacrifice or sanctified courts into which only a few may enter. And that is, as we all know, an abiding image of the Christian hope to which we all look.

As Mel explored at Evensong last week, though, there are many ways of imaging the next life, and as physical, mortal creatures living this one, God can only show us through what we can experience here to understand it. And in doing so, we will always tend to think instinctively of times when we have been happy. The example of this which came to me as I was reflecting on the readings was of Doreen, a member of one of my village congregations in Herefordshire. Her grandson died tragically aged about 19 working at a golf course for his father and the brakes failed on a cart he was driving and rolled him into a lake. I can recall talking to her a while afterwards as her grief continued, and she remembered past times in the village. She was from rural working-class stock, and still lived in one of the former council houses that, as in so many villages, were rather shamefully built tucked down a lane out of sight of all the nice houses. But she remembered fondly the times when her own children had been young in the 60s/70s, when those houses were new and yet there was still a strong village community. There had been boys and girls playing happily, but in her loss, and in what felt, and feels, a harder and more divided world, she could not look forward to sitting happily, staff in hand, like the old people of Zechariah's prophecy. I don't know if she is still alive, but my prayer then as now is that she knows the peace of the heavenly city. We will all have, I hope, happy times in our lives – maybe for some of you yet to come – to look back on in times of trouble.

It brings me on, though, to the risk of imagining the new Jerusalem only in terms of happy memories. In a number of letters late in life, the saintly Bishop of Lincoln at the turn of the last century, Edward King, alluded to heaven in terms of reminiscence of his days long before as Vice-Principal of a theological college, often writing "the gate will open, and it will be like Cuddesdon again." Happy memories as I have of that place too, they were mixed with enough ambiguity to hope for better from God's promised Kingdom! We have always to remind ourselves that the Christian faith calls us forward, to a better future than any we have ever known. This contrast is there in the difference between the fantasy worlds of Tolkien and Lewis. Middle-Earth faces west across the sea, at the fading light of sunset into which beauty and memory depart with the Elves. The Roman Catholic Tolkien drew very much from the vanished world of the Middle Ages. Narnia looks east, towards the dawn from which Aslan returns to renew all things, and maybe the Protestant Lewis was less enchanted by memory, many as the similarities are.

In the Church of England, at least in those parts like here where we maintain the music and traditions hallowed by time, the temptation to let our imagination live by the splendours of the past is strong. But for all that we can learn from it, our faces must at the deepest level be turned to the future that awaits us, the heavenly city of peace that God has prepared. I have often ended my sermons with words from the Welsh 20<sup>th</sup> century poet R. S. Thomas, a man not enamoured of the modern world, and indeed whose biography charting his move to steadily more remote North Walian parishes is titled, “The Man Who Went into the West.” But at his best, he could remember that tempting as it is to look to the fading light of evening, especially as our days grow old, in Christ we look to the morning, when the dawn breaks, and the shadows flee away. The poem is titled simply, The Kingdom:

It's a long way off but inside it  
There are quite different things going on:  
Festivals at which the poor man  
Is king and the consumptive is  
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look  
At themselves and love looks at them  
Back; and industry is for mending  
The bent bones and the minds fractured  
By life. It's a long way off, but to get  
There takes no time and admission  
Is free, if you purge yourself  
Of desire, and present yourself with  
Your need only and the simple offering  
Of your faith, green as a leaf.