

Sunday 3rd October 2021 – Revelation 21:1-5,22:1-5,20-21

I wonder what you imagine heaven to be like? Perhaps it is something so far outside your comprehension that you don't really imagine anything at all. But for many people, a number of ideas are very strong: first, heaven is 'up there'. This is natural, since we use the words 'heaven' and 'the heavens' (i.e. the sky, the atmosphere) interchangeably. When footballers score goals it is common nowadays to look up as part of their celebrations, either towards God or towards loved ones looking down on them. We assume wherever heaven is, it is 'somewhere up there'.

Second, we find it hard to picture it as a place at all. The old cliché is playing harps sat on a cloud – again, taking this idea that if it is 'up there' then where else would you sit, especially in the UK where we have cloud cover most of the time? Not sure that a harp would be the most practical instrument in the circumstances, but I digress.

Third, pretty much all of us think that if heaven exists, we leave this earth to get there: heaven and earth are two separate places, and will be for ever.

So it's very helpful to look at the most famous actual vision of heaven in the bible to see *what Scripture really says about it. And it comes as quite a shock.* Our passage today comprises excerpts of the last two chapters of the bible when God has called time on this world and eternity begins. It's worth emphasising that this is a vision, not a travel guide – heaven will always remain too wonderful to put adequately into words. But it does tell us some very important, and quite surprising, things.

First, in the final reality heaven and earth join together. God's people don't just live in heaven, but in a 'new heaven and new earth' (21:1). To make it clear that the two are actually united, St John (who received this vision) sees 'the Holy City, the new Jerusalem; coming down out of heaven from God' and also declares: 'Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.' Heaven comes down to earth, in other words – the earth doesn't disappear, but joins the eternal kingdom of God – the two are united.

Second, as earth and heaven join together, it is made 'new'. The word translated 'new' – 'kainos' – can also mean *renewed*, so the implication is that this final dwelling place for God's people is not something fashioned from scratch, but something restored, perfected. We might conclude, then, that it will be recognisably like this earth, only much, much better – like all the absolute best bits fused together and perfected for eternity. Indeed, the passage is clear that all its imperfections will be gone: 'no death, no mourning, no crying, no pain.'

Third, this place is very definitely somewhere real. We are not sat on a cloud getting bored, but living in a community. The city described in the rest of chapter 21 is huge and incredibly beautiful. But it's not a concrete jungle either – this perfected world has a tree right in the middle, which bears fruit every month. I think we can reasonably conclude that the beauty of creation will also be all around us in eternity, as human society and the glory of creation dwell in harmony together.

So if we return to our popular image of heaven we actually discover that our final eternal destination is not so much 'up there' as 'down here' too; not just dull clouds but a real place with real cities and real green spaces; and that ultimately *heaven comes down to earth and they join together for ever.*

I'm not saying that we should stop looking up to heaven, that's a natural human instinct. But we need to shed this idea that heaven is totally remote from earth – it's much the same misconception as the idea that spiritual life has nothing to do with 'real life'. This passage reminds us that, ultimately, the spiritual life will be the only real life for everyone, for eternity – and our theology of heaven goes a long way to helping actually live like that.

Today we conclude our series looking at creation and the environment, and this passage is a great place to land, because it reminds us that God's plan for the world is ultimately to join it to heaven, in the perfected state it was always meant to enjoy. **The bible starts with creation and ends with the new – or renewed – creation.** God doesn't give up on this world but restores it – and our calling as humans who bear the image of God is not to give up on it, either.

There is a theology that says that it doesn't matter what we do to this world because God will make a new one at the end of time. Revelation 21 and 22 tell us the opposite. It matters profoundly what we do to this world because God's ultimate plan is to renew it and join it with heaven. In fact God plans to come and live here with us!

We've been National members for 9 years now, and in that time we've visited dozens of stately homes. One consistent story for many of those houses is that the dramatic improvements, often at vast expense, that many of their owners made in the 18th and 19th centuries were so that the house would be fit for the monarch to stay in. At the time, this was held to be the highest honour for any family, and they would go to any lengths, sometimes even bankrupting themselves in the process, to create a beautiful home fit for the king or queen.

200 years later, we still enjoy the benefits of that on our days out. But there is a bigger invitation for all of us here. The eternal king is one day going to come with all the glory of heaven and live in our home. **Our call is to do all we can to make this home – planet earth – fit for him to live in.** In the end we are all called to care for our planet not because of our political persuasion or our love of nature, but because the king is coming to stay – not just for a night or a week, but forever. The least we can do is our best to be ready.

The one who testifies to these things says: Yes, I am coming soon. Amen, come Lord Jesus. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's people. Amen.