

... the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

Acts 16:9–15

Psalm 67

Revelation 21: 9-10; 22—22:5

John 14:23–29

Text: Revelation 21:9-10

Then one of the seven angels ... came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.

Introduction

If I were to summarize the message of the book of Revelation that John was wanting to convey to his hearers—a church that was suffering terribly under a wave of Roman persecution that sent John into exile on a windswept island—I think this saying of Jesus at the last supper, recorded in John’s gospel, captures it well. “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.” The Apostle John, who was in the room to hear this from Jesus’ lips, now knows that the church needs to hear this word afresh.

1. Rome promised peace. “Pax Romana” (Latin for roman peace) is roughly a 200-year-long timespan that saw unprecedented peace and economic prosperity throughout the Empire. Of course it was peace enforced at the end of a sword. The economic prosperity was fueled by an enormous slave underclass. Anything that threatened that peace was dealt with harshly. One needs only to think of our Lord’s crucifixion. Christians were accused of being atheists because they would not recognize the imperial religious cult. Clearly, a people that would not worship the emperor were deemed a threat to good order and peace.

I subscribe to an e-newsletter from the Voice of Martyrs organization. As I read current stories of the persecution of Christians in other parts of the world I marvel at their courage in the face of brutal treatment and threats to life. We don’t face those kinds of assaults and threats here and I wonder if I did would I have the courage of my fellow believers. Perhaps it is other pressures we face that deflect us from our following of Christ and commitment to the church.

Joel Kotkin is a Fellow in Urban Studies at Chapman University (California) and author of *The Coming of Neo-Feudalism*. In a January 2022 [article](#) he reminds us that past societies structured on feudalism essentially saw most people living in bondage to a ruling military aristocracy and a clerical class. Kotkin is not the only one who thinks we are headed there again given how much of the world's wealth is concentrated in the hands of so few. He outlines American experience and how in recent decades wealth gains have been made overwhelmingly by the top 1 percent of households. Here are some of the numbers.

The combined wealth of the richest four hundred Americans now exceeds the total wealth of 185 million of their fellow citizens. This pattern has been accelerated by the pandemic. The number of millionaires around the world jumped to 56.1 million in 2021, with 5.2 million joining the group last year. Five companies, Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Microsoft now make up 20 percent of the American stock market's total value. In [Canada](#) the top one per cent of the richest families own close to 25 per cent of the country's wealth, according to statistics released last year from the Parliamentary Budget Office, while the bottom 40 per cent of Canadian families own barely more than one per cent.

Kotkin notes that this reality—wealth concentrated in fewer hands and the rest doing with less—has sparked calls for a universal basic income to keep the masses from destitution. In the terms of past feudal societies, you don't want the peasants revolting. Whether one agrees with this analysis or not one thing is for sure, the western world worships wealth.

2. The book of Revelation describes in vivid images two cities Rome (code-named Babylon) and the new Jerusalem. The former in grotesque images and the latter with spectacular beauty. The former is called a whore and the latter a bride. The angel takes John to see both cities and observe their fate. The former is judged and does not endure the latter is secured by the presence of God and endures forever.

Listen to the contrast; “Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the judgement of the great whore who is seated on many waters, with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.’ (Harlotry is used in the Bible as an image for idolatry). (Revelation 17:1-2) And then from our reading today: “Then 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.’ And in the spirit he

carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.”

I point this out to you because the book climaxes in the wonder of holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. The first city was the one that was ‘drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.’ Revelation is a letter written to encourage believers; that the city of Babylon (Rome) was judged and would not endure while the glories of the city that does endure is beyond our imagination—so hold on to faith in Christ.

One of the things we are told about Babylon (Rome) is that “the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.” (Revelation 18:1) Wealth concentrated in the hands of very few. Wealth accumulated on the institution of slavery. On the ground the image Rome portrays doesn’t seem so grotesque. Society is peaceful, opportunities exist, things are in good order, everyone is in their place—rulers rule, the wealthy are served, and slaves serve. But God says this idolatry of putting wealth in the place that belongs to Him has been judged. It is decaying and does not last. It is corrupt and destroys people. Which city should we emulate; which kingdom’s values should guide our living?

Some commentators on Revelation believe that the whore represents affluence and the beast on which she rides represents tyranny. You could certainly believe that the first century Christians living in the Roman Empire thought so. Remember that Jesus said you cannot serve God and wealth. Keep in mind also that the Roman empire did not endure; neither will the empires of our day.

3. Then one of the seven angels ... came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. I invite you to think about John for a moment—the author of this Revelation. He intends this letter to bolster faith among a people who are being battered for believing. And if this message will in fact strengthen the persecuted believer it does so because it first bolstered John’s faith.

Solitary confinement is difficult to endure. John was sent into exile for his testimony of Jesus. Cut off from the church he loves. He knows the suffering the church is enduring. He writes, “I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the patient endurance... he writes this after he has seen this vision. I could well imagine John that Sunday morning alone in the crush of exile praying, “Lord Jesus, what is going on?” I was in the Spirit on the

Lord's day, John tells us. John continues what he always does on Sunday—he worships. What was he expecting that day? Maybe a repeat of last Sunday. On this Sunday he brings the crush of exile to worship.

When we come to church we bring the hurts and pains and anxieties common to our world. We may arrive at worship in any mood at all: fatigue, boredom, anxiety, resentment, anger, hope, hopelessness. And then in the course of the service, whether through hymn, prayer, scripture, anthem, sermon or children's story; in the course of the service it happens for us. Our Lord addresses the very thing we needed help with. The challenge may still be before us but somehow the anxiety is gone.

John was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day. For him it meant a vision of his Lord. "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me (the right hand is always the hand of mercy) saying, 'Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.'" In that instant John was oriented afresh to the truth and encouraged afresh in the midst of tribulation. Every bit as much will be given to us at worship, won't it? Yes, much of worship is repetitive; it has to be repetitive just because we repeatedly need to be oriented to the truth and encouraged in the midst of tribulation. The word John received—"Fear not, I am the first and the last... I died, and behold I am alive for evermore..."—there was nothing new in this. John was exiled because he had publicly stood up for the one who had died and was now alive for evermore. There was nothing new in John's vision at all. But none of us needs novelty; all of us need reinvigoration in what we know already. As mature a Christian as John was, he was not yet beyond needing renewal himself.

I know that we do not face the kind of persecution John's church faced. I do want to say a word about affluence and its dulling and distracting impact on the church. In relationship to the world we Canadians live in affluence. Even the poorest among us have access to health care and education and reliable banking services, plus, plus. Over the course of my life affluence has increased and in that increase our leisure pursuits have increased. We can afford to do more things...and the importance of corporate worship has faded into the background. For many it falls into a category of weekend leisure and there is a lot of competition for that time. Pastorally, I think we need a fresh vision from John's Revelation of God's judgement of Babylon and a renewed vision of the kingdom that does endure.

4. It is my conviction that the theme of John's Revelation is captured in the declaration of the loud voices in heaven that followed the blast of the seventh trumpet, the declaration that was chosen for the Hallelujah Chorus of Handel's Messiah, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign for ever and ever." (Revelation 11:15) That Jesus Christ reigns now is a repeated theme in the book. Recall John's greeting at the beginning of the book, "Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, *and the ruler of the kings of the earth.*"

Our reading today is a picture of the consummation of his rule ... the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. We read a portion of what John saw of this city and it is spectacular. Today I have tried to set this glorious future in the context of the message of the book; in the context of the suffering and harried church that hears this message; in the context of John's own life as he hears the message. It is a message for us in all that we face living as Christians in the world hostile to God. And I find it a great word of hope.

The vision of this city is glorious. It is called the wife of the Lamb, the bride of Christ, a metaphor for the church, the company of the redeemed. Is this a vision of God's people or the dwelling place of God's people—it is both. As we witness with John the city we are assured that God's presence establishes it—it is inviolable and endures. The measurements of the city witnesses that God's presence secures and guarantees its perfection. The material of the city tells us that God's permanent presence causes it to reflect the glory of God. His presence will call forth the response of praise—nothing untrue or evil will be allowed to enter. And the garden is a picture of Eden restored.

There is much joy to be found in reflecting on its glory but for today let it encourage you to persist in faith, to endure, to recommit for yet another week to keep following. We are told that 'the nations will walk by its light.' The point I lift to you is we don't need to wait to walk by its light. We walk by its light now. In this life the believer has a foot in two kingdoms and our weight is shifted to the kingdom of our Lord. We strive to live the values of His kingdom here.

Clearly the new Jerusalem is the place to be. It would be important to note the Apostle John's assertion that 'only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life' are in this city. The scripture witnesses that it is through faith in Jesus Christ that our name is inscribed there. The pen is always poised ready to write another

name. The Apostle John tells us that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish but have eternal life.

Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.' And in the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God.