



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

March 21, 2021
The Fifth Sunday of Lent

Choral Evensong
3pm

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A Sermon by
Father Mark Brown

on

Psalms 46 and 87, Isaiah 49:13-18, *and* Revelation 21:1-7

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“Dreams and Visions”: The New Jerusalem

Next Sunday we enter Jerusalem with Jesus, mounted on a donkey, waving palm fronds and shouting our Hosannas. Today we conclude our sermon series “Dreams and Visions” with the culminating vision of the entire Bible: the New Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the city outside the United States that I’ve visited more often than any other—fifteen times. Most of those times my base of operations was St. George’s College, next to St. George’s Cathedral—the cathedral of the Anglican Church in Jerusalem—which one travel guide describes as “a bit of England’s green and pleasant land in Jerusalem.” That being a sly reference to William Blake’s poem about the New Jerusalem.

It’s a city I’ve felt drawn to powerfully—and for a number of reasons, not just for work. The sheer complexity and high drama of its long history are endlessly fascinating. It’s the city of crucifixion and resurrection, the city of Mohammed’s mystical Night Journey, the city of the Great Temple—now gone, destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. It’s a city of beauty and hospitality and wonderful food that welcomes pilgrims from all over the world.

It’s a city a psalm calls the joy of all the earth and the very center of the world [Psalm 48]—but excoriated by the prophets for its apostasies and iniquities. A city destroyed by invaders and defiled by the idolatries of its own kings. A city wept over by Jesus—because they did not recognize the things that make for peace. A city inhabited today by people divided—and not just between, but within its various communities. Fist fights periodically break out in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher between Christian clergy of different denominations.

Joy of all the earth, city of the great King, the very center of the world, says the psalm. Well, if not geographically the center of the world, to go to Jerusalem is to go to the heart of the human condition—in all its complexity, in all its intractable divisions. And yet, a New Jerusalem is the culminating vision of the entire Bible.

“And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.”

A new city, renewed, rebuilt, all as God and human hearts would have it be. John describes his vision in highly poetic, symbolic language. Gates of pearl, streets of translucent gold, walls and foundations of jewels and so forth. It’s probably just as well not to spend too much time trying to crack the code of John’s obscure symbolism and see the New Jerusalem as a broad metaphor: a metaphor for our common life as fellow human beings on this earth. The New Jerusalem can be built in England’s green and pleasant land, like the poem says, or wherever we happen to be.

The New Jerusalem represents our highest aspirations for life together: life together in this human community which God has chosen for his tabernacle. *“And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.”*

There’s an earlier tabernacle in Scripture: the one built for the Ark of the Covenant while the Israelites wandered in the wilderness. Over a third of the Book of Exodus is given over to the design and construction of the first tabernacle. The design comes down from heaven, through Moses to a shadowy, obscure figure by the name of Bezalel. Bezalel is a master artisan of all sorts: carving, metalwork, textiles, embroidery, pottery, carpentry, interior decorating and the sewing of vestments—all the things needed to build and furnish a sanctuary for the worship of God.

The instructions from heaven go on for several chapters. And then several more describe how Bezalel and his apprentices implemented the divine instructions. A tabernacle made by human hands, according to a design from heaven. It does go on and on—but at least it’s all in one place: Chapters 25-40 of the Book of Exodus.

The new tabernacle of John’s vision is human society—the New Jerusalem. We are that new tabernacle. But the instructions, the design are not all in one place like the first tabernacle. They’re scattered all over the Bible. In the Torah, the Psalms, the Prophets; in the Gospel and the Letters. The design, the directions, the instructions for the new city are all there—we just need to sort through the Scriptures and put it all together.

What’s this New Jerusalem to be like? The strongest single clue comes from Jesus himself. Coming down into Jerusalem on his donkey he pauses to look out over the city. And weeps in sheer frustration—and, perhaps, not just for Jerusalem, but for the entire human race. Why? Because we did not recognize the things that make for peace. [Luke 19:42]

But we know the things that make for peace—it’s all there in the Bible, over and over again. Righteousness, justice, love, truth. *“Clouds and darkness are round about him; righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne.”* [Psalm 97:2] God’s own being is a mystery—hidden behind metaphorical clouds and darkness—but there’s not much mystery to God’s agenda. Righteousness, justice, love, truth. We know this. That’s why the prophets excoriated Jerusalem: for its unrighteousness and injustices, its lack of care for the poor and powerless.

And yet a vision for the new city begins to take shape in the pages of the Old Testament. Psalm 87 [2-5]:

Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of our God.

*I count Egypt and Babylon among those who know me;
 behold, Philistia, Tyre and Ethiopia: in Zion were they born.
Of Zion it shall be said, "Everyone was born in her, and the most
 high shall sustain her."
The Lord will record as he enrolls the peoples,
 "These also were born there."*

"Everyone was born in her": a vision of Jerusalem as the mother city of all peoples, a vision of inclusion. I think when the Bible says "everyone" what it actually means is everyone. And notice that list: Egypt, Babylon, Philistia—all ancient enemies of Israel. Even they are children of Jerusalem. This is a new and radical vision, astonishing—a prophecy not yet fully realized. A city to which everyone, even ancient enemies belong—that's the plan, the design coming down from heaven to build this new tabernacle we call life together.

And there's more: Love your neighbor as yourself. Love the foreigner in your midst. Love your enemy. Care for the hungry, the thirsty, the sick, the poor and the least among us. We've got all the directions we need for how to build the new tabernacle—the new city that *does* know the things that make for peace. But the Master Artisan is not the shadowy Bezalel (whose Hebrew name means 'in the shadow of God') but the Light of the World, Christ himself. Christ is the Master Artisan and we are his apprentices.

After Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration he set his face toward Jerusalem. We set our faces toward the New Jerusalem—the city of our highest aspirations and inspirations, our dreams and visions. Making our way not only instructed, but empowered by the Holy Spirit. And we remember that the road to this new city, God's new tabernacle, passes right through the voting booth.

I'll end with a few lines from Blake's poem—with apologies to him and to the rhyme scheme for a very clumsy editorial addition.

*"Bring me my Bow of burning gold:
Bring me my arrows of desire:
Bring me my Spear: O clouds unfold!
Bring me my Chariot of fire!*

*I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand;
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land".* ["Jerusalem", by William Blake]

And wherever else we happen to be.