

ALL SAINTS, 2018

Revelation 21.1-6

Some of you who are old enough may remember back in the 1970's a TV show called *The Jeffersons*. It was about a family that became so successful in their business that they could move from a row home in Brooklyn to the rich Upper East Side of Manhattan, New York City. The theme song of the show went,

Well we're movin' on up
to the East Side,
to a deluxe apartment in the sky.
Yes, we're movin' on up
to the East Side;
we finally got a piece of the pie.

For some reason I thought of that song as I studied our reading from Revelation for this day. It strikes me as a secular version of how some people see salvation and heaven. Life after death is movin' on up, or out, or away from this earth to a better place: heaven. Salvation is getting my piece of the heavenly pie for living a good life and working hard at being good. After all, we've earned it, right?

The only problem is, this is not the way the Bible or our confession of faith sees things. We confess in our creed faith in "the resurrection of the body and the life of the world *to come*." Salvation is not an escape from this world, but waiting for the coming of God's new world and our life in it, under Christ's rule of love. We see this in our reading from Revelation, the last book of the Bible.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.

It is the Bible's final, great vision of the world's future. We should note several things about it.

- Salvation is not an escape from this creation, but creation transformed into what God wants it to be: a new universe ("a new heaven and a new earth"). God loves His creation and wants to transform and perfect it, not destroy it.
- In the future God prepares, evil is eliminated. "The sea is no more": the sea in the Book of Revelation, and the Bible in general, is where evil dwells.
- The conditions of this life – death, suffering, pain, mourning – are gone. Instead, as we read elsewhere in the book, there is singing, worship, and joy.
- Salvation is not me getting my piece of the heavenly pie. Heaven is a city, a community, something people do together. Which means, I don't get heaven without you, and you don't get heaven without me. (In other words, we might as well learn to get along now, because in heaven we'll be neighbors. For eternity.)

There are other passages in the New Testament with similar expressions of the life of the world to come:

- I Peter 3: "But according to God's promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."
- The author of Hebrews speaks of the Church living by God's promises, seeing and greeting God's future from afar, acknowledging that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. "For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland... they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God ... has prepared for them a city" (11.16).
- St. Paul in Philippians 3 wrote: "But our commonwealth is in heaven, and *from it we await* a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body..."

I am sometimes asked – more frequently as I get older – if I think about eternal life and the hereafter.

And I answer, "Sure do. I often am in a room, thinking to myself, 'Now, what am I hereafter?'" Actually, my answer is: I believe what the Creed says Christians believe: the resurrection and the life of the world to come. That's good enough for me. Everything else is just details.

So: when the Bible speaks of salvation and the life of the world to come, it speaks of a transformed, perfected creation. It speaks of God's coming to us. It speaks of community, a place or condition in which righteousness, not sin or evil, dwells. This is the Bible's vision for the future of the world. It is the calling of the Church to witness to it.

Sometimes I wonder: have Christians lost the vision? Have we traded the Bible's vision of the future God prepares for something of lesser value: i.e., the religion of Me? Or materialism? Have Christians betrayed the vision of God's transformed creation by joining with the voices that foster and spread a message of hate instead of love, of circling the wagons instead of welcoming the stranger?

What sets Christians apart? It is our witness to the rule of Christ and the vision of God's future for His Creation. What God does with a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist, and so on is God's business. All Christians know is that God has given us the mission of witness to the kingdom begun by Jesus.

Today is All Saints' Day. Saints are those in every time and place who lived and spent their lives in worship and the service of God. We remember them for how God's grace was at work in their lives and their example of faith active in love. There is a wonderful prayer for All Saints' Day which goes:

We thank You, O God, for the saints of all ages:
For those who in times of darkness kept the lamp of faith burning;
For the great souls who saw visions of larger truth and dared to declare it;
For the multitude of quiet and gracious souls whose presence has purified and sanctified the world;
And for those known and loved by us, who have passed from this earthly fellowship into the fuller light of life with You.

Consider each petition of the prayer.

We thank You, O God, for those who in times of darkness kept the lamp of faith burning. One thinks of the monks in Ireland during the Dark Ages, preserving the Christian heritage when Europe was being overrun by barbarian tribes. Or the many unknown men and women who were a light of the world to people in the darkness of Soviet gulags or Nazi concentration camps. Or in the darkness of our own time, Christians who are the light of the world by their witness to Christ.

We thank You, O God, for the great souls who saw visions of larger truth and dared to declare it. People like the Apostles. Or Israel's prophets. Or a Martin Luther. A Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And especially martyrs like Stephen, Polycarp, Jan Hus, and in every century, even today in many places of the world. All bear witness to Christ's promise: "If you continue in my Word, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

We thank You, O God, for the multitude of quiet and gracious souls whose presence has purified and sanctified the world. Think of Francis of Assisi, Benedict of Nursia, Theresa of Calcutta, and many lesser-known people known but to God and the people whose lives they touched.

We thank You, O God, for those known and loved by us, who have passed from this earthly fellowship into the fuller light of life with You. You know who such people are: the saints in your life who by their teaching, witness, and example have inspired and guide you in your journey of faith. They are the many good and faithful souls who have graced this congregation and left you a legacy of witness and service.

For all these saints, who from their labors rest, we remember and give thanks. They have blessed and enriched our lives. They are what the writer to the Hebrews calls "the great cloud of witnesses" who surround us in our journey in faith. May their memory inspire us to persevere in the course set before us, so that we will be in our time living signs of the Gospel, the light of Christ to the world. Amen.