

Sermon – 13/07/2008 pm

The Bride, the New Jerusalem

Study Text: Revelation 21:9-14

In this last major vision of the book of Revelation John is *carried away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain and showed the great city, the holy Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God* (21:10). He had already seen this city in the previous vision (21:2). This reminds us that the visions in this book often overlap, and one vision may elucidate another as in this case. We have here another case of recapitulation. The symbolism continues in the description of the New Jerusalem, which is the bride of Christ.

One of the seven angels having the seven bowls of God's wrath came to John (21:9). Is this the same angel that came to John to show him the judgment of the great prostitute, otherwise known as Babylon the Great? The introduction to this vision is very similar to that of the previous vision (17:1). We can compare and contrast these two visions. In both John sees a woman, but a very different woman. The first was a prostitute, the second a pure bride. The prostitute was judged and destroyed; the bride was glorified as the wife of the Lamb of God.

What did the prostitute symbolize? She was Babylon, that city of idolatry and corruption in which Daniel lived. She was Rome, the city and nation that was persecuting John and the churches of Asia. Babylon represents the economic and religious powers of this world, powers which seduce kings and lots of other earth dwellers.

Jerusalem on the other hand is the holy city, the city housing the temple, the temple in which God's presence resided. Just as Babylon becomes symbolic of this evil world, so Jerusalem becomes symbolic of the new creation coming down of heaven with the return of Jesus Christ in all his glory.

Shining With Glory

The city which John saw was like no other city. The city shone with the glory of God. The dazzling light was like that which he saw in his first glimpse into heaven. He saw the throne of God which was like jasper stone and there was a rainbow around the throne (4:3). Here he again describes what he saw as being like a most precious stone, *a jasper stone, clear as crystal* (21:11). Jasper is like quartz or diamond. From it light is reflected and refracted in all directions. The glory of God shining from this holy city was something like the brilliance and radiance of an enormous diamond.

The *glory of God* in this city was not just a reflection but was the very source of light. The Greek word translated 'light' is the same as that in Phil 2:15 where it is often translated 'star'. Some use the word 'luminary'. The point is that a star gives out light. The sun is a star which gives off light; light so bright that we cannot look directly at it. The brilliance of the sun does not compare with the brilliance of this glory of God. The heavenly *city has no need of the sun...for the glory of God illuminated it* (21: 23).

The reference in Philippians 2:14 is interesting in that there it is referring to *the children of God*, to believers as shining like stars in this world. But how can we compare such shining

with that of the glory of God? The glory of God is linked to his people, to the church of Christ. The church is the bride of Christ. This holy city is called the bride of Christ. This is a city because it is a community of people. It is an inhabited city. The names of the tribes of Israel are on the gates and the names of the apostles of Christ are on the foundations.

The name 'holy Jerusalem' stands in contrast to the 'unholy Babylon' that has been destroyed as we have seen. The name New Jerusalem is also to be compared to the old Jerusalem. John would be thinking of the old Jerusalem and the temple in it when he heard the angel telling him about the New Jerusalem. Some say that what he saw was the millennial rebuilt earthly Jerusalem but clearly this city is a heavenly not an earthly city.

This vision has an Old Testament background in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel had a vision of the new city and new temple during the exile. He was carried away to a high mountain, as John was, to see a city (Ezekiel 40:2). He goes on to describe the temple. The temple which was the central feature of the earthly Jerusalem actually engulfs the holy city, the New Jerusalem. Ezekiel wrote of the glory of God coming and filling this temple (Ezekiel 43:25).

The tabernacle which Moses built and the temple which Solomon built were built on the same pattern, the pattern of the heavenly temple. God gave this pattern to Moses on the mountain. The glory of God departed from the earthly temple. It is seen again in the city and temple coming down out of heaven from God.

Structure of the City-Temple

Years ago I visited a tribal village in North East India. The village had a wall around it with a very solid gateway. A hundred years ago these people were often at war with nearby tribes – they were headhunters. With the coming of the gospel of Jesus Christ all that has changed but the village wall and gateway remain. What the people did change was the sign over the gateway. It now reads 'to the glory of God'. It was a great joy to enter through that gate and worship the Lord with these people that he had saved in his wonderful grace.

The holy city which John saw had a great high wall with twelve gates. The gates were symmetrically placed on each of its four sides (21:12). The names over these gates were the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Ezekiel saw the same gates and lists the names that were on them (Ezekiel 48:30f). John saw an angel at each of these gates. This reminds us of the angels that were assigned to each of the seven churches in Asia.

The city had twelve foundations on which were written the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:14). The apostle Paul similarly described the house of God as being built on the foundation of the apostles (Ephesians 2:20). He was writing of the church through which God's manifold wisdom and glory would be made known to all creation.

Some envisage these foundations as being like pillars so that the wall of the city is of alternating foundations and gates. The promise made to those in the church at Philadelphia who overcome by remaining faithful to the end was *I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God...I will write on you the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven from God* (3:12). Peter speaks of believers as living stones becoming part of the spiritual house of God (I Peter 2:5).

The holy city had a great high wall symbolising divine protection. There are no dividing walls in this city or in the temple that it merges into. These walls were broken down in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as Paul explained in his letter to the Ephesians (Ephesians 2:15). The city as we see later is a square or more correctly a cube.

In John's first vision into heaven he saw 24 elders wearing white robes and golden crowns as they sat on thrones around the throne of God in heaven (4:4). We concluded at that time that the 24 elders were the twelve patriarchs representing the Old Covenant and the twelve apostles representing the New Covenant. Here we find the same symbolism. The people of God from both old and new covenants are included in the New Jerusalem. All of God's redeemed people are included in this holy city, this temple built of living stones to the glory of Almighty God.

Saved Community

The 'city is founded on God's redemptive acts', writes Paul Barnett in his brief, but insightful commentary. The tribes of Israel were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. This redemption was itself a forerunner of the great redemption in the Cross of Jesus Christ. God redeemed his chosen ones from sin and death through the blood of Jesus Christ. This saved community, this assembly of the people of God, this true church comprising the redeemed from all ages and all nations is symbolized in this heavenly city, the New Jerusalem.

In the merging images of this vision the holy city is the bride of Christ. Christ has made his bride ready; he has made her pure and holy, ready for marriage. Here she is called the Lamb's wife (21:9). This is a marriage in heaven; this is a wonderful and glorious union. No wonder the glory of God shines forth from this city. God has come to dwell in the midst of his chosen people forever and ever.

The glory of the New Jerusalem is too wonderful, too dazzling for us to behold while we live in earthly bodies in this fallen world. For now we see but dimly. We see but a reflection of his glory. For now the King of glory *dwells in unapproachable light whom no man has seen or can see* (I Timothy 6:16). But one day we will see him in all his glory. When the risen Lord comes again in all his glory we will be changed and we will see him as he is. We will see him face to face and dwell in his presence forever.

Are you lifted up in your spirit by this vision of the glory of God? Are you excited that you have a place in this heavenly city? Abraham in faith waited for a city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10) Are you by faith waiting for this same city?

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