

SCENE 7. The Transcendent in History

1. The Church of God on earth

The whole of the created universe is being transformed by Christ. Nothing is the same. Evil has been definitively conquered, including the 'sea'(symbol of chaos) which 'is no more'. There is a new heaven and a new earth because now the crucified and risen Jesus is actively present in history. This is the fulfilment of the promise made through Isaiah:

I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

– Isaiah 65:17

John has used Babylon as a symbol of the organised forces of evil. Now he speaks of the 'holy city' (see 11:2), the 'new Jerusalem' (see 3:12), the place where those who are with the risen Christ gather: the assembly of the Christian community. It is 'coming down out of heaven', because it owes its existence to the action of the transcendent God. It is coming down, for the church is still in process of coming into existence (hence the future tense of the verbs in verse three and the following).

The church is 'prepared as a bride adorned for her husband'(see 19:7-8) because it owes its existence as a community to the choice and the love of the glorified Christ. John referred to it earlier as a 'beloved city'(20:9), and it exists to live a life of love-response to him.

It is solemnly declared that it is God's will to dwell with 'his peoples' (note the plural). God will live in the Christian assembly in a new and intimate communion, promised of old:

Sing and rejoice, O daughter Zion! For lo, I will come and dwell in your midst, says the Lord.

– Zechariah 2:10²

My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

– Ezekiel 37:27³

¹Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea is no more.

²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband;

³and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'See, the home of God is among mortals. He will pitch his tent with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and he, God with them,¹ will be their God;

¹'God with us' = Emmanuel (Isaiah 7:14; 8:8); see Matthew 1:23; 28:20.

²See Leviticus 26:12.

³Ezekiel 11:20; 48:35; 1Kings 8:27.

⁴he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more, mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.'

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new'. Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true'.

⁶Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. *It is I who* will give water to the thirsty as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Jesus has loved us to the end (John 13:1). He has definitively conquered the forces of evil and lives now in the eternal glory of his Father's love. It is this communion in love which he shares with those who choose to follow him in his way of life. The promises made here are already being realised and their complete fulfilment is assured. Such is the intimacy of God's love for the Church, the bride of Christ, that he gently wipes away the tears from her face (see 7:17). Weeping will cease, death will be no more (see 6:7-8). There will be no more pain (see 6:2-6). We recall the promise of Isaiah:

'He will swallow up death for ever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.

– Isaiah 25:7-8

God is already dwelling with us in the church, the bride of Christ, and God is in process of making all things new. As Paul says:

If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new.

– 2Corinthians 5:17

John is instructed to write what is being revealed to him (1:11) to establish a permanent record of what is trustworthy and true (16:7; 19:9), namely, that all is renewed in Christ. The expression 'It is done!' is an example of what is called the prophetic perfect: God is doing it, so it can be considered done. Nothing can prevent its perfect completion.

God is the one from whom everything comes and to whom everything goes: 'the Alpha and the Omega'(see 1:8), the beginning and the end. The whole of the created universe thirsts to be in communion with God, and in the Christian assembly God will continue to slake that thirst:

Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! ... Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant.

– Isaiah 55:1-3

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem.

– Zechariah 14:8

God is the spring from whom flows the water of life and it flows through Christ to his Bride.

Those who keep on conquering will inherit what God has promised, because they will share in the life of Jesus, God's Son. Endurance is still called for, because the battle is still going on. But the powers of evil have been irreversibly conquered by Christ, and if we conquer with him, our sharing in the life which he has from God is assured:

I will be a father to him and he shall be a son to me.

– 2 Samuel 7:14

I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness.

– Zechariah 8:8

The life of intimate communion with the risen Jesus enjoyed in the new Jerusalem by the bride of the Lamb stands in stark contrast to the death experienced by those who give in to the seductive allurements of the empire. Courage was high on the Roman list of virtues. John is saying that those in the Christian assembly who were seduced by the appeal of that kind of courage are in fact cowardly,² for they lack the courage to take a stand with Jesus.

Faith, too, in the sense of fulfilling one's social obligations (including one's treaty obligations with Rome), was crucial to the consolidation of Roman society. Those in the Christian assembly who saw this as more important than fidelity to Jesus and his mission are described as 'faithless'.³

They are 'polluted'⁴ by associating with the imperial cult. They are 'murderers', for Roman 'success' is based on violence. They are 'fornicators'⁵ because they are unfaithful to their covenant relationship with Jesus and are playing around with the false gods of 'Babylon' the 'whore'.⁶

In seeking security through magic (see 18:23) and in giving their allegiance to the Roman system they are living a lie. Instead of enjoying intimate love with the Bride of the Lamb, they will suffer eternal destruction.

¹To translate by 'children' is to miss the essential link with the Son.

²The word 'cowardly' occurs in the NT only here and in the scene of the storm on the lake of Galilee (Mark 4:40; Matthew 8:26).

³Contrast 2:13,19; 13:10; 14:12

⁴This word occurs elsewhere in the NT only where Paul is speaking of abominating idols (Romans 2:22). See Apocalypse 21:27.

⁵See 2:14,20,21; 9:21; 14:8; 17:2,4; 18:3,9.

⁶See 17:1,15,16.

⁷Fire and sulphur'(see 19:20; 20:10,14,15). Compare Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24; Ezekiel 38:22). The image conveys the idea of a definitive and painful privation of life. 'Second death'(see 2:11; 20:6,14).

⁷Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my son.¹

⁸But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all living a lie,

their lot shall be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.'

2. The church in which we experience intimate communion with the crucified and risen Christ

⁹Then 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'.

¹⁰And 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.

¹¹It has the glory of God, and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

¹²It had a great, high wall with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates are inscribed the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites;

¹³on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates.

¹⁴And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

What John sees here can be seen only in the Spirit (1:10, 4:2), for it is an insight possible only to the mind enlightened by faith. It is for the same reason that he is transported to a great, high mountain, the place for revelation,¹ the place where the exalted Christ said he would remain with us till the end of time.²

Throughout the Apocalypse, John has presented the Christian community as betrothed to the crucified and risen Jesus. Because of this love, those who belong to this 'beloved city' (20:9) will be victorious against the evil forces which seek to destroy it. Here, John gives us a glimpse of the assured goal, promised by the one who has redeemed us by his blood. The bride will become the wife and enjoy forever the intimacy of divine communion.

The communities of Jesus' disciples are a gift from God to the earth (21:1). John penetrates to the ultimate meaning of the Christian community here on earth: it is a community which has and radiates the glory of God. John uses language that occurs frequently in Isaiah:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn ...

Your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard.

– Isaiah 58:8

Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

– Isaiah 60:1

The sun shall no longer be your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.

– Isaiah 60:19-20

The radiant light from God himself has already been described with reference to a jasper (4:3). John uses the same image here, making the point that the brilliance of the purified community is that of God himself.

¹See Ezekiel 40:2 and Matthew 4:8.

²Matthew 28:16-20.

The description of the Christian community as a holy city reminds us of the final words of the prophecy of Ezekiel¹ in which the twelve gates of the new city are named after the twelve tribes of Israel. One might compare this passage also with Exodus 28:12 and 39:14 in which the twelve tribes are engraved in precious stones in the priestly breastplate.

Here in the Apocalypse, the foundations of the walls which define the city are the twelve apostles of the Lamb, for these are the primary witnesses of the resurrection, and the primary authority of our faith in it. The church must be 'catholic', with open gates facing in all directions. It must also be 'apostolic', founded on the experience and faith of the apostles.²

¹Ezekiel 48:30-35.

²Compare Ephesians 2:20 and Hebrews 11:10.

3. Further dimensions of the church

¹⁵The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls.

¹⁶The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, *twelve thousand stadia*;¹ its length and width and height are equal.

¹⁷He also measured its wall, one hundred forty-four cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using.

¹⁸The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass.

¹⁹The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first with jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate,

²⁰the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chryso-prase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.

²¹And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass.

The measuring rod (see 11:1; also Ezekiel 40:3) is gold (see 1:12) for we are seeing the church as God sees it. God is encompassing the community within his protective care. Twelve thousand symbolises the fullness of divine blessing (see 7:4) twelve times over. One-hundred-and-forty-four, twelve by twelve, symbolises the People of God, the new Jerusalem, founded on the patriarchs and the apostles.

The measure, says John, is an angel's measure, - an indication that the readers are to understand this as symbolic language, referring to the church in its transcendent reality. Some of the precious stones listed by John are found in similar passages in the Old Testament; some are found only here.²The overall picture is one of dazzling beauty.

¹ 2400 kilometres.

²Isaiah 54:11-12 includes jasper and sapphire among the precious stones found in the new Jerusalem. Tobit 13:17 includes sapphire, emerald and pure gold in his description of the new Jerusalem. Exodus 28:17-20 has four rows of precious stones in the priestly breastplate, including jasper, sapphire, emerald, carnelian, chrysolite, beryl and topaz. Ezekiel 28:13 follows Exodus in describing the mantle of Tyre. Pearl has occurred already in Apocalypse 17:4; 18:12,16; agate, onyx, chryso-prase and jacinth occur only here in the New Testament.

4. God's design for the Church

The Christian community does not need a temple. In his opening scene, John presented the glorified Christ as present in the midst of the Christian assemblies (1:12). Jesus himself is God's temple (see John 2:19-21), and God dwells in the community which is Jesus' body, living by his Spirit:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple.

– 1Corinthians 3:16-17

God's first act in creation was to create light. The light that enlightens the Christian community, and makes possible the process of the new creation that is taking place within her, is God himself (21:11)¹ and his Son.

The moon will be abashed, and the sun ashamed; for the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and before his elders he will manifest his glory.

– Isaiah 24:23

And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

– 2Corinthians 3:18

The church is for all the nations. They will bring into the church all that they have of value,² and there will be no fear from enemies, for no one can do her harm. The gates will always be open,³ and there will be no night.⁴ Nothing unclean will enter.⁵

The church in its historical reality will have within it the kinds of sinners with whom Jesus himself associated during his public ministry. John, however, is looking at the church in its transcendent reality. In so far as we are sinning, to that extent we do not belong to the church, for we belong to the church only in so far as we belong to Christ; that is to say, in so far as we have accepted his love and have allowed him to live in and through us. We belong to the community of the redeemed only in so far as we are holy.

¹Compare Isaiah 60:19-20. ²Compare Psalm 72:10-11.

³Compare Isaiah 60:11: 'Your gates shall always be open.'

⁴There shall be continuous day'(Zechariah 14:7).

⁵Compare Zechariah 13:2; Isaiah 35:8; 52:1.

⁶See 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12,15.

²²I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

²³And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

²⁴The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.

²⁵Its gates will never be shut by day - and there will be no night there.

²⁶People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations.

²⁷But nothing unclean will enter it, nor anyone who practises abomination or falsehood, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.⁶

5. The experience of God enjoyed within the church

¹Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb

²in the middle of the city *square* . On either side of the river, is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, producing its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

³Nothing accursed will be found there any more. But the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him;

⁴they will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads.

⁵And there will be no more night; they need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.

John uses many rich, traditional images to give expression to the abundance of divine life which has its origin in the action of God himself and of the risen Christ, and which is communicated to the church as a body.

The flow of life from God is likened to a river which wells up from the throne of God (1:4) and in the middle of the city square: God's action in history is its source, and it is experienced in the midst of the church community. John is alluding to the creation account in the Book of Genesis, and uses an image frequently found in relation to the temple:

A river flows out of Eden to water the garden.

– Genesis 2:10

Water was flowing from below the threshold of the Temple.

– Ezekiel 47:1

On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem.

– Zechariah 14:8

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of the city.

– Psalm 46:4

This imagery is used by John when he wishes to draw out the implications of Jesus' self-offering to us on the cross:

One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear; and at once blood and water came out.

– John 19:34

This river creates a paradise in which life is communicated uninterruptedly to all:

Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden.

– Genesis 2:9

On the banks, on both sides of the river, there will grow all kinds of trees for food. Their leaves will not wither nor their fruit fail, but they will bear fresh fruit every month, because the water for them flows from the sanctuary. Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.

– Ezekiel 47:12

The twelve kinds of fruit is a further reference to the catholicity of the church: the twelve tribes of Israel (21:12) and the twelve apostles of the Lamb (21:14). No one in the church will be accursed, for all will be abundantly blessed by God. All will experience divine communion. In the favourite terminology of the Bible, all will 'see his face':

As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, beholding your likeness.

– Psalm 17:15

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

– Psalm 42:1-2

Now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

– 1Corinthians 13:12

When he is revealed, we will be like him for we will see him as he is.

– 1John 3:2

All, in so far as they are in the church, belong heart and soul, mind and body to God and to Christ their lord: 'his name shall be on their foreheads.'¹

It is in the church that God reigns, and those united to Christ will reign with him 'for ever and ever'. This is the ultimate fulfilment of the mission of the Son of Man:

The holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever - forever and ever.

– Daniel 7:18

¹See 7:3; 9:4; 14:1. Contrast 13:16; 14:9; 17:5; 20:4.