

SCENE 7. The Transcendent in History

I. The Church of God on earth



Apocalypse 21:1

Then 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.

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: '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).

Apocalypse 21:2 [every local community]



And I saw the holy city [11:2], the new Jerusalem [3:12], coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

The Christian assembly 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.



Apocalypse 21:3

and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the tent of God is with mankind. He will pitch his tent with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and he, God with them, will be their God.

(note the plural)

It is solemnly declared that it is God’s will to dwell with ‘his peoples’. 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 come and I will dwell in your midst, says the Lord’(Zechariah 2:10).

‘My dwelling place shall be with them; and I will be their God and they will be my people’(Ezekiel 37:27).

Apocalypse 21:4

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

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).

Apocalypse 21:5

And 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’.

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.

Apocalypse 21:6

Then he said to me, 'It is done! [16:17] 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.

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

Apocalypse 21:7

He who conquers **will inherit** [in history the struggle continues] **these things, and I will be his God and he will be my son.**

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).

Apocalypse 21:8

But 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.' [2:11; 20:6,14]

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, for they lack the courage to take a stand with Jesus.

Apocalypse 21:8

But 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.’[2:11; 20:6,14]

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’.

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

Apocalypse 21:8

But 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'[2:11; 20:6,14].

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.

2. The meaning of life is experienced in the church where we experience intimate communion with the crucified and risen Christ.

Apocalypse 21:9-10

Then one of the seven angels who had the seven basins 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,

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.

The Christian community, betrothed to the crucified and risen Jesus, is now the **wife**, constantly 'coming down from heaven', enjoying forever the intimacy of divine communion.

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.

Apocalypse 21:11-14

The holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal; having 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 [7:4-8]; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city has twelve ['Catholic'] foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles ['Apostolic'] of the Lamb.

The brilliance of the purified community is that of God himself.

The description of the Christian community as a holy city reminds us of the final words of the prophecy of Ezekiel (40:35-38) in which the twelve gates of the new city are named after the twelve tribes of Israel.

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).

3. Further dimensions of the Church

Apocalypse 21:15-18

The angel who talked to me had a measuring rod [11:1] of gold to measure the city and its gates and walls. The city lies foursquare, its length the same as its width; and he measured the city with his rod, 12,000 [thousand x 12] stadia [2,400 ks]; its length and width and height are equal. He also measured its wall, 144 [12 x 12] cubits by human measurement, which the angel was using. The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear 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 God's 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.

Apocalypse 21:19-21

The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first with jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth carnelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst.

And 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 overall picture is one of dazzling beauty.



4. God's design for the Church

Apocalypse 21:22-23

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

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. 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) and his Son.

Apocalypse 21:24-26

The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there. People will bring into it the glory and the honour of the nations.

The church is for all the nations. They will bring into the church all that they have of value, and there will be no fear from enemies, for no one can do her harm. The gates will always be open, and there will be no night.

Apocalypse 21:27

But 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.[3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15]

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.

5. The experience of God enjoyed within the church

Apocalypse 22:1-2

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, issuing from the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of the city square.

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 (2:10), and uses an image frequently found in relation to the temple (Ezekiel 47:1; Zechariah 14:8).

Apocalypse 22:2-3

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. Nothing 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.

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).

Apocalypse 22:4

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

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).

Apocalypse 22:5

And 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 for ever and ever.

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).

Epilogue: Heed the prophetic Revelation

I. Prophetic Guarantee (balances 1:9-11)

[John]:

And he said to me

[Angel]:

‘These words are trustworthy and true, for the Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place.’ [1:1]

[Risen Christ]:

‘See, I am coming soon!’ [2:5; 3:7]

[Angel]:

Blessed [6th of 7 Beatitudes] is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book.

2. Liturgical Dialogue (balances 1:4-8)

Apocalypse 22:8-10

{John}:

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me; but he said to me,

{Angel}:

‘You must not do that! I am a fellow-servant with you and your comrades the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God!’ [12:9; 19:10]

{John}:

And he said to me,

{Angel}:

‘Do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, for the time is near. [relevant now to assembly]

Apocalypse 22:9-13

{Angel}:

‘Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.’

{Risen Christ}:

‘See, I am coming soon; my recompense is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am the Alpha and the Omega [1:8; 21:6], the first and the last, the beginning and the end.’

The exalted Christ himself declares that he is coming soon, and that good and evil are being judged according to what they really are. We all have to resist whatever temptations we face that distract us from the life we are offered in Christ; and we will all be judged by the decisions we make in relation to him.

Apocalypse 22:14-17

{Angel}:

‘Blessed [7th beatitude] are those who are washing their festive robes [7:14], so that they will have unrestricted access to the tree of life and may enter the city by the gates. Outside are the dogs and sorcerers and fornicators and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practises falsehood.’

{Risen Christ}:

‘It is I, Jesus, who sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.’[2:28]

{John}:

The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come’[assembly repeats]. And let everyone who hears say, ‘Come’[assembly repeats]. And let everyone who is thirsty come, let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

The Church, speaking as the bride of Christ and in the Spirit that gives her life, is encouraged to long for him and to cry out to him to come. All who hear this cry are encouraged to echo it, for the life which God offers through Christ is meant for everyone, and anyone who is thirsty for life is welcome to enjoy the intimacy of his love. This is not earned, it is not able to be bought. What is asked is faith which accepts the offering in joy and faithfully follows Jesus, resisting contrary allurements.

Conclusion Apocalypse 22:18-19 (balances 1:1-3)

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book.

‘You must neither add anything to what I command you nor take away anything from it, but keep the commandments of the Lord your God with which I am charging you’(Deuteronomy 4:2)

‘All who hear the words of this oath and bless themselves, thinking in their hearts, ‘We are safe even though we go our own stubborn ways ... All the curses written in this book will descend on them, and the Lord will blot out their names from under heaven.’ (Deut. 29:19-20)

Conclusion Apocalypse 22:20-21 (balances 1:1-3)

[Risen Christ]:

The one who testifies to these things says,
'Surely, I am coming soon'.

[Assembly]:

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

{'marana tha', 1Corinthians 16:22}:

{'maran atha', Didache 10:6 'The Lord comes'}:

[John]:

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints.

[Assembly]:

Amen.

Postscript

What contribution might the Apocalypse make to our search for meaning today?

Many attempt to use the Apocalypse as though it contains information concerning events of our own day. They use it as if it were a crystal ball in which they can discover a prediction of events of our own day, enabling us to foretell our own future. It is to be hoped that this commentary has established the folly of such an approach. If we are to learn from the Apocalypse, we must face up to its message, and not read our own ideas into it.

This postscript is a brief attempt to point out some directions for further reflection.

The structure and content of the Apocalypse highlight the truth that transcendent realities are immanent in our lives and in our history. God as presented here is not an extra, or one who leaves history to its own devices except for the occasional interruption. There is a constant influence in our history of the powerful movement of grace coming from the 'throne' of God.

The focus of such influence is the risen and glorified Christ, who is presented as constantly 'loving us'(1:5), and constantly inspiring us to listen, to change our lives, and to be his instruments in drawing the world into sacred communion with God and away from the distractions of sin. Christ alone can unlock the meaning of history.

The martyrs and saints who have lived Christ's life on earth, many of whom have lost their lives in witnessing to him, are part of this priestly mediation² of Christ. They inspire us by their faith. They also influence our lives as they draw us to follow their example.

While divine reality is constantly influencing us, we are not puppets of fate. The Apocalypse presents us as free to determine our own direction and destiny. We are responsible. We can opt to respond to grace or to resist it. One of the major themes of the Apocalypse is that it really matters what we do, and that we must suffer the consequences of the decisions we take.

Life is a battle between good and evil, a battle in which good is assured of victory. Good is represented by the ways in which Christ is incarnate in the world. The focus is on the Church, symbolised as a woman labouring to give birth (12:1-2), under constant pressure from the forces of evil (12:13-17), but the wife enjoying the intimacies of communion with Christ (21:9).

Evil is represented by the ways in which it is incarnate in the world. The focus is on the imperialist Roman forces, symbolised by the beast (13:1).

The Church shares in Christ's priestly mediation in her liturgy which mirrors the heavenly liturgy, and in her life in which she works to establish the reign of God on earth (1:6).

The Apocalypse is a clarion call to persevere in our attachment to Christ and so to God, and to resist the pressures upon us to compromise, or to be caught up in the oppressive counter-values of a corrupting political and economic system. We have the responsibility to locate, to name, and to condemn those elements within our own systems which are responsible for injustices similar to those against which John is speaking.

The Apocalypse reminds us of the importance of the Christian community, in its active mission in the world, and in its gathering to remember Jesus, to listen to the inspiration of his Spirit, and to be caught up in a liturgy of prayer.

The Christian community is to be the radiant manifestation in this world of the active presence of the exalted Christ drawing all to himself. From the middle of the struggle in which we are all involved, there arises from the Christian community assembled in prayer the cry: 'Come, Lord Jesus' (22:20).

God does not force his grace, and it is this intense longing in the hearts of the disciples of Jesus that keeps our world open to receive the liberating power of his love.

In conclusion, let us listen again to the words of Christ addressed to the seventh of the churches of Asia:

Apocalypse 3:19-22

I reprove and discipline those whom I love.

Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;

if you hear my voice and open the door,

I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

To the one who conquers

I will give a place with me on my throne,

just as I myself conquered

and sat down with my Father on his throne.

Let anyone who has an ear

listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.



How can I
keep from singing?