

Revelation 7:9-17

In 1511, the conquistador, Diego Velázquez, sailed from his home on the island of Hispaniola and invaded Cuba. He had to do that without the advantage of surprise. Before Velazquez left Hispaniola a local chieftain, called Hatuey, (A -twey) took four hundred followers in canoes over to Cuba to warn them of what was coming. The story they tell is that Hatuey showed the Cuban chieftain a basket of gold and jewels, and said:

Here is the God the Spaniards worship. For these they fight and kill... They tell us, these tyrants, that they adore a God of peace and equality, and yet they usurp our land and make us their slaves. They speak to us of an immortal soul and of their eternal rewards and punishments, and yet they rob our belongings, seduce our women, violate our daughters.

Apparently the Cubans did not believe him, but Hatuey himself fought Velazquez until he was captured and burnt at the stake. Before he died, a catholic priest asked him if he would turn to Christ, so that he might go to heaven. Hatuey asked if Spaniards went to heaven. He was told Spaniards went to heaven if they were good. He replied that

If the Christians go to heaven, I do not wish to go to heaven, I do not ever again wish to meet such cruel and wicked people.

We have a problem with heaven. We have a problem imagining heaven, a problem describing it, a problem inviting anyone to believe in it. Dante thought we keep missing the point.

Heaven wheels above you, Dante said, displaying to you her eternal glories, and still your eyes are on the ground

Our eyes are on the ground. We can't see heaven, or describe it. Sydney Smith, who used to be a canon here, thought heaven was eating pate de foie gras to the sound of trumpets. Let's see if we can do better. Let's look at that reading from Revelation.

there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands

Revelation talks about heaven, it talks about heaven a lot. The trouble is that it makes it a white knuckle ride. Revelation serves up a cocktail when you look to scripture for fine wine. It leaves you wanting a lie down. Our reading was chapter seven. Here is Revelation Six:

He opened the sixth seal, I looked, and there came a great earthquake; the sun became black as sackcloth, the full moon became like blood, and the stars of the sky fell to the earth... The sky vanished like a scroll rolling itself up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place Revelation 6:12-14

Why? Why is it all so shattering?

Revelation is so shattering because our expectations need shattering. Twenty five years ago an American scholar wrote a book called *The End of History and the Last Man*. It was a pretty sophisticated piece of work, but the bare bones of it is that he argued that all history, everything, all that has happened, has been leading inevitably to the rise of right government and that when we get there (and he thought we nearly had), history will stop. He thought history is *going somewhere* and that the summit of human achievement and ambition is a choice between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

That is why Revelation needs to roll creation up. We need a fresh start, because we are so flawed in our imagination. We are not here this morning so that we can hope to be slightly better than we are. Heaven is not like living in Clifton only with better parking and a bigger Waitrose. The world as it is, politics as they are, our poisoned environment – these things do not need a polish, they need to be changed, utterly changed and that is what Revelation foresees. Things as they are must be shattered. We have to look for something else. That is what Easter is, not Jesus come back to life, not more of the same, but *Risen Life* and new creation. That's why we worship on Sundays and not still on the Sabbath, because this is the first day of the new creation.

Give us half a chance and we will settle for less. And we will, be made poor. We will make heaven just a little bit better, and C S Lewis explained, long ago, that when we do that we make an idol for ourselves and worship a thing that will break our hearts. The love of God, the peace of Christ, the justice of the Kingdom these are not an improvement on British democracy they are radically other. C.S Lewis put it like this

they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited

That explains why Revelation wants to roll up the sky like a scroll. Because we don't look for more, we look for other.

Then Revelation does something really interesting. Revelation tells us that the heaven that is ushered in is this world made perfect. It is not clouds and harps, it is Jerusalem, it is the tribes of Israel, the gates and streets of a familiar city. The world is radically changed, but it is still the world and we are still the people we are.

That is precisely what our reading was about, remember,

there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb,

Just notice, in passing, it is a lot of people, a great multitude. God is generous. Notice it is a community, it is common purpose, they really are singing from the same hymn sheet, literally various, all tribes, all peoples, all languages. That was radical then, salvation is not just for the Jews. It is radical now, Migrants get in, the down and the dirty are there. But there is something more important here. This great crowd is robed in white and they carry palm branches

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?"

We need to know. Who is it that joins this choir in the city of God?

I said to him, "Sir, you are the one that knows." Then he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

And there is your answer. It is the tried and the tested, it is the people who live this life fully, the people who commit and endure, who join the saints. It is the worn and weather beaten. It is the people who have been in the storm and been faithful. It is not the great and glamorous who inherit the Kingdom, but those who made a commitment and saw it through. Heaven is solidarity, it is a community; it is a city. It is life together and it is for the people who have lived this life in solidarity with one another and with God. Heaven is where you belong; it is for people who have learnt to belong.

It is Easter we are celebrating a Saviour who lived our life and died our death. We are celebrating his solidarity, his absolute commitment to us and to *this* life. Did you hear the gospel? It was that same solidarity

My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me John 10:27

Solidarity with us

I and the Father and I are one John 10:30

Solidarity with the Father.

Our vocation is to live that same solidarity now with each other, with this city, with Christ and then live it forever. The shocking thing, the really shocking thing in all this fuss over the Panama Papers and tax evasion, is not that some people are so staggeringly rich, the shocking thing is that so many of us apparently want to opt in and out. We want to be at the part but not pay for it; we want to live another life alongside everyone else. Some of us want to live here, but leave our wallets, and our commitment, in the Cayman Islands. The trouble is that salvation is not independence; salvation is finally belonging fully, and forever.

So, read Revelation and you learn that salvation is always more than we hoped for and that salvation is solidarity with Christ and with one another. And those are good lessons to learn. Revelation 7 is not quite done with us however. There is that ending to consider,

...they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them... the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,

The community of the saved are not looking at one another, they are looking to the Lamb. The Lamb is Christ. You see, salvation saves us not just from sin; it also saves us also from ourselves. We don't spend eternity enjoying *ourselves*; we spend eternity loving God and being loved by God.

In the heavenly city there is not just community there is purpose. It is not a crowd, it is more than that. The poet Auden once suggested that a community is more than a crowd

because it is united in a love of something other than itself. That is what we have here with the Lamb centre stage, a community loving something other than itself.

This is the beginning of the language and hope we need, Heaven as a community with a purpose, United in loving something other than ourselves. Together, loving God, being loved in a world made perfect, in solidarity forever. That is what Revelation offers and it is the beginning, the very beginning of a heaven worthy of belief. It is an invitation to start living in that solidarity today, and here.