

Immersed as we are in the sounds and sights of Evensong, we might feel that we have stepped into another world, another dimension of life beyond the ordinary. I daresay that is a good way to describe the odd and now counter-cultural practice of worship, as we gather to offer prayers, praises and songs to One who is holy mystery, and yet steadfastly *for us*; invisible, and yet powerfully present.

We come not to escape from the concerns of the “real” world or of our own “real” lives, but to bring the totality of life—all the sorrow and pain, all the joy and hope—here, now, into the presence of God. We are not unhinged from reality here; rather, we are enabled to see a still deeper reality with more than ordinary sight.

The Mendelssohn anthem “Hear my prayer,” so beautifully sung by soloist and choir as part of the prelude this evening, highlights one aspect of what we bring before God.¹ Not only in the anthem’s words (from Ps. 55), but also in its harmonies and dynamics, and in the voices of soloist and choir, we hear and feel the pain of human suffering. On this day of All Saints, we are reminded, too, of all the saints and martyrs who have suffered because of their faith, yet persevered for love of God.

The psalmist cries out in the anthem, longing to escape from a reality that has become unbearable. He dreams of a safe haven, far from the evil, confusion and horror that surround him. Even a nest in the wilderness, looks good to him. A few verses on from those included in the anthem, we learn the context of this lament: the evil, confusion and horror of the city.

The city, the *polis*, is the place where “politics” got its name. Here inside the beltway, we know all too well the woes the psalmist describes: violence and strife in the city; misery, trouble and ruin in its midst; and fraud in the marketplace. (Ps. 55:9b-11) You have only to skim this morning’s Washington Post to find them all.

To be far away, isolated from any and all human companionship, and finally at rest is the best the psalmist can hope for. But God has something radically different in mind. God has always had something immeasurably better in mind for humankind.

Over time, the reality of the city has always been mixed, at best. Toward the end of the first century of the Common Era, when the Book of Revelation was written, things were no different. The holy city, Jerusalem, stood in ruins. The temple had been burned and torn down by the army of Rome. The walls of the city were rubble, they provided no safety. Jews and Christians alike had fled from this place of strife and violence. Those who remained felt the continuing heavy weight of Rome’s wrath and oppression.

¹Anthem: “Hear my prayer.” Text: William Bartholomew (1793-1867); after Psalm 55:1-7. Music: Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847).

Against this reality, the Revelation to John held up the vision of the reality of God come down to earth, the *new* Jerusalem. A new city with a new politics, the politics of God, that bring strife and chaos to an end forever. There will be no more death, no grief, no crying, no pain any more. Everything that has been a curse before God and creation will come to an end.

The city, new Jerusalem, is no longer a place of chaos and violence that people must flee to seek asylum in foreign lands, or in refugee camps in wilderness places.

It is a holy place. It comes down to earth, to us.

The new Jerusalem is not a city that has to struggle to implement reforms, as many prophets and precious few kings have tried to reform the cities and societies of this world. It is not a city rebuilt or restored.

It is a city entirely new. Everything old and not of God has passed away. No one is homeless, sleeping on grates or under bridges, living in shelters. No one fears foreclosure. Everyone is at home.

There is no temple there, no place set apart for the presence of God to dwell. Not because the temple has been defiled or destroyed, but

because the whole city, every place in it, every person in it, is the dwelling place of God. There is no separation between what is holy and what is profane. All is of God, with God, in God.

The new Jerusalem is filled with light, the glory of God's own self.

There is no more night, or darkness, no fear or danger. Its gates are always open.

So the people can come in—all the peoples, the nations, the gentiles, the peoples not like us, not of us.

There is no more "us and them," but a new collective story and history made up of all of our stories woven together into one.

Even the kings, the rulers of the earth are drawn to this holy city. Their politics so often have not been God's politics of justice and peace, mercy and truth. But kings and rulers are not walking by their own light any more; they walk now by the light of God. They come in procession bringing in their own glory, under God's tent, at last. No longer are their wealth and fame only for themselves or their compatriots to enjoy; they are offered to God, for all peoples. (21:24-25) Nations and rulers have been transformed.

People of every station in life are there in the new Jerusalem, all the people the choir sang about in Psalm 148: kings of the earth; princes, and all judges of the world; young men and maidens, old men and children (vv.11-12). All of them, from every age and generation, are praising the Name of the LORD together. There is no more separation, no more division of rich and poor, strong and weak. All are one in God.

Every tear is wiped away as it falls, as long as it takes for the sorrows of the former cities to wash away. The river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God, is for all. No more anxiety about finding clean water to drink; no more thirst at all. No more wondering where the next meal will come from; no more going to bed hungry. The fruit of the tree of life is for all, and the tree bears it all year round.

The *leaves* of the tree are for the healing of the nations. There is no more war, no casualties, military or civilian; no more enmity or terror; no injuries or death; no more damage of any kind, intentional or collateral.

The vision at the end of Revelation shows us reality transformed. Its poetic images draw on and draw out our longing for God's justice and peace, mercy and truth. The poetry of this vision evokes the new Jerusalem for us, draws us for a time into the holy city, into God's reality, along with all God's saints, past, present, and yet to come.

We have heard it in poetry. We hear it now in song.² Listen now. Let the music and the words open the eyes of your heart to see with new and deeper sight the reality into which we are invited by God.

If there are any tears now, they will be tears of joy.

²Anthem, "And I saw a new heaven." Text: Revelation 21:1-4. Music: Edgar Bainton (1880-1956).