

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 21: Some Notes

It is tempting to give the notes a miss for this Chapter, because some of it at least is very familiar, and most of it can be read with pleasure and benefit without any extra information. This is one of the most popular and memorable bits of the New Testament. However awful your life and the world situation may be, Christianity offers the promise that one day life will be unbelievably good... and even if you aren't entirely convinced by the prospect of living in the best Bond Street jewelers multiplied by 1,000, you can take this as perfection expressed in terms of jewels and precious metals, and rejoice in the promise of no pain, no tears, no scary darkness, no separation, and universal shared happiness without any clouds on the horizon.

But, as you can see, you are being offered some notes. There are three reasons for offering the notes. 1) There are some pointers which might make a rich feast even richer. 2) Familiar passages can become so familiar that we miss important points. 3), and this is the main reason, John is of course writing as a Christian, but, for the most part he is drawing on the Jewish Old Testament and the Jewish books written between the Old and the New Testaments. If all we had from John was the completely original stuff, Revelation Chapter 21 would be very short indeed. 21st Century Christians are sometimes a bit inclined to think they only need the New Testament; and it is good for us to be forcefully reminded that, for John as indeed for Jesus Himself, the Bible was the Old Testament, and hugely valuable. Radio 4's John Humphries, who of course is not a Christian, was arguing today with Giles Fraser that while the New Testament has some good bits, the Old Testament is a waste of space. He is very very wrong.

A new heaven and a new earth is Isaiah 65.17 (and Baruch and Enoch and Esdras). The new Jerusalem, and much of the detail of the description, is Esdras and Baruch, and Isaiah 54.11-12, and Isaiah 60.10-20, and Haggai and Ezekiel and Tobit. The fellowship with God and the absence of tears etc is Ezekiel 37.27, Isaiah 25.8 and Isaiah 65. 19. Everything new is Isaiah 43,18-19. First and last (alpha and omega) is 2 Samuel 7.14. The gates are Ezekiel 48. 30-35. The measuring of the city is Ezekiel 40.3. The perfect cube shape is Exodus and Ezekiel, and, not least, 1 Kings 6.20. Herod's Temple was covered with gold, and dazzled in the sunlight.

Perhaps even more important, because some bits of the Old Testament do seem to suggest that non-Jews are at best onlookers in the New Kingdom: the inclusion of all nations is in Isaiah 2.2-4, Isaiah 11.12, Isaiah 49.6, Isaiah 51.5, Isaiah 56.6-8, plus Jeremiah, Daniel, Zephaniah, Zechariah.

And in case all this suggests that only Jews and Christians have this sort of vision: It was Plato's idea that our earthly things are a pale reflection of the perfect things in heaven; and the idea of perfection meaning no more sea was shared by most ancient peoples, who found the sea distinctly scary and the realm of rather nasty forces.

Most of the key messages will emerge (or even shout at you) if you read slowly and savour – maybe in more than one version. You might miss: This isn't about giving up on earth and going to heaven. There is a new heaven and a new earth. No Temple needed – for the Jewish people the earthly Temple was hugely important, but they never kidded themselves that the Temple could contain God, any more than the little box for God they carried about during the Exodus. The idea of God sharing a tent with us is particularly lovely. One aspect of the heavenly city is the shining not just of God, but of the saints (us!). Hymn line: Who are these like stars appearing. The city is about 2,250,000 square miles, and the wall is lower than some actual walls of ancient times. This suggests room for everyone. Oddly, the twelve precious stones are the stones of the signs of the Zodiac, but in reverse order. Make of that what you will.

The one thing that makes a Church is the presence of Jesus Christ. (William Barclay's most telling comment.)

One footnote. The idea of us shining and the idea of us all bringing gifts into the New Jerusalem might seem a little odd in the context of Christ being "all in all" = a bit like a child bring a pocket torch the better to see the sun! But by the same argument, God didn't need to create us: He could have done just fine without us. Given that He did choose to create us (and all the rest of the stuff of Creation), He clearly values our contribution, our gifts, our "little light shining". The New Heaven and New Earth scenario does tempt us to just sit around waiting for God to sort things out: Thy Kingdom come but don't expect me to do anything in that direction. What can I give Him, poor as I am? Revelation 21 is largely about The City. The Latin is Civitas, which goes with what schools sometimes call Civics, and with Civil Society – everybody working together for the common good. The Greek word is Polis, from which we get Politics – which is about getting together to change things for the better. Revelation 21 encourages hope. It also encourages action.

Since the age of 21, a young man with a degree in engineering and a promising future in athletics, has been suffering from progressive multiple sclerosis. He is now, ten years on, unable to walk, use his hands, speak, or look after personal needs. His university friends come regularly to take him out (he is looked after mainly by his mother). They take him to restaurants, and liquidise his meal choice, and feed him. Building the Kingdom?