

Sermon – Today’s readings have a similar pattern to those of last week. The Gospel takes us back to the last hours of Jesus with his disciples, and the stark message that he was ‘going away’ – yet this meant blessing, not deprivation. Jesus is still ‘away’, and yet, like the early Christians in Acts and Revelation, we are given glimpses of the glory that his death and return to the Father are bringing about. This is the glory already anticipated in the Psalms, where Yahweh is acclaimed by all creation.

John’s vision of the holy city in Revelation brings the psalmist’s prayer to a new intensity of hope. Essentially, however, it is the same vision. God blesses his people so that through them the world may be blessed.

Jerusalem was the city of God’s holy temple, where he had promised to place his name (2 Kings 9 : 3) Here John sees its heavenly counterpart, the reality of which the earthly city was always just an image and foreshadowing. God is present in it with new transparency and intimacy, rendering any temple, and even sun and moon, unnecessary. The glory of God and of the Lamb lights it up.

By the light of this city the nations walk and, through the trees watered by its river, they will find their healing. All who serve this God will see him, be marked as his own, and share his reign as those made in his image were always destined to do. This breadth of God’s new world inspires boundless gratitude and hope – leading, surely, to generosity and environmental care in the present. But there is also a glorious purity that leaves our modern value of ‘tolerance’ woefully inadequate as an all-embracing conception of the ideal society.

The tree of life in this new creation reminds us of the tree in the Garden of Eden. The eternal life has its source in God from whose throne the sustaining river flows. In the Old Testament, Ezekiel described a similar scene with the river flowing from the Temple: but the Temple is no longer needed. Old Testament hopes had centred on overcoming powerful enemies but here the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations: a completely inclusive vision. The writer describes New Jerusalem, lit by the Lamb. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it.' The gates will never be shut by day, and because there is no night, the implication is that no one will ever find themselves excluded by arriving at a closed, guarded city.

In the Temple, the priest had entered the presence of God, alone, once a year. Here God's presence fills the city, excluding no one. His servants will see his face and enjoy that vision for ever. Since it is the expression on the face that allows us to know someone, the image conveys a personal knowledge of God by every believer. Causes of sin are removed; Nothing accursed will be found there any more;. The role of the servant is not subjection: they will actually share in God's rule and 'reign for ever and ever'. Even if the world does its worst to God's people, nothing can take away from us this eternal hope, and nothing can prevent the ultimate triumph of God who will establish this new creation.

After the first Easter, the world had entered its last phase, the kingdom is closer, paradise no longer forbidden. The heavenly Jerusalem opens its gates and life will conquer death. Throughout Revelation, the Lamb, represents Christ both as sacrificed victim and also as risen and ascended

Lord. The centrality of true worship is stressed in contrast to the pressures on Christians to worship the Roman Emperor. Emperor worship would involve venerating some kind of image whereas in the heavenly Jerusalem; God and the Lamb are present in person. The worshipper enjoys being in the presence of God.

The end of everything accursed is a powerful theme and the world has seen many 'Babylons'; over the last century. But the healing of the nations also happens: we have seen truth and reconciliation in South Africa, the peace process in Northern Ireland, harmony between European nations after two world wars and their liberation of Eastern Europe and re-unification of Germany. God's people should never lose heart.

Where do we need healing, in family, church or community? How do we work to ensure that there is justice and a future for all people? How do we ensure that the world's resources are available to all and not all taken by the rich and powerful? Questions, perhaps, for our Time to Talk. Amen.