

A new year, a new heaven, a new earth

After church on Christmas Eve, we went home and turned on the tv to watch Carols by Candlelight, as is our tradition. We went to Melbourne for Christmas 2019, and went to Carols by Candlelight and it was a really special experience to be there with live singing, and the sheer joy being shared by so many people. Watching it on TV now, is a reminder of that – and a reminder of how tv coverage doesn't fully capture the atmosphere.

Amongst the carols we know, amongst the new and sentimental Christmas songs, there's always some that aren't really Christmas songs, but seem to fit and have become part of the tradition anyway. Amazing Grace. Not a particularly Christmas song (if you know the story, it was originally a New Year's hymn), but singing about God's grace is fantastic thing to do at Christmas time – and, indeed, at any time. For many years 'You'll never walk alone' was included in the song list.

This year, the final performance was by David Hobson with 'The Holy City' – a song that he has now performed many, many times at Carols by Candlelight.

It begins, "Last night I lay a-sleeping/There came a dream so Fair, I stood in old Jerusalem/Beside the temple there."

It's hardly Christmassy, is it? It doesn't have the stable and the baby and the shepherds and so on... and nor does it have the sentimental things of Christmas – snow and sleighbells and whatever.

As the song progresses, it shares a vision of what has been, what is, and what is to be. It points to Jesus, "The sun grew dark with mystery, The morn was cold and chill, As the shadow of a cross arose/ upon a lonely hill."

And in the last verse of the song, it looks to the future, as the narrator's vision continues:

And once again the scene was changed;
New earth there seemed to be;
I saw The Holy City
Beside the tideless sea;
The light of God was on its streets,
The gates were open wide,
And all who would might enter,
And no one was denied.
No need of moon or stars by night,
Or sun to shine by day;
It was the new Jerusalem
That would not pass away.

It's a vision of hope, a vision of fulfilment, a vision of a future that is not like the present. And that reflects of Christian expectation of 'things to come' – but we need to remember that what the future holds for us, what God has prepared for us, is really

beyond our understanding. St Paul writes to the Corinthians, “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

There are many things we do not know about what our ultimate future will be like, because it is simply beyond our ability to comprehend. But from what we do know, from the glimpses the scriptures give us, it will wipe away our problems and fear, it will be greater than anything we could imagine or dream, it will be a place where love and joy will last forever.

And we, and all Christians who have gone before us, and all who will come after us, have a place in that future, and we will be led to that place by Jesus who opened the way for us through his death and resurrection.

Remember that Jesus said in John’s gospel, “I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (John 14:2-3)

For all we don’t know about heaven or our future, there is unfortunately no end to the people – non-Christians and Christians – who will fill in the gaps and make up details, quite possibly with the best of intentions. But there are some things our ultimate destination that we do know.

And the first thing about it, is that it is real – it is physical . John writes “Then I saw “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away”. It will not be some ethereal existence, floating around on clouds playing harps. Why would God take the trouble to create a new earth if there was not going to be anyone to live on it?

In the beginning, God created people to live in his creation, in the Garden of Eden, where they walked with God. Our future is the new creation – which we can think of Eden restored.

The final images of the bible are not people going up to heaven, but heaven coming down to earth.

And John adds “and there was no longer any sea” – to the people of the first century, the sea was the source of storms and uncertainty; the sea was scary and dangerous. In the new creation, there will be no sea – so no storms, no uncertainty, no chaos.

It will be the fulfilment of what we pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” And Peter assures us in his second letter “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare. . . . But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness” (2 Peter 3:10,13)

The new earth will not be different world, but the real world we have known, only new and better. It will be a place where everything evil is absent, and everything good is

present; sadness will be gone; disappointment will give way to fulfilment; violence and hate will be gone, every unfaithfulness will be in the past, and loyalty and faithfulness will be constant; every sickness will be gone, and everything will be made healthy. As John writes “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (21:4)

That reflects the prophecy of Isaiah more than 600 years before: “Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind” (Isaiah 65:17)

What a hope that is! But you may have noticed that it’s not here yet. We can look forward to things being put right, but in the meantime, we continue to struggle. Things are not fair, justice does not always happen, we face fear, despair and loss in our lives.

Even if we work hard and are faithful and do our best to avoid temptation and seek forgiveness when we do wrong, things still go wrong for us. Ill-health. Broken relationships. Failed businesses. It’s as the psalmist says “Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence” (Psalm 73:13)

It all seems so unfair, and we wonder: where is the justice? The scriptures assure us that God’s justice is coming, but that it will ultimately come to us fully only in the new creation – the new heavens and the new earth.

In the future that John describes in the book of Revelation, our fallen, imperfect nature will be healed and we will be in perfect relationships with each other and with God.

In fact, our relationship with God will be so profound that verse 2 describes the Holy City – the assembly of Christians - as a bride prepared for her husband — full of love and passion, with arms open wide.

And while the popular perception of heaven might be that it is boring, we can know that the new heaven and the new earth will be rewarding. John, in the book of Revelation, does the best he can at describing heaven, but he is limited by language and experience. He has never seen anything like the visions God gives him, and he struggles to describe them - he talks about walls made out of translucent gold built on foundations made with precious jewels; gates made of a single pearl (the “pearly gates”) and streets of gold.

But the most wonderful thing is that God himself will be present in the world to come. Nothing we see or experience will be greater than the fact that we are with God and see God face to face. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. (1 Corinthians 13:12a)

As we heard in today’s reading, John writes in the book of Revelation: And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Revelation 21:3)

Often, when we open the scriptures, we look to find what we should do – or should not do – but sometimes we just need to listen to God’s word. To be assured and comforted and encouraged by God’s word.

I think that this morning’s passage from Revelation is one of those times. To be reminded of what God has in store for us. To be reassured. To be confident. And to stand in awe and wonder God’s plan for each one of us as individuals, and for all of us together.

Here we are nearing the start of a new year, and we wonder – we worry what it has in store for us. I look back to the Christmas of 2019 that we spent in Melbourne, and think about all that has happened since – the huge bushfires of 2019-20, Covid in 2020 and 2021 (but with the effects still lingering), the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the October 7 attacks and the Israeli response, the Bondi shootings of only two weeks ago, the housing crisis, the cost of living crisis... and so on and on and on.

And then there’s all the tragic events of our lives too. The people we’ve lost from and around our congregation here. The illnesses. The disappointments. The despair.

There’s been some good things too – and I can particularly point to a new birth as something that’s been good. But do you think things will be better in the new year, or worse? For you, for your family, for our church, for our country, or for our world.

In the beginning, God created heaven and earth, and we – humankind – turned away from him; we chose our own way and turned against God... but God sent his son into creation – into the fallen creation – not to destroy it, not to judge it, but to save it. And to do so, he died on a cross... but that wasn’t the end: he rose again, he ascended to heaven and he will return.

Jesus tells us that no one knows when that will be... and there are many things that we don’t know about the things to come, but we can be assured that our future is with God, that all things will be made right, that we will be there together with those we love and those we have cared about - including those who have gone before us.

John writes: He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. (21:6)

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and in the end, God will bring about the new heavens and the new earth.

There are many things we do not know, but there are some things that we know for certain.

Or as Paul says to the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39).

We might face 2026, with fear or uncertainty but in Jesus, God offers us a place in his future – the new heaven and the new earth. All any of us need do to take up that offer is to respond to him in faith.

Amen.