

St. Aidan's West Epping, 2nd June 2019

“THE ETERNAL GARDEN CITY”

(Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:1-6,12-16; John 17:20-26)

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” Familiar words to many of us: the very opening words of the Bible – Genesis Chapter 1. The story of the Bible begins with God the Creator. He creates light. He creates the water and the skies and the earth. He creates plants and vegetation. He creates the sun and moon and stars. He brings into existence creatures that inhabit the sea and the sky and the earth. And he creates human beings in his image.

Genesis then focuses our attention on the first man, and how God gives him a wife; and it tells of a beautiful garden in which they live. They have the joyful task of looking after the garden as God's privileged servants, and the great blessing of having God walking in the garden with them. They have freedom to live their lives, with the warning that there is just one tree from which they are not to eat the fruit. If they eat it, death will come to them. A minimal restriction, but a chance for them to make choices about how they will relate to God. All is good, until the evil one seeks to persuade them that they are missing out by not eating the fruit, and that by eating it they can become like God, rather than being under his thumb.

We know what happens. Eve and Adam eat the fruit, and discover that the serpent, the mouthpiece of the devil, is a liar. They can no longer live in the beautiful garden. And now that sin has entered their lives, things are going to keep on going wrong. The animal kingdom will often be a threat to them. Growing food and plants will often be hard work, rather than a pleasure. Relationships will often be stressful, and affected by conflict. And death will come to them.

And so it has been from our beginning. Those first three chapters of Genesis provide the setting for the whole of scripture. And in one sense the rest of the Bible tells the story of how God works step by step to get things back to the way they should be. We see how he chooses a man, Abraham, from whose family and descendants he will establish a nation to bear witness to him in the land he will give them. But even the chosen nation of Israel does not fulfil the plan he sets before them, or live truly as his covenant people.

God keeps sending his prophets who call on everyone to live as God's people, and who also remind them of God's great promises. And they assure the people that these promises will ultimately be fulfilled.

And then, 2000 years after Abraham was called by God, a baby was born a few kilometres outside Jerusalem, the holy city, where God's temple stood as a witness to God's presence with his people. And this baby would not only teach people about God and his purposes. He would not just show God's love and power as he miraculously cured the ill. He would go to war with the evil one.

But that climactic battle was very different from what people expected. Jesus defeated the evil one not by violent deeds of valour, but by sacrificing his life on a Roman cross. The death and resurrection of Jesus are the centrepiece of history. The first Easter marks that central battle between God and the evil one, between the Son of God and Satan. And we are assured by the resurrection of Jesus that he has indeed won the great victory over evil and death.

The devil knows that he now has limited time to do his worst before he will finally be wiped out, and he is certainly active here and now. That reality provides the background to the Book of Revelation, which we have been thinking about over these past six weeks. The spiritual battle goes on, and the devil is happy to use whatever means he can to try still to prevent God's purposes being fulfilled.

And late in the 1st century, he would work through the power and the arrogance and the ignorance of the Roman Empire to pressure Christians to compromise in their faith, or to abandon that faith altogether. The big question facing so many Christians was whether they would swear allegiance to Caesar as Lord, when they knew that Jesus their King and Saviour alone is Lord. There was great pressure, and even the threat of martyrdom. Would Christian believers remain faithful to Jesus? Or would they turn away and take the easier way, the safer way?

So John, who received a great and strange revelation from the Lord, and wrote it down for the church to read. It challenges John's readers to remain faithful to Jesus. Seven letters present their messages to the local churches with their various strengths and opportunities and challenges.

Then John pictures the Lord on his heavenly throne, surrounded by angels and elders and creatures joyfully proclaiming his glory. But how will his purposes be fulfilled? Who is worthy to open the seals which reveal God's plans for creation and for his people? The Lion who is the Lamb, who has suffered and died for his people, is worthy to open the seals! He has won the great victory, and God's purposes will indeed come to pass.

We then saw a great multitude of God's faithful people: they had come out of the great ordeal. They had been faithful and they had suffered for their faithfulness. And they had washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb: as they trusted in Jesus who had died for them, to bring them forgiveness and salvation, they had been assured of a place in God's kingdom.

Over the following chapters we met some of the book's strange and gruesome characters, displaying the power of evil as they battled against God and his people. But in Christ, the real victory has already been won. And in God's time that victory will come to its ultimate fulfilment in the new heaven and the new earth. Last week we heard of the New Jerusalem coming down to earth from heaven, for in the new creation there is no separation between heaven and earth. All things are new. And those things which belong to the old creation will be no more: sin, evil, pain, conflict and death will have no place in the new creation.

In the final chapter of Revelation, part of which was today's first reading, we hear more of the new creation, and especially the new Jerusalem. The old Jerusalem had been the city from where the kings of Israel and Judah ruled, so often corruptly and faithlessly. The old Jerusalem was also the city of the holy temple, which symbolized God's presence with his people. But the barriers between the different courts of the temple also reminded thoughtful people that God was holy, and he was not accessible to just anyone under any conditions.

But the new Jerusalem is indeed new. It is what we could call a "garden city". So much of what we read here takes us back to the Garden of Eden before evil took hold. At the moment there are debates going on about how much development of a city like Sydney is good, and how we can make sure that there is sufficient green space. Interestingly, in the new Jerusalem we find no building described. After all, a city is people before it is buildings. Constructions are there for the people: not the other way round.

Yes, there is a wall: but its twelve gates are open. But there is no temple in the new Jerusalem, for the temple is the Lord God and the Lamb. The Lord God and Jesus are truly with their people, with all barriers down. We will see them face to face. In the Old Testament, to see the face of God was to court death: we are sinful but God is holy. In fact, even in the book of Revelation we have been given no description of the Lord on his throne. He does not speak directly to his people until Chapter 21. But in the new creation we shall be in the fullness of his glorious and loving presence, and see him face to face.

In this garden city there is the river of the water of life, flowing through the city from the throne of God. And there is the tree of life, now accessible to all God's people: bringing sustenance and refreshment and pleasure to Christ's people. It is a new and greater Eden. There is no night or darkness, where evil can be done in secret and where truth can be hidden from view. The Lord himself is the light of all. And whereas the servants of Satan wore the number 666 on their foreheads, a merely human number which is also the number of the beast, the citizens of the new Jerusalem are clearly identified as belonging to the Lord and the Lamb. The hope pictured for us is truly wonderful.

But these blessings do not come automatically. We are reminded that Jesus will come to repay everyone for their work. Yes, there is judgement coming. We of course fall short, but as we trust in Jesus, we have our dirty robes washed in the blood of the Lamb, and we are assured of forgiveness and acceptance. And as we trust in him, we also take on the challenge to live as his people, to hold fast to Jesus.

Jesus is coming soon, we are told. No, we are not in a position to tie down a particular time or date for Jesus' return in glory. The important thing is that we shall be part of it all, whenever it happens, and we need to heed that call to live as people who are ready for the great day. So let us not take our faith for granted, but seek to live it out. Let us not take our salvation for granted, but seek to live faithfully as followers of the Saviour.

The date of Jesus' return in glory could be any time. Let us live as those who are ready for the great day. Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!

Paul Weaver