

**SERMON: 19 May 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**

**“Imagining the City of God”  
(Revelation 21:1-6 and John 13:31-35)**

The last 2 chapters of the Bible give us a beautiful road map to where we are headed.

I say that, not in terms of a place we will go to after we die, but more so as a state we can imagine and hope for and continuously see evolving, taking shape.

Because somehow, it's in the imagining and the hoping - which, of course, is inspired by God in us - that this new state becomes a reality in the here and now.

Maybe that's why John's vision is of a city descending like a Bride, because a city is a tangible collection of a big number of very diverse people, united into one place.

In the poetry of the Bible, this new state is described as a wedding of Bride and Groom, a joyful occasion, a celebration of the everlasting coming together of that which was previously separate.

The city and the wedding are symbols of God's desire, from the beginning, for unity in diversity, the joining together of different parts into one.

And that oneness is revealed to us *in Christ* and made real to us *as Christ*.

God is bringing all things, including all people and all living creatures, together in Christ.

So what is our role here and now?

I think it's about preparation. Preparing for the wedding feast, and building the heavenly city. Getting ready for the coming together of Bride and Groom, the Church becoming one with Christ, the ever growing Body of Christ fully at one with the Head of Christ. God's dream of unity in diversity.

And how do we do this?

I think we're called to set the table. [SLIDE] I remember as a child my mum giving me the job of setting the table. I didn't particularly like it as a child. It seemed too much of a chore. And looking back I regret that I was so reluctant to take part in that holy act of preparation for eating together around a table.

There's something sacred about people eating together. It's no small thing that perhaps the most central symbol of the Christian faith is the act of eating and drinking together. I think this is one of the reasons why The Alpha Course is so successful. Because it involves the act of eating together, and it can only happen if someone goes to the effort of preparing for the meal, and that includes setting the table.

Preparation then, is a key act of service for the Body of Christ. And as well as setting the table, we're called to make room at the table, to make everyone feel invited to the table, with no exclusion and no judgement.

[SLIDE] A couple of years ago, John Pavlovitz wrote a book called *A Bigger Table - Building Messy Authentic and Hopeful Spiritual Community*. In this book, he suggests that the church must widen her embrace and build a big enough table for all. And he gives his 'table' 4 'legs', each leg having a name - [SLIDE] radical hospitality, total authenticity, true diversity and agenda-free community.

There is good advice here, which I believe affirms what we read in the Bible. And it might be good for us to reflect on how well we measure up in these 4 elements.

But let's move on to think a bit more about Revelation 21. What strikes me is that, in John's vision, the new heaven and the new earth appear as "coming down from God out of heaven" onto the earth. In other words, does it all end up here?

Rather than escaping this world to go to some unseen heaven elsewhere, which has been the understanding for many Christians for a long time, will the new heaven and the new earth be a renewed heavenly version of this earth that we've come to know and love? The earth in a state of ongoing creation in which we get to participate in as co-creators with God?

I think it might. The appearance of the earth and all its creatures is changing as Christ becomes more and more, and all in all.

How we see ourselves in Christ affects how we see things. The extent to which we can imagine the new world, in Christ, with God at the centre, is directly related to how much we realise our own oneness with God in Christ.

Augustine put it like this [SLIDE], “Joy proceeds from the inner realisation of union with God, which descends upon us at ever deeper levels as we walk our faith journey”.

[SLIDE] Remember, Paul tells us our real lives are “hidden with Christ in God”, and waiting to be revealed (Colossians 3:3-4).

So, we are to set our “sights on the realities of heaven” (3:1).

In other words, we are to imagine and work for, with the help of the Spirit of Christ in us, heaven becoming real, here and now.

“Let heaven fill your thoughts” (3:2) says Paul.

But of course we are to do so with our feet planted firmly on this earth. The proper outworking of being heavenly minded is that we are of earthly good.

We will be inspired to care for the planet and all living things, [SLIDE] to love where we live, as the slogan for the community litter pick puts it.

In practise, this will also mean leaving behind selfish thoughts and ways and paying more and more attention to the Christ [SLIDE] who now lives in all of us (3:11).

The more attention we give, the more space we make to hear the Voice of Christ in us, the more we realise God is dwelling with us in the centre of the holy city (21:3), the more our behaviours and thoughts will change and the world will begin to look and feel more and more like heaven. And then we'll want to build an even bigger table and make more and more space at the table.

[SLIDE]

Look, I am making all things new!  
I am the Alpha and the Omega  
The beginning and the End  
Come to me all who are thirsty.

That invitation will grow louder, so much so that we can't not share it.

And having responded to the invitation of Christ, having spent time in the awareness of Supreme Love, having discovered the True Essence of who we are as One with God and with each other in Christ,...

...we will arise and look at the world with new eyes, because in our Oneness, we find it easier to love one another, easier to live in the ceaseless flow of unfailing love, easier to imagine the city of God which the Bible speaks of, easier to share the small seeds of faith that we've each been given.

I want to think a bit more about that invitation next week but for now ...

Let us be united in love for each other, as Christ has loved us. And in such love, let's prove to the world that we are Christ's disciples, imagining the city of God, and living and working for its coming nearer all the time.