

Into God's World - Community
Revelation 21:22-27 / Nehemiah 5

I wonder what you think heaven is like. Mark Twain had some smart comments to make: *"The secret source of humour itself is not joy, but sorrow. There is no humour in heaven.... Let us swear while we may, for in Heaven it will not be allowed.... Travel has no longer any charm for me. I have seen all the foreign countries I want to except heaven & hell & I have only a vague curiosity about one of those.... [and]... Go to Heaven for the climate, Hell for the company."*

Building Community

For well over 3 millennia people have made various attempts to build heaven on earth - or to get as close to it as they can. Sometimes you see it in the millenarian cults or sects; sometimes you see it in political ideologies, whether religious or secular. We also do it in our own small lives - in the idealisation of the Christian family, or the idealisation of church. However one of the lessons from history that rarely seems to get learned is the fact that heaven is not ours to build. Heaven belongs to God.

Nevertheless, the Bible is insistent that humanity is made in God's relational image. It's because of *God's* own eternal relationship within the Trinity that *we* experience relationship within humanity. And so while we're never called to build heaven on earth, we *do* have an innate human vocation to build community.

What *is* community? People have all sorts of idealised and romanticised notions. Community is nothing more or less than the arrangement of our human relationships - which is why it can be a local or a global affair. How we build community depends on the interplay between our values and our vision. The Bible gives us a powerful vision for community. It's not a blueprint or a photograph. It's a vision which imparts values. And the mature reading of Scripture God calls us to is one which looks *into* the vision and draws *out* the values, planting the *values* into our life-work together and keeping the *vision* in front of us.

Now, Revelation 21 is an inspiring picture of the New Jerusalem, but a second glance at the Chapter shows immediately that this isn't the description of a city. Rather it's a description of the people of God. The city - like the picture of the Bride of Christ - is an image of God's *people* rather than the place where they dwell. Nevertheless, through the vision of this city, the values God desires for his people stand out radiantly, and stand as an inspirational challenge to us as we seek to build community in a godly way.

So what are some of the aspects of this vision shining through this passage?

God's Community

God's Presence

Firstly, God's personal presence is central. "I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple."

The temple is a place of meeting, a place of sacrifice, a place where sins are dealt with and God is worshipped. But in this city God is not confined to a special place - he is there in the midst of his people. The word used for "temple" here is "*naos*" - which means "sanctuary." The presence of God calls forth a worshipping relationship and creates a safe place where we are both known and welcomed. The combination of "**Lord God Almighty**" and "**Lamb**" is typical of Revelation and crucial to the book's theological purpose. But it also combines the ancient power, stability and justice of God with his self-offering and vulnerable love. When God is among his people, these are the qualities we become aware of.

God's vision for community, therefore is one in which he is personally and publicly involved and present.

Light

Secondly, the city is full of light. v23 - "The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp."

Light guides; it gives confidence and ability to see the way. Jesus said, "**I am the light of the world, whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.**" We read in the First Letter of John "**if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.**" (1 John 1:7) So the image of light is partly about truth and clarity in our relationships.

Once again we have the double image of the centrality of God and the Lamb. The light of the '**glory of God**' speaks of dazzling power and unmitigated truth. The light of '**the Lamb**' speaks of a tender and healing presence. As God's people, we are able to be open and truthful with ourselves and each other because our truth-telling is done in the context of healing. As St Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "**speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.**" (Eph 4:15)

So God's vision for Community is one of truth and grace.

Partnership

Thirdly, the city is a place of partnership - v.24: "The nations will walk by its light."

The history of the world is littered with warring nations, but here we read that they “walk” and *walking* means no longer *warring*. But notice, the nations walk by the light of the *city*. The source of light has changed from being God and the Lamb, to being the city itself. The people of God are providing light for the nations of the world. *Our* walking in the light provides a witness to *others* to walk in the light. That’s why it’s so important to model truth and openness within the church. Jesus said, “**You are a city built on a hill.**” The church is intended to be a blessing to the rest of creation - actively involved in peace-making, building life, dignity, respect and relationship.

God’s vision for community is one of active and involved reconciling.

Safety

Fourthly, the city is a place of safety: “On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there.” (v.25)

A city shuts its gates at night because it is fearful of attack. God’s vision for his people is one of security. A lot of us in church have things that attack us. For some it is the repeating pattern of past behaviour. For others it’s the repeating memory of past experience. They are things that attack us in the night - they creep up on us in the dark and suddenly we’re overtaken by them. I’m not talking literally of course, but neither is this a literal picture. What it’s looking for is for God’s people to be a safe place to be open and vulnerable. We need to make ourselves vulnerable in order to receive the healing of Christ, but we can only make ourselves vulnerable in a safe community

God’s vision for Community is one of confidence and enabling.

Participation

Fifthly, the city is a place of participation: “The glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it.”(v.26)

This is a picture of valuing contribution - joining together with common purpose to give glory to God. There’s a great sense of diversity and colour. A few months ago someone had a picture for St James’. As I recall it was of a net put together with all sorts of different strands and fabrics, and it spoke to me of our calling as God’s people to be *inclusive* and *welcoming*, *celebrative* when it comes to difference.

God’s vision for Community is one of inclusiveness, recognition, and celebration.

An Entrance

Lastly, the city is a place with an entrance: “Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.” (v.27)

At first this verse might seem like the joker in the pack. The wonderful vision has unfolded of a beautiful city, but how could any of us ever enter it: **Nothing impure... nor.. anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful...** I guess most of must face the sad fact of exclusion. Except we then read, **“only those whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”** We become part of the city through belonging to the Lamb of God. We belong to the Lamb of God when we come to him, giving ourselves to him, *with* all our shame, our deceit, our impurity, and when we *ask* him, *beg* him, *plead with him* to cover our sins with his atoning blood. And he replies, “Look - your name is already here in my book of life.”

God’s vision for Community is one in which he himself makes it possible for all to enter.

That’s something about the *vision* for community, and out of the vision we’ve drawn a number of *values*. But in order to strain forward towards that vision, we need to put these values into practice. Let’s spend some final minutes, therefore, reflecting on our *first* reading from Nehemiah: Just three aspects of a bold community creator, community leader, and community developer getting on with the job: Nehemiah Chapter 5.

Values – Vision - Strategy

First of all we see that Nehemiah’s lifestyle as a *Community Creator* was *characterised by and borne out of his worship*.

Worship

End of v.15: **“Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that.”** His motivation was reverence for God. That was his motivation for rebuilding the city. God was present in the centre of his life, and Nehemiah’s desire was for God’s presence to be central to the people as a whole. If you and I want to be involved in building community, then let us do it out of reverence for God and his glory. St Paul said of the Macedonian Church, **“they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us.”** and may that be *our* attitude as well so that all the efforts of our lives are centred around God. Nehemiah was a *Community Creator* - he brought that community into being, but he was effective in his creative process because he worshipped first the Creator of all things.

Walk

Secondly, we see that Nehemiah's ministry as a *Community Leader* was one of *walking in the light*.

Some time into the great project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem he suddenly became aware of a scandalous situation: a number of the people were selling their own children to pay their debts, whilst others of the same people took rent with interest off them for the vineyards they were harvesting. Nehemiah was aghast. He himself had even possibly contributed to the situation, but once he sees it he is determined to put an end to it.

In v.6 we see how angry and straightforward he is. Then in v.7 we read, **“So I called together a large meeting...”** It's living in the light - being open about the problems. And then in v.9 he says, **“What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our enemies?”** Nehemiah builds the community and acts for justice, but he appeals to his listeners to make their own decisions. As a great *Community Leader*, he doesn't set himself up as the light, but he invites the community to walk in God's light with him.

Willingness

Finally, as a *Community Developer* we see how *he leads by example and draws other people in*. Nehemiah is willing to share of himself

In v.14 he relinquishes **“the food allotted to the governor”** so as not to place a burden on his people. In v.16 he **devoted himself to work on the wall and did not acquire any land.** In v.18 he fed **150 people at his table** from all nations. It's the politics of the Lamb:- A Lion for others and a Lamb for himself - Nehemiah leads by sacrificial example. The community could be shaped and developed because they saw not simply a leader who stood up the front and talked about his values, but one who actually got on with the job and lived them out.

So how will *you* be a Creator, a Leader, a Developer in *your* communities? Where is your main community? Is it at work? Is it in your street, your block, or your hall of residence? Is it in your locality, or maybe God is raising your awareness of being part of a global community. How will *you* play *your* part in reflecting the image of God?

What is your vision for community? What values do *you* take away from these passages? This evening as we celebrate Holy Communion we are reminded of those values through self-offering of Jesus - Lamb of God given for the life of the world. But we're not only reminded of them - we participate in them as we eat and drink the bread and wine.

So let me invite you: as you come forward to receive, come forward carrying your

community - which ever community it is you most identify with tonight. Come forward to the Lord's table bearing that community and your involvement in it, and then go out of this place to love and serve the Lord. Amen.