

Revelation 21:1-6

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 15, 2022

According to Douglas Adams, "In the beginning the Universe was created. This has made a lot of people very angry and been widely regarded as a bad move."¹

Science now tells us that in the beginning there was nothing, which exploded.² As space itself boiled out from a single point, atoms and elements coalesced out of the seething cosmic soup. Gas clouds and then planets began to form, whirling away into the blackness. Eventually there was life.

After life, sentience: the capacity to have sensations and experience the world. Humans alone, we think, have something further: sapience, the ability to reflect upon experience. Self-awareness.

But with sapience comes the ability to think; to reason; to organize. To build cities; create societies; found nations. Impose hierarchies, hoard resources, persecute your neighbour.

John of Patmos, writing somewhere between 60 AD and the turn of the century, addresses a Christian community that knows about persecution. The seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, in modern-day Turkey, have a tumultuous relationship with

1 Douglas Adams, "The Restaurant at the End of the Universe," 1.

2 Terry Pratchett, "Lords and Ladies," 1.

their Jewish and pagan neighbours. Sometimes they come into conflict with their Roman rulers as well. Several Roman emperors persecuted Christians, starting with Nero who blamed them for the Fire of Rome in 64 AD.

John knows that the oppression of God's people is a historical pattern. Several hundred years later, the Babylonian empire conquered Israel and took its people into bondage; for John, the violence and excessive opulence of Rome makes it the new Babylon.

His audience knows, on both a personal and a political level, that life involves mourning; crying; pain; death. Why is this the case, and will the future hold more the same? Is God really in charge at all?

With our modern understanding of science and cosmology, we may be even more inclined to ask these questions. Is life just physics? Is it just atoms and planets and dust clouds, the years ticking away without purpose or meaning?

This is the sort of thing we ask ourselves at funerals. Why do our loved ones die? Are we born just to die? Why must we be left to mourn?

We look around at our cities, at Mission and Abbotsford. Why are there homeless people on our streets, in garbage-strewn back alleys and wooded lots? Why are people dying of drug overdoses? Why is an overheated housing market permitted to make some

people rich and others homeless? Why, in an over-connected world, do so many people feel so alone?

What is it all for? What is it all about? Is there no meaning to our life? To the universe? Are we just pushed through our days by the unrelenting march of time? Or is it all going somewhere? What is the end—in the sense of both the purpose and the fate—of the universe?

Once the Big Bang—the idea that the universe exploded out of nothing—became accepted, physicists began asking themselves the same question: where is it all going? Is all of the matter in the universe going to keep flying apart? Or is it expanding just fast enough to counteract the force of gravity, so that it will stay mostly the same forever? Or is everything going to come back together in a Big Crunch?

Biologist, theologian and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin believed that the end of the universe is Christ. Everything was evolving to what he called the Omega Point, a great attractor at the end of time, which was Jesus. We do not stumble through our days; we are not pushed, but rather we are pulled with purpose.

This is John of Patmos' vision. While things may seem to be flying apart, God is bringing them together again. This will culminate in the New Jerusalem. Whereas the current age is dominated and characterized by Babylon / Rome, the city of death and

oppression and mourning and exploitation, when we arrive at the future to which God is inviting us, we will live in the new Jerusalem.

This is not a spiritual, metaphysical city in the clouds: the New Jerusalem may be formed in heaven, but it descends to earth. The material world, the created order, is not erased but rather redeemed.

I invited you to think, this week, about what the city of God might look like. What might the New Mission, or the New Abbotsford, look like?

On the one hand, this is a dangerous question, because the New Jerusalem is not characterized by a certain set of policies or the dominance of one party or ideology over others. Its primary characteristic is that God dwells there alongside humanity. God is not isolated from the world and from daily life: God is right there in the middle of it, and we will never feel alone or abandoned by God again.

On the other hand, Revelation is not an idealized fantasy or drug-fuelled vision. It envisions a physical world redeemed, not erased, and its New Jerusalem is both a beacon and a contrast. It calls us to compare it with our own cities. If Mission and Abbotsford have homelessness and drug overdoses, and the New Jerusalem does not, how do we get there from here?

John tells us that this New Jerusalem is our ultimate destination. We are all going there: our loved ones who have died are going there. We are going there. Everyone is going there. At Ron Arnold's funeral we commended him to God:

"Give rest, O Christ, to your servant Ron with all your saints, where there is neither pain nor sorrow nor sighing, but life everlasting." To this New Jerusalem, in other words, through the gates of which all the saints of God will enter.

What does it mean that the place where we will meet our departed loved ones is not in a disembodied spiritual reality, but in a redeemed physical one?

It says two things to me. First, that they do not depart into some other world to which we have no access. They are, in some mysterious way, still with us here, just as God is with us here.

Second, that we should not aspire to this escape, either. We are not called to heaven but to Earth. "Behold," says God, "I am making all things new." This future God, in John's vision, does not say, "I *have* made all things new," but rather, "*I am making* all things new." This redemption, this regeneration of the world is already in progress. The full presence of God and our departed saints is becoming more and more real, every day, despite all appearances. While there is pain and suffering in the world, there is also beauty and complexity and surprise and wonder, as that invitation and pull towards our destiny in Christ fills us with hope to creatively meet the challenges of everyday living.

For God is our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end.

We know where we are going.