

The Fifth Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 14:21-27
<i>Response</i>	I will extol thee, my God and King, and bless thy name for ever and ever.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 145:8-9, 10-11, 12-13
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 21:1-5a
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 13:31-33a, 34-35

The fifth Sunday in Easter for year C continues our journey through the book of Revelation. And it actually brings us to what may be my favorite passage in the entire Bible, if you can believe that. I know I say it about a lot of passages, but this one I really mean it. It's John's vision of the new creation, of the new Heaven and the new Earth, and his vision of the end of an old creation and the beginning of a new. So let's read the Scripture for today, and then we'll try to unpack it and see how it relates to the Easter season. Revelation 21:1-5 says this:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away."

And he who sat upon the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.”¹

Beautiful, beautiful passage. Okay, so what’s going on in this particular passage for today, and why does the Church choose it for the fifth Sunday of Easter?

Well, the answer to the first question is real simple. It’s... what’s going on in this passage is that John is having a revelation of what we commonly refer to as the end of the world...the end of the world — or what the theologians refer to as eschatology, the doctrine of the end times, the doctrine of the Last Things.

And you can see this when John uses the language here of saying:

...for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... (Revelation 21:1b)

You might recall, for example, from the Gospel of Matthew and Mark... in chapter 24 of Matthew, Jesus speaks about the end of the world using this very same imagery. He says:

Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.
(Matthew 24:35)

That’s the imagery he’s using there of speaking about the end of the cosmos, the end of the world, the end of the universe. So when John says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... (Revelation 21:1a)

This doesn’t mean, as sometimes people think, that he’s speaking about a new celestial realm where God dwells. No, the expression “heaven and earth” is just an ancient Jewish way of referring to the cosmos, of referring to the universe. So when Jesus says:

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Heaven and earth will pass away...

He means *the world* will pass away. Likewise, when John says:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth... (Revelation 21:1a)

He's talking about a new world that is going to replace the former world. And he's getting this idea from, of course, the Old Testament. Because if you go back to the book of Isaiah, for example, chapters 64 through 66, one of the most powerful and distinctive aspects of the book of Isaiah, of the prophecies of Isaiah, is that Isaiah makes clear that when the Messiah comes — when the Anointed One comes, when God comes to save His people — He's not just going to save them. He's not just going to deliver them. He's not only just going to forgive their sins; He's also going to bring about a new creation, a new Heaven, and a new Earth where the righteous will dwell forever.

And so what John is doing is showing us a vision of the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy of not just the end of the world, but the new creation. And he describes this new creation as centered on another new thing, and that's the new Jerusalem, the new city of God — which he depicts as coming down out of Heaven, like a bride adorned for her husband.

What does that mean? Well, if you go back to the Old Testament, you'll see over and over again, the people of Israel are depicted collectively as a bride, and God (the Lord) is the divine Bridegroom. So what John is showing us here — and this is really crucial — is that the end of time, the end of the world, isn't just the kind of cataclysmic destruction of the visible universe as we know it... although it is that. It is going to pass away.

But it's *more* than that. It's the coming also of a new cosmos, a new universe, a new Heaven and a new Earth, and the union of God and Church, of God and humanity in the Church, through the wedding of Christ with His Bride, the new Jerusalem.

And so what John's doing here is using imagery from Jewish Scripture to unveil the mystery, because this really is a mystery, of what the end of time is... what it's all about. So you see a new creation (number one), you see a new Jerusalem (number two), and then you also — if you look carefully here — you'll actually see he's also talking about a new exodus.

Now what do I mean, a new exodus? Look at that verse where it says:

Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. (Revelation 21:3b)

In Greek there, the word for dwelling is *skēnē*. It means the “tent” or “tabernacle” of God is with men. Now when is the last time you saw God tabernacling with His people or dwelling in a tent? Well, it's in the book of Exodus. It's in the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and their journey to the Promised Land, in which God commands the people to build a tent, a tabernacle, so that He might dwell with them in this portable temple, in this portable sanctuary — that He would remain with them as they were on their journey to the Promised Land.

So here, what John is saying is that at the end of time, after the dissolution of the old creation and the coming of the new creation, after the descent of the new city of God from Heaven, God is going to tabernacle with humanity in such a way that:

He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them...

And because He is with them, there's not going to be any more pain. There's not going to be any more tears. There's not going to be any more suffering, because:

...death shall be no more...

And the former things, meaning the old creation, will have passed away.

Now whenever we talk about eschatology, it always strikes me as fascinating that some people are really scared. They are alarmed by the thought of the world passing away, of the end of time coming. And that's understandable that that would

be our reaction to it, because most of us are very attached to this world. We love the world. We love this world. We're part of this world, and imagining it passing away can be distressing.

But it's only alarming or distressing or frightening to us if we don't ask or we don't look carefully at what Scripture reveals about what will come *after* the end of the world. Because what God is revealing here to us through John is that in the new creation, there's not going to be any death. There's not going to be any suffering. Instead, what we'll have is union with God. He's going to tabernacle with us. And that union is so intimate that it will be like a bride with the bridegroom — Christ with His Church, God with the new Jerusalem.

So the new creation shouldn't be something we're afraid of. This is attractive. This is what we should all hope for. This is the Christian hope, that one day on the last day — or maybe say *after* the last day — Christ will not just cause all that is to pass away, but that He will:

...make all things new.”

The coming of a new creation. This, at least, is what the living tradition has said about this passage. So two examples of this from ancient and then modern times... in his 8th century commentary on the book of Revelation — this is one of the most widely read commentaries on the book of Revelation. St. Bede of Northumbria, a Doctor of the Church, had this to say about the passage that we'll read today in the lectionary. He wrote this:

Then ‘the form of this world will pass away’ in a conflagration of heavenly fires, so that when *heaven and earth have been changed into something better*, the congruent quality of this double transformation may harmonize with *the incorruptibility and immortality of the bodies of the saints*.²

Bede's *Commentary on Revelation*, 21:1. What does that mean? What's he talking about? Well, what Bede is pointing out here is that when the book of Revelation

² Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 21:1 (trans. Faith Wallis)

says that this world is going to pass away and a new Heaven and new Earth are going to come, what it means is that the end of time is not just going to mean the *end* of this world, but the *transfiguration* (so to speak) of this world into something better.

In other words, at the end of time — contrary to what some people might assume or imagine — God isn't going to just destroy the universe and then throw it into the trash bin of history, and everyone will then continue forever and ever as immortal souls who are disembodied in some kind of ethereal realm.

No. Rather, our hope is for the coming of a new world and the resurrection of the body. I've said this many, many times, but here we see Bede saying this — that God is going to transfigure creation, make it into something better, precisely so that the saints might not only experience immortality of their souls, but the incorruptibility and immortality of their bodies so that they have a place to dwell with God. They have a place to have communion with God in this new creation, this new Heaven and new Earth.

Now what exactly will that look like? What will it be like? What exactly are the details? Well, as St. Paul said so long ago:

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him...” (1 Corinthians 2:9)

So it's hard for us to comprehend the nature of that mystery as long as we're living in this valley of tears in this visible fallen world. But this *is* the faith of the saints. This *is* the revelation to John. And this is the tradition of the Church about the nature of the end of time. It's not just the end of this world; it's the *transfiguration* of the world into something better.

And you don't have to take Bede's word for it. You can actually look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. One of the fascinating things about the *Catechism*, the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is that it has a section on the new creation, on this new cosmos, on Revelation 21 — the reading for today.

And so listen to the words of the *Catechism* following the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. And I quote:

At the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. *After the universal judgment, the righteous will reign for ever with Christ, glorified in body and soul. The universe itself will be renewed...*

Then it quotes Vatican II:

The Church ... will receive her perfection only in the glory of heaven, when will come the time of the renewal of all things. At that time, together with the human race, *the universe itself*, which is so closely related to man and which attains its destiny through him, *will be perfectly re-established in Christ.*³

Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, paragraph 48. In other words, and in closing, what the reading for today shows us in this Easter season is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Easter Sunday wasn't *just* the vindication of Jesus of Nazareth as a Messiah. It wasn't even *just* the beginning of *our* life in Christ, a kind of anticipation of *our* resurrection on the final day.

But rather, the resurrection of Jesus was nothing less than the beginning of a new universe, the beginning of the new creation, and that just as Christ's Body is put to death but then raised up and transfigured into glory and into a glorious state, so too at the end of time the whole universe will pass away...but not into non-existence, but rather into a transfigured and glorious state where Christ will fulfill the words that He said to John in Revelation 21:

“Behold, I make all things new.”

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 1042, quoting Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 48