

The Sixth Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 15:1-2, 22-29
<i>Response</i>	O God, let all the peoples praise thee!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 21:10-14, 22-23
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Jesus answered him, "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 14:23-29

The sixth Sunday of Easter for Year C continues our journey through the Apocalypse of St. John, the book of Revelation. It brings us to another beautiful passage in Revelation where John has a vision -- this time focused not on the new creation so much as on the new Jerusalem. This is what John says in Revelation 21:10-14 and 22-23:

And in the Spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed; on the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates, and on the west three gates. And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.¹

Now the lectionary skips all the way down to verse 22:

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.

And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

All right, so what's going on in this passage and why does the Church choose it for the sixth Sunday of Easter? A couple of points. Number one, when John speaks about this vision of the New Jerusalem, he's once again alluding to the Old Testament, he's alluding to the prophecies of the New Jerusalem in the book of Isaiah 64-66, but actually chapter 62, and elsewhere 62-63. The last several chapters of the book of Isaiah are all about visions of the new Jerusalem that Isaiah the prophet has, and now John is explaining to you that he's seeing them fulfilled. He's, in a sense, being given a guided tour by the angel, who's revealing this to him, of the New Jerusalem. So maybe those of you out there who have gone to the earthly Jerusalem, you probably went on a pilgrimage. And if you went to the city, you likely had a tour guide to kind of take you through the city and show you all of the major sites, show you all of the holy places, show you the sacred shrines and sacred places that have been sanctified, either by the the life of Jesus himself, by the actions of Jesus while he lived there, or by the Church throughout the centuries, various saints and shrines and relics and whatnot. So just like you might go to the earthly Jerusalem on pilgrimage and be given a tour by a guide, so too John here is seeing the New Jerusalem and the angel is giving him a kind of guided tour of the New Jerusalem and highlighting various facets of this heavenly city. Now in the book of Revelation itself, it's a much longer tour of the New Jerusalem. There are a lot more details, but the lectionary here focuses our attention on a couple of key aspects of this city of Jerusalem.

One of them is just its beauty, it's glory. It has radiance like a jewel, like Jasper it's clear as crystal, but another is the symbolism of the number twelve -- tied to the new Jerusalem. So notice here it says that the city has twelve gates and at those gates are twelve angels. And on the gates are the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel. So think here of the tribe of Ruben or Simeon or Levi or Judah, each one of these gates has the name of a tribe or a son of Jacob on it. And then also there are the twelve foundations, and this is interesting that the twelve foundations have on them, not the twelve names of the twelve sons of Jacob, but the twelve names of the twelve Apostles of Christ. So Peter and Andrew, James and John, Thomas, Bartholomew, all of the names of the Apostles, presumably here with the inclusion here of Mathias, right? Who is the replacement of Judas. So what John is

showing us here -- this is fascinating -- is to the extent that the New Jerusalem is an image of the Church, of the Church Triumphant, of the bride of Christ. Notice that the way you get into the Church, the access is through the old covenant, right? You have the twelve tribes of Israel, but the foundations of the Church are the twelve Apostles of the lamb. So it's a very powerful image that we actually see elsewhere in Revelation too, of the old and the new together in the Church. So for example, earlier in the book of Revelation, you'll see the twenty-four elders having these twenty-four thrones and you might think, well, wait, is the number twenty-four significant in Scripture? Well, not on its own, but when you recall that twelve plus twelve makes twenty-four, it's a symbol of the plentitude of the righteous, not just from the new covenant, but from the old covenant as well, coming together in the one church of Christ.

And then the third aspect of the New Jerusalem that John highlights -- it's really fascinating -- is that unlike the earthly Jerusalem, where the center of the city was the Temple, right? Even to this day, people will go to the Dome of the rock. There's a Muslim mosque up there now, but that's where the Temple used to be. And then the Wailing Wall or the Western Wall were the foundation stones for the Temple in Jerusalem, and that holy site is still the central site in the earthly city of Jerusalem. Well, for John, who would've made pilgrimages to the earthly Jerusalem and to the Temple in particular during his life as a Jew, one of the striking things he notices about the New Jerusalem is there's no Temple. Now if you say there's no Temple, the first thing a Jew might think is, well then God's not present there, right? Because the Temple was the dwelling place of God. But what John does is he qualifies that. He says:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

So just as the earthly Temple was the visible sign of the invisible presence of God in the earthly Jerusalem, now in the heavenly Jerusalem, in the New Jerusalem, there isn't a need for a visible sign of God's presence because his actual presence is the Temple itself. So the Temple is the presence of God and the lamb in this mystical New Jerusalem. So it is very, very powerful imagery there. On the one hand you could say there's a new Temple, which is Christ. On the other hand you could say there's no Temple because the Temple was both a sign of presence, but also a barrier too, right? It was meant to point something invisible, but in the New

Jerusalem, the risen Christ is visible and is fully present. So there's no need for a stone temple or a place of mortar and brick to symbolize invisible presence. The fourth and final aspect of the New Jerusalem that's fascinating here in John's description is the light of Jerusalem. It says something interesting. He says that:

the city has no need of sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Okay, so what's John talking about, "it needed no sun or moon...[because] the glory of God is its light." Well here he's actually alluding to, again, another prophecy from the book of Isaiah. And this one I just want read you for just a minute, just to give you an idea of how John is weaving all these illusions to the old Testament into his Revelation. In Isaiah 60:19-20, Isaiah's having a vision of the New Jerusalem and this is what he says:

The sun shall be no more your light by day, nor for brightness shall the moon give light to you by night; but the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory.

What does that mean? In the book of Isaiah, basically what it's describing here is some kind of light that goes beyond natural light, some kind of light that goes beyond earthly light. It's a supernatural light or an eternal light. It's the luminosity of God's own presence that will give light to the New Jerusalem. And I can't help but wonder here if that both Isaiah and John have in mind the initial light of creation in the book of Genesis. So if you go back to the book of Genesis, one of the odd things about Genesis that modern readers have certainly picked up on, but ancient readers noticed as well, is that although on the first day God makes light; Genesis 1:3 says:

God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.

It's not until the fourth day that God creates the sun and the moon and the stars, which are the preeminent sources of the natural light that we think of when we think of light in the world. So the ancients, they weren't dumb, they read the text more closely, not less closely than we moderns tend to do. So they picked up on this, and one of the things that they derived from it was not that the author of Genesis was confused, but that he was talking about two different kinds of light.

The natural light of the sun, the moon and the stars, but then the supernatural light of divine glory, the light of God. And with that distinction in mind, that's what's playing out here in the book of Revelation. So what John's saying is that in this New Jerusalem, in the heavenly Jerusalem, as opposed to the earthly Jerusalem, it's going to be illuminated not by the earthly light of the sun and the moon and the stars, but by the eternal light of God himself. As he says:

the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb.

Now, what does that mean? "Its lamp is the lamb." Is it some kind of lamb shaped lamp that illuminates the city? Obviously not. In a Jewish context, remember the lamp in the Temple was the candelabra, known as the menorah. So the only way you got light inside the holy sanctuary, the inner sanctum known as the Holy Place; it was closed off to the light of the sun, moon and stars. If you went in it, it would be pitch black except for the presence of a lamp in it, known as the menorah. Okay. So what John's saying is in the new Jerusalem, there's no temple and there's not even any light from the sun, moon and stars, but its light is "the glory of God, and its lamp is the lamb." So in other words, Christ himself illuminates the new Jerusalem. And I can't help but notice as I look at that imagery, the fascinating triadic character of it, because what's illuminating this city is the glory of God. And the light that comes from the lamp that is the lamb.

Okay, now why do I say triadic? Well, because as I mentioned in other videos, these symbols from the tabernacle can be linked with the persons of the Trinity. So you have the light of God the Father, the glory of God. You have the lamp of the lamb, his light, but the lamp itself is illuminated with the fire of the tongues of fire, the candelabra, which is always a symbol in the New Testament for the Holy Spirit. So in other words, the light of the new Jerusalem is the light of the Trinity itself, the supernatural eternal light of the Trinity, so that there's no need for the glory of the sun or the moon or the stars to shine on it, for they pale next to the supernatural light of the triune God. That's John's vision of the new Jerusalem. That's what the mystery of the new Jerusalem is all about. That's the heart of the heavenly city, just like the Temple is the heart of the earthly city, God himself, the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the center of the new city of God, the new Jerusalem. We could say much more, but that'll do for now.

In closing, I just want to highlight here something significant in this description of the new Jerusalem, and it's the relationship between the new Jerusalem and the apostolic Church. Let's shift gears for just a second, this is important. When I say the word church, what do you think about? Many people will think first and foremost of the earthly institution of the church, right? So if you are Catholic, you probably think of the Catholic Church, right? The communion of bishops, the body of bishops and faithful in communion with the success of St. Peter. And that's good. If you're from another Christian tradition, you might think of your local church, or even maybe you're a national church, right? If you're in the Orthodox tradition, like the Russian Orthodox Church; but in scripture, although the church can have different manifestations on earth, what John here is describing is the heavenly church, or what we sometimes call the Church Triumphant, which is embodied in this vision of the new Jerusalem. And what I can't help but notice as I look at that, is that the foundation of the Church, although it is of course Christ, right? He's the cornerstone. Revelation's really clear that the foundation of the Church are the Twelve Apostles. So every time we profess the creed, we say "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." What does that mean, apostolic? It doesn't just mean that the church I belong to comes down through visible history through the apostles and their successors. It means that, but it also means that the church to which I belong participates in a real way in the heavenly reality of the new Jerusalem, which is founded on twelve foundation stones of the Twelve Apostles; that the church participates in the triumphal reality, the mystical reality, the glorious reality of the invisible heavenly church in which the Triune God dwells, whose gates are the twelve tribes of the old covenant and whose foundations are the Twelve Apostles of the new covenant.

So with all that in mind, I'd like to just end with a couple of insights from the living tradition. One of the things that we say every time we profess the creed is that "I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." What does that mean? Apostolic? One of the things it means is that the church to which we belong, especially the bishop, who was ordained by a man who was ordained by a man who was ordained by a man who goes all the way back to the apostles. So in history, we're referring to apostolic succession as the succession of offices from one man to another, through the Pope and through the episcopacy down to our own day. So for example, in the First Century A.D, Clement of Rome, who's one of the successors of St. Peter, in his Letter to the Corinthians actually talks about this reality of apostolic succession in this way:

Clement of Rome: The Apostles received the Gospel for us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent from God... Preaching, accordingly, throughout the country and the cities, *they appointed their first-fruits, after testing them by the Spirit, to be bishops and deacons of those who should believe...* Our Apostles also knew, through our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be contention over the bishop's office. 2 So, for this cause, having received complete foreknowledge, they appointed the above-mentioned men, and afterwards gave them a permanent character, so that, as they died, other approved men should succeed to their ministry.²

That's from Clement's Letter to the Corinthians 42 and 44. So here we see already in the first century, the idea of apostolic succession as the apostles ordaining bishops to be their successors, and then those bishops transmitting their authority from one generation to the next, so that there would always be a visible and valid line of episcopal authority bearing the authority of the apostles as teachers of the faith. So that's the one aspect of it. The other aspect of it though, you'll notice that in the book of Revelation, the imagery of the apostolic Church is not just as one of successors, but as one of foundations. In other words, the perpetual foundations. For example, in the early Church, in the ancient church, Andrew of Caesarea wrote one of the early commentaries on the book of Revelation we have, and he mentions here, Revelation 21:

The foundations of the walls are the blessed apostles, upon whom the church of Christ has been established.³

In other words, what Andrew is highlighting here for us and what John is revealing to us fully in the book of Revelation is that when we talk about the church as apostolic, we don't just mean the succession in time from one person to the other. We are actually referring also to the perpetual foundation of the Church on the Twelve Apostles of Jesus Christ. In other words, in the Church Triumphant, in the heavenly Jerusalem, the apostles continue to function as the perpetual foundations of the church of Jesus Christ. You can actually see this, for example, in a more mystical way in the Council of Chalcedon. So in the fifth century, there was a famous council that decreed a number of teachings on the fullness of Christ's humanity and the fullness of His divinity, the mystery of the incarnation. And in that council, Pope Leo, who was Pope at the time in Rome, sent a letter to the

² Clement of Rome, *To the Corinthians* 42.1, 4; 44.1-2 [trans. F. X. Glimm et al.]

³ Andrew of Caesarea, *Commentary on the Apocalypse* 21:14 [trans. W. C. Weinrich]

bishops of the Council of Chalcedon. And when the bishops read Pope Leo's letter, they responded to it by all acclaiming together:

This is the faith of the apostles. Peter has spoken through Leo.

In other words, the bishops at Chalcedon recognized that the apostles...It's not as if they were the foundation of the church and now the foundation of the church are their successors. No, no, they continue to function in the heavenly church as the apostles of the lamb, as the foundations of the new Jerusalem, as the perpetual witnesses to the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church."

And with that in mind, just one last point. Sometimes Catholics are criticized by non-Catholic Christians for putting too much emphasis on the church. In fact, sometimes our Protestant brothers and sisters will say, "well we might be sola scriptura, but you all are sola ecclesia. We put all our focus on the Bible, but you put all your focus on the church, the church alone." And my response to that would be that in one sense, that's actually true, because if you look at Revelation 21, what is salvation? What is the ultimate destiny of all humanity, other than the Church? This is what John's describing. He describes the new heaven and the new earth and the new Jerusalem, which is the Church Triumphant, as if they are one thing, because ultimately at the end of the day there is no salvation apart from the Church, any more than there is salvation apart from being a member of the new Jerusalem. When you look at the new Jerusalem, what is it other than the Church? Not only is it centered on Christ, on the lamb, but also it's founded on the Twelve Apostles. The very foundations of the new Jerusalem are the Twelve Apostles. So if there's no salvation outside of the heavenly Jerusalem, then it follows that there's no salvation outside of the apostolic Church, because the new Jerusalem is nothing other than the church, which Christ has founded on the Twelve Apostles. That's why it says:

the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.

In other words, what the book of Revelation is revealing, what the Church Fathers see here and what the book of Revelation is revealing is that the Church is not just an earthly institution. That even the apostolicity of the Church is not just a historical reality or an institutional reality, but that it's a mystical reality. It's a

heavenly reality in which the Church and the Pope and the bishops and the faithful continue to participate as we await the final coming of Christ on the last day, when the heavenly Jerusalem and the earthly Church will be united as one in this new Jerusalem, in this new creation, in this new heaven and this new earth.