

Revelation 21

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[0 : 00] This morning I explained in some detail, as it were, both my personal association with this building and long-standing relationship with the Free Church of Scotland.

Although my life's work in ministry, as you know, has been in the Church of Scotland itself. I will therefore not repeat what I said this morning, except to say this.

I'm very pleased to be with you again. And I'm very grateful to you for the invitation to be here. I was very impressed by the fact that your financial representative presented me with the pool for supply check this morning, on the basis that he trusted me, I suspect, to come back tonight.

He did explain that travelling expenses were given at the cheapest rate. And since I'd been daft enough to show my card this morning of free public transport, he suggested I should get no travelling expenses.

However, I joke. I'm glad to be here. This morning I tried to analyse with you the challenges we face as Christians in our society.

[1 : 22] And how the only way to deal with these challenges satisfactorily was to be part of the Church of Jesus Christ, declaring and living out what I call the clear gospel.

This, I believe, as St. Paul calls to the early Church in Corinth, means a renewed commitment on the part of believers to the priority of the gospel in our lives.

A fresh understanding of the content of that gospel. And a faithful living in society, resting in the security of the gospel.

Now all of that is vital if, as followers of Christ, we are to know the blessing of the Lord in our hearts and lives. And of course, that's the true desire of the Lord Jesus for all of his followers.

However, it seems clear to me that the focus of the gospel is never restricted to our private individual lives.

[2 : 31] Yes, of course, the Lord has a special and unique purpose for each one of us as individuals. But he has also set us in families, in communities, in society to be salt and light.

And so he has a very special purpose for society. And the Bible consistently tells us for the nations or the people groups.

And tonight I want to spend a little time with you seeking the mind of God and his word for the shape that he would want for our nation at this historic time in the land of Scotland.

Last Sunday night, Fergus MacDonald urged you and me here to be very conscious of our responsibility as Christians in society.

He explained the kind of response in the political milieu of the Roman Empire, by no means a democracy, that St. Paul was suggesting to the Christians in Rome.

[3 : 36] And indeed, the implications for us as we face the crucial political choices that were ours on Thursday past.

Now, I won't check up on you tonight, first of all, if you exercised your vote and so fulfilled your responsibility. Nor, of course, will I ask you how you voted.

Or indeed, if you were one of the 100,000 who thought you'd voted, but your vote wasn't counted. Suffice it to say that the day has come and gone.

And although it seems the final consequence of that day has yet to become clear in terms of who will lead us for the next four years, I believe that whoever it might be that will lead us, we as Christians have an ongoing responsibility to seek to shape our national life in accordance with our basic, fundamental, biblical faith in Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

And it is, I believe, true, that from Scripture, from the Word of God, we do get a clear vision of the kind of society the Lord is one day going to order, and in which we already have a part, those of us who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[5 : 05] As I listened keenly to the political arguments of those who were so desperate to get my vote on Thursday, I have to tell you that I became increasingly concerned that the choice between the parties seemed to boil down simply to economics.

How much better off I would be if I voted this way or that other way. Real quality of life in the New Scotland seemed to get very little attention.

And then I came across this quotation in a magazine I was reading. The quotation focuses on the economic definition of a nation's wealth, what we call Gross National Product, or GNP.

Listen to these words. Gross National Product measures neither the health of our children, the quality of their education, nor the joy of their play.

It measures neither the beauty of our poetry, nor the strength of our marriages. It pays no heed to the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials.

[6 : 32] It measures neither our wisdom, nor our learning. Neither our wit, nor our courage. Neither our compassion, nor our devotion to a country.

It measures everything in short, except that which makes life worth living. And it can tell us everything about our country, except those things that make us proud to be part of it.

That's the end of the quotation. Now, you might have thought that words like those could have come from some cynical political commentator, or some critical philosopher, or even some idealistic preacher.

But they, in fact, came from one of the most seasoned politicians of his day, the late Robert Kennedy of the United States. You see, at the end of the day, what really counts is not the wealth of a nation, but the quality of its life as a society and a community of love and of compassion.

So, as we stand on the brink of a new era as a nation, does God's Word have a word to say to us?

Is there a clear vision of the kind of society the Lord wants us to be?

[8 : 04] Or will we, as Christians, be trapped in a morass of confusion and brokenness? So, let me take you back some 2,000 years to a cramped prison cell on the little island of Patmos, out there in the Mediterranean.

The physical life of Jesus on earth was now passed. And his transformed followers were now trying to live out the commandments of the Gospel.

in different places in the hostile Roman Empire. And beginning to suffer for their faith, not least, St. John the Divine, by now a seasoned disciple.

And for obeying Jesus in Asia Minor, he was imprisoned in the island of Patmos. And suddenly there, Jesus, the exalted Christ, appears to him and shows him these amazing visions visions of the kind of experience the Lord has in prospect for his people.

Now, I think it's fair to say that the book of Revelation, which was, in fact, the fruit of that encounter, is one of the most enigmatic books in the Bible, full of the most intense and, I say, at times, pretty scary imagery.

[9 : 33] I wonder if you've ever asked yourself why that is. Well, St. John was surely given a most remarkable experience, for in that prison cell he was privileged to see the risen, exalted Christ.

But then this Christ opened a window for John into the perfect world that one day God would live in with his faithful people.

It must have been quite an amazing experience until, if I can be just a little naughty, until Jesus spoiled it for John.

There he was, basking in the presence of Jesus. and while seeing undoubtedly many unsettling things, he was given the vision, this amazing vision of heaven.

And then he hears the voice of Jesus. John, write this down. Write this down. John, you've seen the vision of that future world, now describe it to the natural world of human beings.

[10 : 47] But how do you describe the supernatural wonder and glory of heaven, to eyes still blinded or at best clouded with the finite limitations of earth?

Yes, he would be led and helped by the Holy Spirit, but still John could only use human words and human pictures to describe divine beauty and reality.

It was, I believe, an almost impossible task and is at least one of the reasons that so many of us struggle with the imagery of revelation. However, I believe that this we can most certainly say, that as we hear again the description of that heavenly dwelling place, which surely is the model and the pattern for our Christian life together, the community of heaven is marked by two basic qualities.

First of all, it's an experience of perfect harmony, and then it is an experience of perpetual worship. And I believe with all my heart that these are qualities the Lord would seek to be reflected in his own people, the church, and include the kind of qualities we might covet for our nation.

It was what the prophet Isaiah saw as he looked these two and a half thousand years back at Jerusalem of old, set there on Mount Zion.

[12 : 32] This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the last days, he goes on.

And here he pictures these two experiences again. First of perpetual worship, as the nations stream into the city of God.

People hungry to know more of God and his purpose and word. And as they meet with the living God, there is perfect harmony.

They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not lift up arms against nation and neither will they train for war anymore.

So, as we in Scotland stand on the threshold of possibly a new era in our history, let's see in some more detail, the kind of nation God wants us to be as he leads us as his church to serve Christ in our communities.

[13 : 47] And of course, the point is very clear from scripture that the purposes of God, whilst very definitely focused in many ways on us as individuals, even more profoundly, the Bible makes clear he is concerned about the nations.

And we see in the words we read in Revelation just how comprehensive God's plan is for the peoples of the earth. So, first of all, this vision and experience of perfect harmony.

In verse 1 of Revelation 21 we read, Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea.

Now, the absence of the sea, when I first read this many years back, intrigued me. Because it's of course something that you might trouble some of us, especially those of us whose roots are deep in a safe seafaring people.

However, the point I believe is this, that in this new heaven and new earth, there will be nothing there to divide us. Because this is to be an experience of perfect harmony and unity.

[15 : 09] And what would divide and separate us will be forever banished. And there will be this eternal experience of a recreation of all things.

Now that of course reflects the vision of St. Paul people as he describes the full effect of the death of Christ on the cross. Speaking of what some have called the cosmic Christ, he writes to the Colossians, for God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in Christ.

Remember what Jesus himself said to the disciple Philip in John 14 and 9? Anyone, he said, who has seen me has seen the Father. Yes, God was pleased to have all his fullness.

In the Greek verse, it's the fullness of his fullness, the pleroma of his pleroma. all his fullness dwell in Christ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven.

How? By making peace through his blood shed on the cross. Of course, the cross of Jesus Christ, what we call the atonement, was about Jesus cleansing believers and forgiving believers for their sins.

[16 : 39] As individuals who trust in the finished atoning work of Jesus Christ, we are assured of our final destination in that heavenly glory. But the cross, the Bible says, is about more than my individual salvation.

It's about the reconciliation of all things. And as St. John describes it, it is about a new heaven and a new earth.

And we find here a central place given to the holy city, the new Jerusalem. It goes almost without saying that the city of Jerusalem lies at the center of so much of the testimony of the Bible.

And still today, that very same city figures so prominently in world history. You see, I believe that the current whole Middle East conflict of our time may of course manifest itself in many ways.

Democracy for Iraq, the fear of nuclear power in Iran, the so-called war against terror, the occupied territories.

[17 : 56] Yes, all of this is involved. But I want to suggest to you tonight that it is at its very foundation about a spot that lies at the top of Mount Zion, the city of Jerusalem.

Well, the Bible is very clear. Isaiah 2 and 2, it says, in the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains.

It will be raised above the hills and all nations will stream to it. John puts it like this in verse 26 of Revelation 21, the glory and honor of the nations will be brought into it.

At the heart of the experience of this new creation, of course, is the Lord, the Lord who is present amongst his people. It is with us that the Lord will dwell.

He will live with us. He is our God. And all that has caused us distress and pain and separation and discord will be finally vanquished.

[19 : 11] He will wipe every tear from our eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain because the old order of things has passed away.

And Jesus speaks on, I am making everything new. And notice that here Jesus is now speaking from his throne of power and victory.

The one who in his selfless love and grace gives us what we need to quench a thirst that will never attack us again. For we are drinking, the source of our drinking is that divine spring of the water of life.

when you read something like this, don't you want to go there? Don't you want to be there? In the heart of that experience of perfect harmony where we live in unity and love with all who have followed Christ and kept the faith.

Now remember, remember those letters, seven letters that Jesus wrote to the seven churches in Asia Minor. You can read them in the same book of Revelation chapters 2 and 3 and notice that in every single one of them the reward is assured and in every case it's assured to the one who overcomes.

[20 : 48] The one who not only has a good beginning in the faith or even a full journey in the faith, it's about how we finish, it's about overcoming. that perfect harmony will be ours.

But you see, this is the vision that I believe the church in our world should be aspiring to.

It is not enough to excuse ourselves that we're only human. You see, it's our very humanity made perfect in the Christ we serve that in fact enables our perfect harmony.

It is because Christ became human that we can know the fullness of his human life in us. Will you not pray?

Or will you not pray that we may yet see a church in our land live in perfect harmony? and indeed will you not pray that our nation will once more be a place where the power of the gospel will fill the hearts of our leaders and our people?

[22 : 07] This is yes where the believer is heading. Perfect harmony of a new heaven and a new earth. But you know the Lord wants to give us a full taste of that here and now.

But the second part of John's vision is that experience of perpetual worship. Let me say two things about heaven. The first is that evangelism will be passed.

The great commission to see the world receive the gospel will be completed. and the second thing is this, that we will be there seeing Christ face to face.

Now one of the common features of the Bible in relation to people encountering the exalted Christ is that the response of the ordinary person to Jesus is to worship him.

Just a reactive sense of awe in the presence of this Holy One. This is how St. John describes his own meeting with Jesus in the prison cell in chapter 1 and verse 17.

[23 : 28] When I saw him he said, I fell at his feet as though dead. It was the same when St. Paul encountered Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts 9 11.

He says, he fell to the ground. You see, to meet the exalted Christ is to be in the presence of the King of Glory. And the response is one of all and one of worship.

Now I think it's true to say that many people identify their experience of worship with as it were a church building. Here we are tonight and that's what we're here to do, to worship.

Well such an experience was not unknown of course in the history of the people of God with their focus on the temple. And of the temple the Lord once said in 2 Chronicles 7 and 16, I have chosen and consecrated this temple so that my name may be there forever.

My eyes and my heart will always be there. And yet you notice in Revelation the focus changed. John could see no temple.

[24 : 47] But then he realized that the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. There's no longer need of a building that at set times will house our worship experience.

This new heaven and new earth is all about perpetual worship. glory. The presence of the Lord does not even need for sun and moon because the glory of God gives its light and the Lamb is its lamp.

What St. John is really saying here is that it's all about the full satisfaction we find in Jesus. He becomes our all in all.

and all eyes will be on him. And these eyes we read will come from every nation. There before me says John in chapter 7 and verse 9.

There before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.

[26 : 00] It's all about Jesus and when Jesus becomes all in all, then our passion and our desire is to worship him, to give him our love, to offer him our praise, and to desire his favour and his blessing upon us.

You know, I've never really understood the growing practice in our nation of restricting worship to an hour. It used not to be so.

People just exalted in the presence of the Spirit of Christ. And it still is so in many nations across our world. But I have to say to you tonight that if you find worship for an hour a challenge or a chore, then it may be that heaven is not really for you.

Because heaven is about perpetual worship. It is what we in fact do. in the presence of the Lord our Saviour. And so I tell you, we do well to practice it.

And practice it often. Of course we are bound in our nation, still housing millions without Christ, to share Christ with them.

[27 : 21] But maybe if we who are his people, his followers, really showed the passion in our worship, people would in fact see it in our faces, sense its heartbeat, and be attracted to Jesus.

Because I believe that the desire of the Lord himself is for Scotland in worship before him. the great cry of John Knox, give me Scotland or I die.

And that, I say, is not too much to expect. the nations are important to the Lord God.

You cannot read the Bible and conclude otherwise. And they're there at the very end as God's people gather in the new heaven and the new earth.

That final reality will be marked by these two amazing experiences. That of perfect harmony and perpetual worship.

[28 : 30] But I believe that as Scotland moves into a new era, God is less interested in our gross national product than he is in the quality of our life together.

And he would desire to see that life infused with these divine realities, perfect harmony and perpetual worship.

a pipe dream, not if we believe in the Jesus who has conquered death, and who this very night reigns supreme, and who can do more than we can ever ask or think.

Can I ask you to pray that it may be so? Amen. So let's gather in prayer before the Lord.

Living God, you the one who are high and mighty, beyond our understanding, yet you the one who came clothed in human flesh to walk this earth amongst us.

[29 : 56] We give you thanks for your word. We give you thanks again for the great hope of the gospel that is the only hope for humanity, indeed, for the whole of creation.

We give you thanks again that your grace touches our hearts, and we thank you, our God, that you reveal to us the kind of church and society, nation, we might be under your gracious and loving hand.

And so we come tonight, our God, afresh, with your word ringing in our hearts, to pray for this nation of Scotland. we pray, our God, for wisdom in these ongoing days as people seek to establish power in the light of the events of past days.

We pray that your will might be done, O loving God. And as we pray for our nation, and indeed the nations of the world, troubled in many ways, so we pray for the church of Jesus Christ.

Lord, we long to see a church filled with perfect harmony. Indeed, we long to see a church filled with perpetual worship that would draw not just the ones and the twos, but the nations to the mountain of the Lord, there to meet with the living Christ.

[31 : 38] Father God, we thank you for the great heritage that is ours down through the centuries as faithful men and women have proclaimed the gospel and have served the nation and by giving of themselves sacrificially have led others to Jesus Christ.

May it be, O God, that we would see a great uprising of people in this nation seeking that living water that never dries up.

And that that Lord would help us to see again men and women and young people go into the far corners of the world where still the name of Jesus is unknown and unheard.

Lord, your word teaches us that until the gospel is proclaimed in every nation, you will not come again. And we long to see you in glory and we long to worship you face to face.

So, our God, our hearts cry is that you would raise up your church in this land and in our world afresh.

[32 : 49] We thank you for all that is happening in different places. And Lord, we are hungry and thirsty for more of you in our own land of Scotland.

Father, we offer our prayer to you. We offer it because we believe that you are a hearing and answering God and you are able to do more than we can imagine or ask or think.

So, Lord, come in mighty power by your Holy Spirit. Revive your church and renew this nation of ours in Christ.

For we ask it in his almighty name and for his loving sake. Amen. !

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