

May 5, 2013 / Eastertide / David L. Edwards

No Temple in the City

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5

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

Imagine there's no...religion, too. --John Lennon

The Revelation to John is not as it has been portrayed by certain Christian groups. It is not about the destruction of the earth and the saving of a small group of individual Christians. It was not written in the late first century as a prediction of events in our historical period. The book is not a calendar of things to come. It is a message of hope and encouragement, written in vibrant, even fantastic imagery, to small, struggling Christian communities at the end of the first century. The Revelation to John is like an art gallery. When you are trying to express the deepest truth and reality, you do it in art, poetry, music. That, I believe, is the best way to experience this book.

We don't know for sure who John was, except that he was stuck on the island of Patmos, as he says, because of his witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Being faithful to the way of Jesus had gotten him into trouble. It was a time of upheaval, threat, oppression, and fear for the small Christian communities with whom John shared his vision. His message is, in essence, "Hang in there! Keep your faith and your faithfulness in spite of how bad things look. Don't accommodate what you know to be true to culture around you." Why can John say this? Because the evil and violence that seem so rampant and dominant have already been overcome. As bad as everything seems to be, we see in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus that God has already won the battle. Through his vision, John is telling the seven churches in Asia Minor that, as small and insignificant and weak as they think they are, their faithfulness to Jesus and all that he taught and lived makes them part of something far bigger that God is doing. Indeed, it is already done.

Our reading for today comes at the end of the book, as John paints the final scene of how everything will ultimately work out. And yet, it is not about the future alone. It is about the present, how things REALLY are now, and how we can live with confidence and hope the

life to which we have been called in Jesus. Why? Because as bad as things seem and indeed are, they are not as they appear to be. Violence, greed, warfare, injustice, and religion that has lost its essence and purpose...all of this is disconnected from the nature of life itself, the sacred energy and presence that is always moving toward healing, compassion, justice, and peace. Therefore, all of that stuff that causes us discouragement and even despair has no future. It is empty and already dead. It just doesn't know it!

John is taken by an angel to a high mountain. There he sees Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven, looking like a bride. This is a new, renovated city. Yet, it is still Jerusalem, the place where human beings live. Now, however, it is truly a place where God dwells intimately with human beings, with us, with nothing standing in between. Earlier in this final scene, John heard a voice saying: "See, the home of God is among human beings. God will dwell with them. They will be God's people."(21:3-4) The truest, most authentic human life includes intimacy with the divine presence that is everywhere and in everything. That is the way it IS, says John, and that is the way it WILL BE.

God is with us, all around and within. The problem is that we humans keep choosing ways of living that disconnect us from God, that disrupt and distort our relationship with God, as well as with one another. The vision of John is about all of that being overcome, stripped away, so that what REALLY IS--our nearness to God and God's to us--comes to full expression. It is not just about the ultimate future. It is about what can be now. The way we live. The way we become aware of and live out of our awareness of and relationship with God. Our reading from John's gospel has Jesus saying words that echo the Revelation to John. "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." The nearness, the indwelling of God and Jesus, comes as we keep Jesus' word, as we listen to, hear, and live out all that Jesus teaches. The peace Jesus gives his disciples is there because they are re-connected, we might say, with reality--life in its relationship with the divine, with God. Life as it truly is.

So, it is about living God's future now. You remember the movie from the Vietnam era, "Apocalypse Now"? A great movie, but a misuse of the word. Apocalypse means revealing, literally taking the lid off something and looking into it. The Apocalypse, or Revelation, to John is not about massive destruction or the so-called "end of the world". It is about seeing the way things really are, beneath the violence, illusion, lostness on the surface that causes

such suffering. John's vision is about apocalypse now, in the truest since--living the new heaven and earth now. Waking up in the present to God's nearness, God's dwelling with us, and then living our lives that way. It is about the work of our inward journey as we grow in awareness of and see through the illusions and delusions that govern so much of life around us. And as we see them and let them go in ourselves, awareness of reality, of the new and true heaven and earth, grows in us.

The purpose of religion, of the church, of our Christian faith is to wake us up to our true humanity, a humanity characterized by love--Jesus' one commandment that he gives us, according to John's gospel. And that love includes just relationships, compassion, forgiveness, and living our lives in the service of life. The problem is religion forgets that, and starts existing for its own sake, perpetuating itself. Religion can go either way. It can wake us up to our true humanity, can be the means of our becoming who God made us to be...or it can make us sick, violent, arrogant, or drain the life from our spirits. I've been around religion and the church all my life, and I've seen both. I've seen people come alive because they found in religion and the practice of it something that restored their souls, that opened up a path from emptiness to meaning, from despair to hope, from hostility and anger to love, from illusion to reality, from self-preoccupation to service. And I've seen people for whom religion became burdensome and oppressive, squelching their spirits and filling them with guilt, self-doubt, and self-hatred. Or it made them arrogant and aggressive, shutting down their minds and hearts. Religion can make people sick and violent. When you become an adherent of a religion, you are on the road to fanaticism. You start defending some religion rather than practicing its heart and essence. We also see how religion forgets and becomes the chaplain to the nation and its interests. The cross has accompanied conquering armies all over the world. Our country was founded on genocide against native people and in the institution of slavery, all of it with the blessing of the religion called Christianity.

There is a story from the Sufi religion. It is about Nasruddin, who is a kind of wise fool. Nasruddin was taking a load of salt to market. He had to lead his donkey through a river, and the salt dissolved. When the donkey got to the other bank, he ran around, overjoyed to be free of his heavy load. Nasruddin was annoyed. The next time, Nasruddin packed the baskets with cotton, which he thought would protect the salt. Of course when the donkey entered the water, it nearly drowned from the weight of the water-soaked cotton. "There," said Nasruddin. "That will teach you to think that each time you go through water you stand to

gain!" Anthony De Mello, who tells this story in his book *SONG OF THE BIRD*, adds the comment: Two persons walked into religion. Once came out alive, the other drowned.

Notice that John says, "I saw no temple in the city, for the temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb." What does it mean that there is no temple in the new Jerusalem? John connects with a very important part of Israel's history--the transition from Israel's being a wandering people, carrying the Ark of God around on their journey, to being a settled people, building the temple as a permanent place for the Ark of the Covenant. God was not in favor of the temple idea, but went along with it. Temple worship and the whole cult of the temple began to preoccupy Israel. The worship of God became separated from living as God's people, in justice, compassion, and peace. The prophets of Israel railed against Israel's worship because it became a substitute for right living. The people got so attached to the temple that when it was destroyed, it was a huge spiritual crisis. Where was God, now that the temple was gone?

In John's vision, there is no temple. And it is a good thing. The temple was a poor substitute for God's intimate presence with the people. The absence of the temple signifies that religion, as important as it can be, is only for the purpose of waking us up to the nearness of God and to living as those who know God's nearness. The purpose of religion is not to make us religious, but to help us become true human beings, who live out of their relationship with God. There is a debate these days about "spirituality" versus "religion". Many people, including a lot of young people, find that they are drawn to spirituality but, for many good reasons, avoid religion of the institutional, organized kind. There is a Buddhist saying: The raft is not the shore. Think of religion--the worship, the scriptures, the practices, the teachings, and, yes, the institutional aspects of it--as the raft. It is for the purpose of getting you to the shore, which is life as we are created to live it, or what we might call the spiritual life, or the fully human life. The point is not to mistake the raft for the shore. Religion is very important as long as we remember the purpose of it. That to me is the meaning of there being no temple in the new Jerusalem.

All in all, the apocalypse, the revelation, to John is about now. The truest and deepest nature of reality. How things really are deep down beneath the terrible illusions by which so many live and cause so much suffering to others, the earth, and themselves. The Revelation is about living with confidence as human beings, God's presence with us, around us, and in us,

here and now, as we continue to give ourselves to those things that are part of that new heaven and new earth, the true heaven and earth.