

Saturday March 27 Revelation 21:1-7 – our ultimate hope

1 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.

2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God.

4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

5 He who was seated on the throne said, “I am making everything new!” Then he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”

6 He said to me: “It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life.

7 He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.

Two thousand deaths in Northern Ireland, two thousand funerals, many in nearly-deserted churches, just a few mourners, the minister, perhaps an organist, the undertaker and his colleagues. If ever there was a setting where HOPE seemed to have vanished without trace, this was it.

I recall the occasions when I was a curate and then a rector, sitting with grieving families and asking them about the hymns and scripture readings they wanted for the funeral they had to arrange. There were some favourites – if that was the right word – the 23rd Psalm, 1 Corinthians 13, that passage from John’s Gospel about the many mansions in the Father’s house. There was another one, a striking passage from near the end of the book of Revelation, with its God-given vision that the aged and exiled John saw: “[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” You can see the power these words will have for some bereaved families; it’s particularly appropriate when death has followed great suffering, whether it’s Covid or cancer or something else.

And why have all these things passed away? Because, in John’s vision, he 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.” So the vision is not just about the end of something old, which includes Covid and all other nasty viruses; it’s also about something new, something glorious, something permanent, something that completes the work that Christ came to do and is still doing. That, in a nutshell, is what Christian HOPE is all about, and it’s far bigger than our comforting but limited views of heaven as a nice place we go to when we die. This is about a renewed, transformed creation, united with heaven itself into something so mind-boggling that you can only glimpse it in a vision. What, I wonder, will it be like to be part of it? It was C.S. Lewis who did a really good job putting it into words in his Narnia book *The Last Battle*. This is what he writes:

‘The things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.’