

**Mt Albert Baptist Church**  
**8<sup>th</sup> January 2017**  
**Looking in the Back of the Book**  
**Greg Liston**

A few years ago before I was a pastor,  
I was a management consultant.  
I worked for a company called Andersen Consulting  
And after I'd worked for them for a couple of years,  
they decided to relocate me  
From here in Auckland to Sydney.  
And when I moved from Auckland to Sydney,  
I moved into a flat there.  
And in this flat was a girl who was pretty impressive.  
So began what I called "Operation Diane"

Now, you may not have heard this about me,  
But those of you who have been up into one of my offices  
You will know that my desk is a right mess.  
The truth is that I am not the tidiest person in the world  
But I tell you, for a short period of time,  
I became the best flatmate the world has ever seen.  
I cooked, I cleaned, I kept my room tidy, sort of.  
I even offered to wash up.  
I was to flatting what Peter Jackson is to filmmaking.  
I would have won an Oscar for flatting.

And eventually, I managed to convince Di  
that we should go out and see a movie together,  
just as friends, you understand.  
And in the week before that movie, my gosh, the angst.  
There were butterflies in my stomach  
I couldn't eat  
I couldn't sleep  
I couldn't concentrate.  
I was ringing up my sister in Canberra for advice every night  
What if she doesn't like me?  
What if we're going to be –  
that worst of all possible scenarios –  
just good friends.  
I drafted and redrafted what I was going to say to her.  
Anyway, the night of the movie came.  
We went and saw it, and then we went out for dinner.  
I said my piece, saying how special I thought she was  
And how much I hoped we could go out more often  
And just kind of see what happened.  
And when I finished, she just sat there.  
She just sat there for a while, looking at me,  
And then she said "Well, the first thing I want to say is ...  
YIPPEE!!!

And I tell you, the feeling of relief,  
The feeling of excitement and anticipation was overwhelming  
It turned out, and this is incredible.  
It turned out that she had actually liked me  
right back at the beginning, right from when I first moved in

And so all that striving, all that work,  
all that cooking and cleaning  
and being the perfect housemate  
had in fact been completely useless.  
She already loved me, she always had.

Such an amazing feeling,  
When you realise that the person  
who you would be exhilarated  
if they merely glanced at you every now and then  
actually loves you enough to be with you.  
That meal, admittedly I didn't eat a thing,  
But I reckon that must be just about the best meal I ever had.

Well, maybe there was one meal that was better.  
There was another meal that I went to  
about 10 months after that first meal with Di.  
And this second meal, well that was something else.  
By that time  
The potential of that first meal had become a reality.  
The promise of that first meal had turned into commitment.  
And the hope of that first meal had turned into celebration.  
That meal was the beginning of a whole other life.

A little later today,  
we're going to be celebrating a meal together.  
It's a meal that's full of potential.  
A meal that's full of promise.  
A meal that's full of hope.

And the potential, the promise, the hope  
of the meal that we're going to be sharing in today  
is because this meal, today, communion  
is looking forward to another meal, in the future  
the wedding supper of the lamb.  
And in that coming meal, that coming life,  
The potential of this meal today will have become a reality  
The promise of this meal today  
will have become a commitment  
And the hope of this meal today  
will have become a celebration  
That meal will be the beginning of a whole other life.  
What I wanted to do for a while this morning,  
As we prepare for 2017 is just to dream a little.  
Let's use our sanctified, Bible assisted,

Holy imaginations to daydream a bit  
Let's imagine together what it's going to be like  
When this world, this life is over  
And we move on to the next bit.  
Let me read to you a bit of what John saw.

<< Read Revelation 21:1-5 >>

Revelation is an interesting book.

There is a huge amount of controversy about it.  
In fact you might have heard some of that controversy erupt again,  
With NZ's sponsoring of a bill about Israel to the UN.  
When you get near to the back of the book, it's not like all the answers are there.  
People have lots of trouble trying to interpret Revelation  
and understanding what's going to happen

Even though that is true,  
I think that it's kind of interesting and wonderful, though,  
When you come to the very, very end of the story  
When you come to these final chapters of revelation, chapter 21 and 22  
All of the disagreement just kind of dies away.

In these chapters, everyone agrees about what John is saying  
Here is a picture of the life that is to come  
Here is John trying to describe something  
that is virtually indescribable.  
And so he's grasping at metaphors and ideas  
That go some way to explaining what it will be like

The picture he paints is kind of weird.  
It's a combination picture.  
It's kind of like a city, and it's kind of like a woman.  
And you may remember from when Steve  
was talking about Revelation earlier on last year  
He talked about how in Revelation the city of Babylon,  
Was kind of like a woman.  
But while the city of Babylon was a prostitute, a whore  
This city, the Holy City, the new Jerusalem,  
Is like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband

And the whole point of the city is that it is a picture of God's people  
It's a picture of us, what we will be like,  
But when God is among us.  
Look, says John, God's dwelling place is among people  
He will dwell with them.

We can hardly fathom what that is going to be like.  
What is it going to be like to be in the constant presence  
of the one who sits on the throne?  
John piles image upon image and metaphor upon metaphor  
And it all becomes kind of overwhelming to be honest  
And that's probably exactly the way that it should be.  
But the way I found easiest to understand it, and the way we're going to look at it today  
Is to look first at what isn't there in the city

And then to have a look at what is there.

And the first thing that John says isn't there in this new city  
is everything we hated about our earthly existence.  
"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Says John,

Whatever else being with God means,  
The first thing John tells us  
is that it will bring immeasurable comfort.  
Imagine a little girl, who, in a time of crisis,  
Has waited bravely and anxiously  
for her daddy to come home  
and as soon as he walks through the door  
she bursts into tears and just cries and cries  
until all the yucky horrible feelings are gone  
and she's just safe, warm and content  
happy in the arms of her father.

Heaven is going to be just like that.  
When we come into the presence of God  
We will experience this incredible release  
from all the emotional tension  
that marks life on earth.

You see, here's the thing.  
Life is hard.  
You try so much, and sometimes you fail.  
All of us have got this thing inside us,  
The tension, the fear, the worry, the pain.  
In a sense being human means being hurt.  
That's the way this world is.  
But it's not the way the next world will be.  
To be with God will be to have all of our hurts healed,  
And all of our brokenness made whole.  
I wonder can you imagine what it is for you.  
What is that one thing that defines you,  
That hurt, that failure, that shattered dream.  
That thing that is always lurking there  
at the back of your mind.  
That thing that you've never really  
been able to escape from?  
Well, imagine that thing being gone, forever.  
That's what the new heavens will be like.  
There will be no more death, says John  
or mourning or crying or pain,  
For the old order of things has passed away.

You see, when John says there will be no more death,  
He's not just saying that people won't die anymore,  
He's saying that for the first time ever,  
people will really be alive.  
This will be real living,  
life the way it was meant to be.

So in this new city, there will be no more of the things we hate,  
No more death, no more suffering, no more pain.  
What else won't be in this city?  
Well, surprisingly there is no temple there either. Listen to this.

<< Revelation 21:22-27 >>

So not only is there no temple, but there is no sun or moon either.

And this might surprise you at first,  
but when you think about it for a while  
it makes perfect sense.

You see, the temple was a place where people went to meet God  
The temple was the place where the priests worked,  
The ones who brought you into the presence of the divine

But if God's dwelling place is with people,  
If God is there among us, who needs a temple,  
Who needs a priest to help us connect with God  
God's already there! We are wholly in the presence of god.  
In fact, there's a beautiful picture of this in these passages.

Let me explain, in fact let me read to you.

<< Read Rev 21:15-16 >>

So the city is 12,000 stadia long and 12,000 stadia wide  
And 12,000 stadia high.  
Now in Revelation the number 12 as being a complete number  
And 1000 as being a big number,  
So you get the idea, this city is complete, its finished,  
there's no more work to do on it  
It's all we'll ever need.

But the thing I wanted to talk about is its shape.  
The city is a cube. That's most unusual.  
Why is the city a cube?  
Now that fact may not mean much to you,  
But it definitely would have been ringing bells  
For the original people who were reading revelation  
Here's the question,  
what can you think of in the Old Testament that's a cube?  
Any ideas?

In the tabernacle there used to be a place right in the middle of it.  
It was a place that one priest only ever went once a year.  
I'm sure you've all heard stories about it.  
The bells and the rope and the preparations  
The one chosen priest went through to go in.  
It was the most holy, most awesome place.  
It was the place where God was specially said to dwell.

And it was called the Holy of Holies.  
And it's shape was, you guessed it, a cube.

You see, what John is saying here  
is that the whole city is the Holy of Holies.  
The whole city is where God especially dwells.  
So all that awe, all that presence, all that closeness  
That the priest felt just that one day a year  
That's what it's like every day in the city of God.  
Don't you think that's incredible?  
So what have we said about the things  
that aren't in the city of God  
We've said there's no suffering, no death, no pain  
We've said there's no temple,  
because God will be the temple  
But there's one more thing that won't be there in the city of God.  
Let me read to you again ...

<< Rev 22:1-5 >>

So you see, there's a river  
and a tree that's so huge that it is on both sides of the river,  
and the name of the tree is called the tree of life.  
Does anyone see what's missing?  
Any ideas?

You see, way back at the beginning of the story, Genesis 2  
There was a garden, and two people living in the garden.  
And in the centre of garden there were two trees.  
The first one was called the tree of life,  
And while they were in the garden,  
Adam and Eve could eat as much of the fruit  
Off that tree as they wanted,  
But there was another tree,  
The tree of the knowledge of good and evil.  
And that was the famous tree  
that they weren't allowed to eat from,  
but of course as you all know they did,  
and that was the start of all the trouble we've got into

But, here in the city of God,  
there is no tree of the knowledge of good and evil.  
It seems that not only is there no evil in heaven  
But that even the possibility of it has been wiped out.  
The city of God is a place where there is only goodness,  
Only kindness, only joy.

This is such a big point for John, it's actually the first thing he says.  
Do you remember way back in v1 he said,  
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 sea, of course, in Revelation  
is the place where the beast came from.  
You see for John the thing is not just that evil has been abolished,  
But in some sense, some how, some way,  
The very possibility of evil seems not to be there.  
There's nowhere for it to come from.  
Evil just doesn't work anymore in the city of God.  
It has no place there.  
It cannot be there.

So what have we said, we've said that in the city of God,  
There is no suffering, no pain, no death  
There is no temple, for God is already there  
And there is no evil, not even the possibility of it.

But what about what is there,  
And there are two things that get emphasised.

The first is light. The city of God is full of light.  
Rev 21:11 the city of God shone with the glory of God,  
And its brilliance was like that of a precious jewel.  
Rev 21:23 The glory of God gives it light, and the lamb is its lamp  
The nations will walk by its light  
Rev 21:25 On no day will its gates be shut,  
For there will be no night there.  
Rev 22:5 There will be no more night.  
They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun,  
For the Lord God will give them light.  
I think if you were to choose one image that runs  
all through the Bible,  
One image that explains what God is like,  
Then that image would be light.

In the beginning God said let there be light.  
It was the first thing he ever says in the Bible.  
When Moses saw the glory of God on the mountain,  
He came down and his face was shining so brightly  
They had to cover it up like a veil.  
John said about Jesus,  
In him was life, and that life was the light of all people.  
Jesus said about himself  
"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me  
will never walk in darkness,  
but will have the light of life."  
When Jesus appeared to Paul on the Damascus road,  
The first thing Paul saw was a bright light  
flashing all around him  
And then here in city of God,  
What we see is so much light, so much brightness,  
That even though there is no sun and no moon,  
That people don't even need lamps.  
This is an incredible picture of the presence of God

In the city of God. It could not be any clearer.

So, that is the first thing you see in the city of God, light.  
But there is one other thing in this city of God you can't miss.  
And its not light, but its water.

Rev 21:6 It is done, I am the alpha and the omega,  
the beginning and the end.  
To the thirsty I will give water without cost  
from the spring of the water of life.

Rev 22:1 then the angel showed me the river of the water of life,  
As clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God  
And of the lamb down the middle of the great street of the city

Rev 22:17 Let those who are thirsty come  
and let all who wish take the free gift of the water of life.

Probably the main image that describes what God is like  
Then that image would be light,  
But if you were to choose one image of what God gives to us  
One image that runs all the way through the Bible,  
Then that image would be water.

In the beginning God said let there be light,  
But the very next thing he did was to separate the waters  
So the water in the sky was distinct from the water below.  
And so that the land was separated from the water.  
When the Israelites were wandering through the desert,  
And were short of water, God told Moses to point at a rock  
And when he struck it, water flowed.

Ezekiel has a famous passage about the temple of God,  
In which the river flows from the temple,  
Becoming deeper and wider as it goes,  
And then when it strikes the dead sea,  
the most stagnant, salty, lifeless place on earth  
But when the river of God hits the dead sea,  
large numbers of fish suddenly appear.  
That's the effect of the water of God.

Do you remember, Jesus says to the woman at the well,  
Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,  
but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst.  
Indeed, the water I give them will become in them  
a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

And then, here in the city of God,  
What we have is not just water,  
But water running down the main street.  
And sprouting out of this water is the tree of life.  
Which Adam and Eve were not allowed to eat from  
After they ate from the tree  
of the knowledge of good and evil.

But now there is so much life in this water  
That the tree bears fruit not once a year



But twelve times a year.  
And we can eat our fill whenever we want.

So here is what the city of God has in it.  
It is full of light, the light of the glory of God and the lamb  
It's main street is flowing with water,  
The water of life that brings life and healing.  
But there is one more thing that this city has in it.  
And this one is the most incredible of all.  
Listen to this:

<< Read Revelation 22:3b-5 >>

You see the city is not just filled with light,  
the light of the glory of God  
And it is not just flowing with water,  
The water flowing from the throne of God  
The other thing in this city is us.  
The servants of the lamb,  
who will reign with him for ever and ever.

I usually get annoyed when someone says something like  
Words fail me,  
or I cannot express how much I feel this or that  
I usually think its just an excuse for not really trying.  
But honestly, if there's a place  
where those phrases can be used with integrity,  
surely it must be here.  
I mean, what can you say about this.  
This city, it's our city, it's for us.  
We get to be there.  
How do you put into words some kind of response to that.

What is it that Paul says in Corinthians,  
What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard,  
and what no human mind has conceived  
these things God has prepared  
for those who love him

We've been invited to the wedding supper of the lamb,  
And here's the thing, we're the bride.  
This city, its not just for us, in a sense it is us.  
We're the city of God that he chooses to dwell in.  
We're his bride, whom he has made pure and spotless  
Whom he has clothed in fine linen  
We reign with him forever and ever and ever.

I know that these days there is this cultural feeling in us  
That says it's not a good thing to spend that much time  
dwelling on heaven and what its going to be like.  
People can become too heavenly minded

to be of any earthly use, we say.  
But I want to challenge that notion this morning,  
I want to encourage you to spend more of your time this year  
Day dreaming of heaven.  
I want to encourage you to get your mind  
Up and out of the here and now  
And on into the by and by.

Because here's the truth,  
In the life that we live here and now,  
In the meal that we are about to share together,  
The future that God has planned for us,  
Has come rushing back to meet us.

Here we stand in the middle of two incredible meals,  
On one hand we remember the last supper,  
When Jesus took bread and broke it.  
And said this is my body, broken for you  
When Jesus took the cup and drank it.  
And said this is my blood, shed for you.  
On the other hand we anticipate the wedding breakfast  
When with great celebration Jesus will take us  
As his bride  
And we will be together forever and ever.

But just as the truth of what Jesus has done for us in the past  
In dying for us on the cross  
Just as that past truth comes forward in Jesus  
To impact us now in our present  
So the reality that will be is true of us in the future,  
The future truth of our destiny to be with Jesus forever  
In the holy city of God.  
That future truth comes backward in Jesus  
To impact us now in our present as well

If it is true that our future  
is one without pain, without suffering, and without tears.  
If it is true that he will take our brokenness and make us whole,  
Then that truth is not just a future truth,  
But a truth that in part, not in total but in part,  
comes back to meet us in our present  
And God will heal our brokenness now.

If it is true that there will be no temple, but God will be with us  
Then that truth is not just a future truth,  
But a truth that in part, not in total but in part,  
Comes back to meet us in our present.  
And God is with us now

If it is true that evil will be abolished,  
If it is true that our lives will be full of light and the water of life

Then those truths are not just future truths,  
But they are truths that in part, not in total but in part  
Come back to meet us in our present.

Do you see what we do with this meal,  
with this sacrament, with this communion  
What we are doing is taking the future hope  
and making it a part of our present reality.

Do you remember when I had that first meal with Di.  
The one that was full of potential and promise and hope,  
Well that meal was connected, that meal was a foretaste  
Of the even more amazing meal to come  
when the potential would become reality  
when the promise would become a commitment  
when the hope would become a celebration

And in the same kind of way,  
This meal, this communion that we are going to take part in  
It's connected with the meal to come.  
As we take, as we eat, as we drink,  
We are taking that future reality,  
And in part, bringing it back  
to be a part of our present reality

So, I want to invite you now.  
Take, eat, drink and dream.  
Build a frame around your future.  
Imagine what it's going to be like in the city of God  
Imagine what you'll see, what you'll hear  
Imagine what you'll do, what you'll feel.

And as you see, as you hear, as you feel,  
Pray that God will bring some part of that future hope  
And make it a part of your present reality.

Let me read to you as we come to the Lord's table

<< Revelation 22:12-17 >>