

Sunday 22nd May

Acts 16:9-15

Revelation 21:10; 21:22 – 22:5

John 5:1-9

Hope for the future and the present

All we are saying – is give peace a chance

Those words from John Lennon are often sung when people gather to protest at some act of violence across the world. Whether it be Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the civil war that is bubbling up in Ethiopia, the war in Yemen or whatever.

Why can't people live together in peace and harmony? Why is violence so often seen as the solution rather than the problem. Why can't we look to what connects rather than what divides?

And in some senses it's very easy to look at those macro-issues and point the finger. But really they are just larger scale versions of the disagreements and conflicts that happen in our daily lives. Which result in alienation, anger, animosity and abuse. And ultimately none of us is immune from those kinds of things.

Perhaps a question we often find ourselves asking when we look at the world – from global events down to our own lives – is: Does it have to be like this? Is there any hope?

When I speak at funerals – as I often do – I always try to talk of hope. It is surely what makes a Christian funeral distinctive. There is hope. Death is not the end. There is hope of a new future; a new future where sin and pain and sickness and death are no more. Where life in the presence of God for all time is possible. Free from all the things that hold us back in the here and now. Free to be what and who God created us to be. Free for us to enjoy life in all its fullness.

It's this future, this hope that the book of Revelation is all about.

It's not an easy read. It's written in what is known as apocalyptic language. Using pictures and images to illustrate truths. It's almost as if it's a map – maybe like an Ordnance Survey map similar to the ones we use when we go for walks in the countryside. A two dimensional image that illustrates what the three dimensional reality is like. But like a map, you need to know what all the symbols mean to understand that picture. But unlike a map which has a handy key to the symbols alongside it, in Revelation there is no simple key. The interpretation comes from the whole of scripture, it comes from understanding the whole of the Bible and the culture in which it was written.

Which doesn't really help people like you and me.

I'm not going to attempt to unravel the mysteries of the book of Revelation this morning – that's a task for people far more able and knowledgeable than me. But I do want to have a peek at the end, at the final vision - some of which we had read this morning - and see what difference grasping some of its truth can make in our lives.

The vision is of a new Jerusalem – the new city of God - in which the full glory of God lives. There is no need for a man made temple here, because God himself lives at the very heart of this city. The city will not be home to any uncleanness or falsehood, nor anything which goes against the will of God. But it will be the home of all those who trust in Christ – whose names (as the passage says) are written in the book of life.

And from the throne of God within the city will flow the river of the water of life – the source of life itself. And from the water of life grows the tree of life – whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. There will be no more war; there will be no more division; there will be peace; there will be healing.

That's the culmination of John's great vision contained in the book of Revelation. A new creation with God himself at its centre. We may think that the world around us – in all its variety and beauty - is the ultimate reality. But Revelation tells us that what is to come is far better.

Think of the most glorious sunset you've ever seen -

Think of the most moving piece of music you have ever heard -

Think of the greatest act of love you have ever experienced or witnessed

The new Jerusalem of John's vision will exceed and surpass them all.

As Paul wrote in his letter to the Corinthians - For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

This vision is a vision of the ultimate reality which everything around us points towards.

But that is all about hope in the future. What about hope now? How does this future hope help us in our present reality? Can knowing of and hoping for this glorious future make any difference to the way we lead our lives now?

Our gospel reading today recounts the story of Jesus healing a paralysed man. Someone who had been ill for many, many years. Someone who had probably given up hope altogether. Someone whose life consisted of lying by that pool day after day. Existing, not living. Helpless and hopeless.

Do you want to be made well? says Jesus.

We might think that is a rather odd question but maybe the man had got so used to that existence that he could not imagine anything different. He could not imagine a future that was unlike the past. But Jesus offered him something new. 'Stand up, take your mat and walk.' At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.

We don't know what happened in the future – but we can imagine a host of possibilities. We can be sure that there was hope. That his future was incomparably different from his past.

We can see in the stories we read about Jesus that because of who he is – because of his divinity – he offers a foretaste of that heavenly vision in Revelation. God himself living amongst human beings. The glory of God fully present in our human existence. He talks of himself being the source of living water – the water of life. And he offers the foretaste of that vision by what he does and what he teaches. Healings, miracles, compassion, love, righteousness. A new way of living centred upon God himself.

And as Christians we believe that his Spirit – the very life of God – can live within each one of us. This is what he promises, and this is what countless Christians through the ages have testified to. Which means that we too can experience a foretaste of that wonderful vision in our daily lives through what we do and what we say and who we are.

We will never in this world see the vision become a full reality, but we will enable glimpses of heaven, glimpses of what God wants, to be seen.

So the question Jesus asks that paralysed man is one he could ask us all. Do you want to be made well? Do you want your life and the lives of those around you to be different, or are you content with the way things are? Do you want to live rather than just exist? What is holding you back?

And the life that Jesus offers is one where divides can be broken down; where peace can take over from conflict; where understanding replace ignorance; and gentleness replace unkindness. Where there is hope in the here and now.

Such lives will not be the total fulfilment of the vision we have thought about, but they will offer glimpses into the future that show things don't have to be as they always have been. Glimpses that will offer us hope in the here and now and not just in the age to come.

So when we look at the world around us in despair; when we wring our hands and cry "does it have to be like this", we can imagine Jesus himself asking us if we really want things to be

different, if we want to be made well. And we can – through his power within us – become part of the solution rather than the problem. We can look to the vision in Revelation and take small steps now to begin to make it a reality. To bring hope alive now.