

Overview of the Bible 10 – ‘Behold, I am making all things new’: The fate of the Word today

Zephaniah 3:14-20 / Psalm 148 / Revelation 21:1-6 / Matthew 24:29-44

Biblical books: Revelation

Sunday Night in the City, Bethlehem, 6 November 2022

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Tonight we conclude our ten sermon series on a complete overview of the Bible. Tonight I will be preaching on the book of Revelation and other texts about the end of the world and the kingdom of heaven, including the readings we’ve just heard. Let’s pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth.

The Judgment of Joy

This past semester at Australian Lutheran College, I’ve been lecturing for a class on Apologetics and World Religions. We begin all our classes with prayer, but in this class we also begin with a Bible reading and reflection. This time we’ve been reading through the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes. And one thing that I’ve noticed again is how the Scriptures combine a kind of deep scepticism with profound joy. Sometimes we’re led to think that a deeply sceptical person might also be somewhat miserable, and perhaps without Christ that’s understandable. Or, that someone joyous might also be a bit naïve, a bit blind to the ways things actually work. Again, something understandable for a life lived without reference to God. But the wisdom writings of the Scriptures often combine scepticism and resignation to the impermanence of things, with praise and joy and freedom. So for instance, in Ecclesiastes 11:

Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things, God will bring you into judgment.

Remove vexation from your heart and put away pain/evil from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity/meaningless. (Ecclesiastes 11:9-10)

God’s judgment and the vanity/meaninglessness of the world, are here presented alongside rejoicing, and freedom from worry.

Tonight, we’re looking at the end of the world. This not only wraps up our sermon series on the Bible, but is also fitting on the Sunday we’re celebrating All Saints Day – commemorating those who have died in the Lord Jesus Christ –, as well as being good preparation for the end of the church year in coming weeks, followed by Advent, a time when the church as a whole brings to the front of its mind the clear Scriptural teaching that this world is coming to an end, and that the Lord Jesus Christ, who is even now ruling the world, will come again to judge the living and the dead.

This could be a cause for lament. And, indeed, it sometimes is. The Bible’s teaching on the second coming is partly a call for us to again repent of our sins, and to hold fast in great trust to the never-failing mercy of Christ Jesus our Lord, lest we live a life unrepentant, a life without faith, without mercy, a life of imagined self-sufficiency, a life that cannot stand under the judgment.

But as the book of Ecclesiastes shows, in God, an honest appraisal and confession that everything we see is vanity, here today and gone tomorrow, is more fundamentally the cause for joy. So too, the end of the world and the coming of Christ in judgment is for us good news, the occasion for us to live a life of praise, of hope, of love, of joy, of freedom. We can all “lighten up”, so to speak, be full of the light of Christ, because he is coming, and he will put away the darkness.

Of course there are many temptations around us to live a life that is tied to things that won't last: political victories, the improving of my reputation and standing among friends and family, or a life tied to the gradual accumulation of savings, or tied to the fortunes of our loved ones. While all of these things do bear some joy, they can, and often are, all taken away. They all come to dust. As Christ proclaimed in tonight's Gospel reading, it will all pass away. “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”, he says (Matthew 24:35).

A life tied, then, to the words of Christ, the Word of God, is a life tied to what will endure, what can see us through death into life, what will make us stand in the judgment with a confidence in the saving work of Jesus Christ. It's also a life, then, that is free to see the impermanence of things, that is happy to call a spade a spade, because this Christian way of life is not spiritually dependent on this earth enduring.

And this life of freedom and praise is your life. When you were baptized, you were brought into the kingdom. You were made a citizen of this real, eternal kingdom, which will endure when all other kingdoms are ruined. The king is coming, the trumpets will soon sound, you can almost hear them on the horizon now, and the heavenly kingdom will come. You were made a member of this not by your choice, but by the death and resurrection of Christ, and God's adoption of you in baptism as his child and heir. In Jesus, in a mysterious way, you have died to the world, so that now you are already living in the light of the resurrection, in what the Bible calls “newness of life” (Romans 6:4). So that the end of the world, the coming again of Christ and the resurrection of the body, is not just a distant hope, but already a present reality, a kingdom which we already live in, which we already invest in, build treasure in. It's a hope that is present, even as we also long for Christ to come again quickly. Listen to how God's Word puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling... He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. (2 Corinthians 5:1-2, 5-6)

You holy people, you who have the Holy Spirit by baptism, and by faith, not by your moral superiority, you have the Spirit as a guarantee of the world to come. You already participate in this, a house that will not pass away, but which is eternal in heavens. And so you are free to be always of good courage. The end of the world is good news.

For [as St Paul puts it] God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake or

asleep we might live with him. Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:9-11)

Old Testament Teaching on the New Heaven and New Earth

This good news was already proclaimed in the Old Testament. God worked then and now through prophecy – through words which reveal both the present, hidden, realities that can be ignored or passed by, but also the future realities, what is coming, all seen in the light of eternity. In this sermon series we've noted how many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in the coming of Christ Jesus – prophecies, for instance, on how there would come a new King, from David's bloodline, and that there would come a suffering servant, a Messiah.

But there are other Old Testament prophecies that point to the end of the world, or that perhaps point both to Christ's first coming, but also his second coming when heaven and earth will pass away and the kingdom of heaven will be made known to all. In our first reading tonight from Zephaniah, we heard a sample of this kind of prophecy, with Zephaniah speaking of a coming day when it would be said:

The Lord your God is in your midst,
A mighty one who will save;
He will rejoice over you with gladness;
He will quiet you by his love;
He will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)

This prophecy of God dwelling in the midst of his people is something already fulfilled in Christ Jesus, who by his real presence with us in worship dwells in our midst as a mighty one who saves. "I am among you, as one who serves" Jesus says (Luke 22:27). But living with God in our midst is also something we will see given in the book of Revelation as a prophecy about the new heaven and earth. And one of the surprising dimensions of this Zephaniah prophecy is that it does not proclaim that we will rejoice in God, that we will sing God's praises, but rather that God will exult over you, rejoice over you with gladness, that he will quiet you by his love. The people of Israel were already being prepared for the new heaven and the new earth, when God would gather and delight in his people, as a parent delights in their children.

Jesus' Teaching on the New Heaven and New Earth

But then in the New Testament, these prophecies are amplified and built upon, including by Jesus Christ himself. When we looked at Jesus' ministry and teaching in the seventh sermon, I delayed addressing Jesus' teaching on the end of the world and the kingdom of heaven until now. But it's hardly a marginal part of Jesus' teaching.

In fact, perhaps his most famous words, the Beatitudes, which we heard this morning for All Saints' Sunday, are clear words of the world to come, of the heavenly kingdom. They simply can't be understood without seeing that Jesus is speaking of a kingdom to come, of a justice and a mercy that we won't see fully revealed in this world, but we will see in the world to come. Let me read to you:

Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.
Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.
But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.
Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.
Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. (Luke 6:21-26)

There's much we could say here, but I want to draw out three things.

First, that Jesus here encourages us to rejoice and leap for joy, even as we are being reviled, and our reputation is in tatters on account of Christ. Because justice and mercy are coming in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus here teaches both a very realistic and even pessimistic word on where your Christian faith will lead you in this world, while also teaching a joyous, happy word, for our live here on earth, living as we are in the hope of the world to come. In many other passages, Jesus encourages us to store up treasures for ourselves in heaven, to invest wisely not in this world, but in the eternal kingdom of heaven. It will pay off, Christ promises. It also means we can put up with suffering now, which will pale in comparison to the reward that is coming, when our suffering will be transformed. As St Paul puts it in some of his teaching on the kingdom of heaven, "This light momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Corinthians 4:17).

The second thing I want to note is that Jesus thus does encourage us to be attached to some things, even if somewhat detached to others. In my Apologetics and World Religions class we've read from the ancient Buddhist text, the *Dhammapada*, and from the ancient Chinese Daoist text, the *Tao Te Ching*. Both of these texts wisely acknowledge the impermanence of what we see around us. Things aren't always as important or lasting as we sometimes think they are. But the Buddhist and Daoist remedy is to live a life of total detachment. Don't get close to anything, they say, because it will all let you down. Don't be too despondent, they say, but neither be too joyous – because it will set you up for disappointment. Live a small life, they say, minimise your attachments, cordon yourself off from what will fade, what will let you down. That's the Buddhist and Daoist way, the way that might make more sense without God, but it's not the Christian way. For Christ here, and in other places, teaches us to attach ourselves to Him, to His return again in glory, to His eternal reign. "Seek first the kingdom of God ["Attach" yourself first to the kingdom of God], and then all of these things will be added unto you" (Matthew 6:33). And so by attaching ourself to Christ, even as He has attached Himself to us, Jesus then gives us back the things that are impermanent, to enjoy them for what they are. He gives us back our family, our possessions, our country, for rejoicing now, for serving and loving now, and for ordering in a way that prepares us for the kingdom of heaven, where our real treasure is.

The third thing I want to mention about the beatitudes, and Jesus' teaching on his return in glory to judge the living and the dead, is the audience Jesus chose to reveal this to. It's an interesting feature of the Gospels, that Jesus reveals these things only when he has gathered his disciples to him, and not when he is preaching to the crowds. This is the case

for the beatitudes in Matthew 5 and Luke 6. It's also the case for the Gospel reading we heard tonight, from Matthew 24, which was spoken on the Mount of Olives when "the disciples came to him privately, saying 'Tell us, when will these things be, and what will be the sign of your coming and the close of the age?'" (Matthew 24:3). That's when Jesus gives the teaching we heard, including on signs of the coming of Christ, that things will get worse before they get better – stars will fall, tribes of the earth will mourn – but also on how no one knows when Christ will come. The day of preparation is every day. The time for repentance and forgiveness is now. It's not something to be put off for a timeline we are in control of. But he teaches this privately, to people who are already followers, and not to the crowds. Of course, he does teach the crowds in ways that point to the kingdom of heaven – it's not something he hides. But when Jesus speaks most explicitly about the second coming, he speaks only to his followers, he speaks to those who can receive it in the light of faith in Christ. He speaks to those who are already ready to be ready, to stay awake.

Revelation on the New Heaven and New Earth

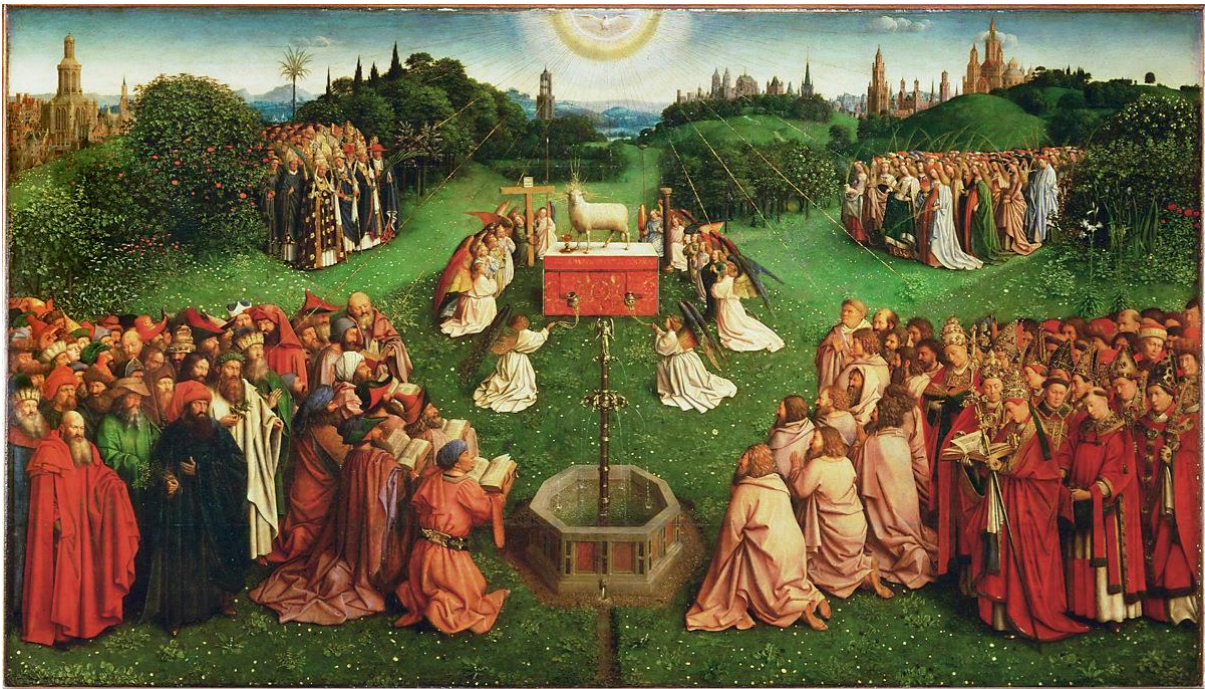
The Book of Revelation is both one of the more mysterious books of the Bible, and also the book most dedicated to the end times. Those two realities are not an accident. Just as the origins of the world are mysterious, partly owing to the fact that no human existed to witness the birth of existence, so too the end of the world and the kingdom to come is mysterious, partly because no one living has seen it.

Although the writer of Revelation, John, is perhaps something of an exception. For while he was in exile on the Greek island Patmos, and while he was in church, worshipping on Sunday, the Lord's Day (Revelation 1:9-10), God gave him a mysterious vision of the kingdom of heaven. He peeled back the visible to show what was really going on, and what was to come, all in the light of eternity. This wasn't just for interest's sake, but rather the Book of Revelation which records John's vision, was written as an encouragement to early Christian congregations, and to us, to remain faithful to Christ in the midst of persecution.

As perhaps the last book of the Bible written, the immediate context of Revelation was pressure by the Roman Emperor Domitian for all people to pinch incense before a statue of the emperor, to bow down, and to declare the Emperor 'Dominus et Deus', Lord and God. For the few, small early Christian congregations, it's not hard to imagine this pressure as extremely difficult to bear. Isn't Jesus supposed to be king of heaven and earth? Why is it, then, that the Emperor seems to be in charge, exercising a kind of demonic power?

The book of Revelation reveals that indeed Christ Jesus is reigning. The first words declare that it is the revelation of Jesus Christ (Revelation 1:1) – Jesus is the one revealed. Even though Christians then and now can't see him, he is speaking through his Word, and dwells in our midst through worship. And, the book of Revelation shows, his rule is eternal and will soon be revealed to all. The whole book has strange imagery that is not wholly unique in the Scriptures. The Old Testament also has passages of prophetic vision with unusual imagery, and Revelation even calls itself a work of prophecy (Revelation 1:3), showing that it stands in this tradition, bringing Old Testament prophecy to a climax. There are seven different episodes in Revelation, all presenting different angles of one central reality, revealed in chapters 4 and 5, in which Christ is revealed to be sitting on a throne. Around him creatures and elders are singing the 'Holy, holy, holy' and singing 'Worthy are you to receive glory and honour and power', songs which our own liturgy takes up as we join with heaven and earth,

gathered around the Lamb on the throne. Tonight we prayed Psalm 148 which itself is somewhat prophetic of this moment, when the whole world will be consummated in praise and adoration of the Lamb.



Jan van Eyck (1390-1441), The Adoration of the Lamb

Why does God's Word include these visions? In trying times, God reveals to us that the central drama of human history, and all of history, is the battle between Christ and Satan, and the Good News is that the victory already belongs to Christ. Satan cannot defeat him, because by his death, resurrection and ascension, Christ has defeated sin, death and the devil, and now rules the world in grace and truth. In the book of Revelation, Satan instead turns his attentions to the church, because he knows the battle with Christ is over. For Christians persecuted in the early church, and persecuted now, God reveals that the accusations from the Devil are short-lived, for he knows his time is short (Revelation 12:12), and we know it too. The suffering that Jesus told us would come our way, is not the final word, but an opportunity for us to endure a little while, as we await the full revealing of Christ's kingdom.

And that's the climax that Revelation builds into, as we heard in our reading from the second last chapter of the whole Bible:

Then I saw a new heaven and new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21:1-2)

Just as the Bible began with a marriage, of man and woman, the Bible now ends with a marriage, that of the church, the new Jerusalem, who looks like a strange mix between a bride and a holy city, married to the Lamb, the Bridegroom, Christ enthroned. And as the Bible draws to a close, it erupts into praise. In the midst of the tribulation that Christians have always faced, God reveals what will not pass away:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:3-4)

That teaching from the throne, where Jesus sits, echoes the words we heard in our Gospel: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Matthew 24:35).

Conclusion to the Sermon Series

And as we conclude this sermon series on the whole Bible, it's a fitting note to end on. The Word of God, centred on Christ, is what endures in life. That's not to say that the creation around us is sinful or evil in its essence. We began our overview of the Bible by hearing how God spoke creation into being with his Word, declaring it good. But God keeps speaking his Word, and is creating a new heaven and a new earth, as this one passes away.

This same Word also speaks into your life, into your conscience, by which God in Christ Jesus is breathing his Holy Spirit into you.

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness. (2 Timothy 3:16)

All of this is not to say that the Word of God is necessarily popular. It has always been despised in some sense, and our moment in time is no different. But the Word of God doesn't become less true because fewer people around us believe in it. The Word, which has become flesh in Jesus Christ, endures forever. For Christ reigns, and he is coming again soon, and this is Good News!

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

