
The Healing of the Nations

Revelation 21.10, 22 – 22.5

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on May 9, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Poetry is what happens when you put two words side by side that don't usually belong together, and then sit still and allow the sounds and resonances and associations to echo and conflict and spark and coalesce. I want this morning to think with you about the poetry of the Book of Revelation, and about two words we don't usually put together: healing and politics.

Healing we usually think of as personal, private, and hidden. Politics we connect with Washington, elections, speeches, and backroom deals. Healing sounds wholesome. Politics sounds emotive, like what happens in the workplace when you don't understand what's going on at the staff meeting but your boss says they'll tell you later. Healing might be something you come to church to find. Politics could be something you come to church to avoid.

But the Book of Revelation is concerned with the healing of politics. And that healing is vividly portrayed in the final scenes of the book, where John sees a new heaven and a new earth, and the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. The city has no temple, and is in perpetual light. Its gates are perpetually open. A river runs through it, and on either side of the river is the tree of life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. This picture sets out for us pretty clearly what politics is, what healing is, and what it might mean to talk about the healing of politics and the politics of healing.

Here are the three striking things about the way the Book of Revelation ends. Number One, there's a new earth. We're so familiar with the words, "And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth..." that we seldom pause and reflect what they mean. They mean the earth is a *permanent* part of God's vision for our life. It's not that earth is finally destroyed and then we're all in heaven forever. This vision is telling us there'll always be an earth, not necessarily just the same way it is now, but nonetheless there'll always be an earth. God so loved the world that when the old one was worn out he didn't kick it out but made it new, and made a new heaven to match.

Think back to the tower of Babel, in Genesis chapter 11. At Babel humanity tried to become homogeneous and tried to reach heaven through its own ingenuity. God scattered the people and languages at Babel. God was making a clear statement that humanity was meant to enjoy diversity, not obliterate it, and that getting to heaven was God's gift, not humanity's achievement. Unlike Babel, which tried to take earth up to heaven, this picture in Revelation is of heaven come to earth. We can't make salvation come. It comes to us. But salvation won't whisk us away. It will transform what's already here. God has healed the earth.

This is vitally important for the way we see our bodily existence, for the way we imagine politics, for the way we relate to the wider animal, vegetable and mineral creation. The earth is not a means to an end. It's not the wrapping paper we toss away once we get to chew on the candy of heaven. Our embodied existence is the way it's always going to be. Relating to one another in all our diversity and relating to the earth in all its vibrant complexity is the way we're always going to live. This world isn't ghastly and irredeemable. God's plan for everlasting life is recognizably similar to what we already know. Politics isn't a waste of time, or a necessary evil. It's the way we're going to be spending eternity.

Number Two, what comes down from heaven is called "Jerusalem." In other words God's plan for eternity is in continuity with the Jewish people, with the covenant, with the temple, with the whole story of the chosen people before God. God doesn't obliterate the earth to make a new world and God doesn't obliterate Israel to make the church. This one gesture – calling the heavenly city "Jerusalem" – incorporates the politics of Israel into the politics of heaven. God has not forgotten the covenant. The way God's people drew together God's salvation, God's judgment, God's possession of the land, and the way they responded in praise and worship – these will be real and present in the politics of heaven. The Old and New Testaments provide the ingredients from which God concocts the recipe for heaven. But the new Jerusalem has no temple, because Jesus is present and worship is constant and reconciliation with God is complete and so there is no need for a temple. God has healed Jerusalem.

Number Three, Jerusalem is a city. The Bible is ambivalent about cities. Remember, the story begins in a garden. In the garden of Eden human beings are at peace with one another, at peace with the animal, vegetable and mineral creation, and at peace with God. What happens after the Fall is that divine abundance turns to human scarcity, and relationships between human beings and one another, the wider creation, and God, are suddenly all in jeopardy. And this is represented by the symbolic journey from Adam and Eve's garden to Cain's city. The city is the living embodiment of humanity's failure to live in the garden.

The tension between city and garden runs through Jesus' story. Jesus enters the city in triumph on Palm Sunday but four days later he's rejected in the city. His betrayer leaves supper in the city but kisses Jesus in the garden. On Good Friday Jesus is tried in the city but buried in the garden. On Easter Day he appears to Mary in the garden but to his disciples in the city. So for heaven to be portrayed as a city is a decisive form of redemption.

But notice, crucially, what finally happens to the garden. God doesn't finally make a choice between a city and a garden. God brings the garden into the city. There is a river and there is the tree of life and there are twelve kinds of fruit and there are leaves on the tree. God doesn't wipe out the history of human interaction in the city. The tension between city and garden that runs right through the Bible is finally resolved by the creation of a garden city. God has healed the city.

And these dimensions of the Book of Revelation's picture of heaven describe for us the healing of politics. God does not destroy the earth: God makes the earth new. God does not reject Israel: God makes a new Jerusalem, but one that reflects the presence of Jesus. God does not choose between the garden and the city: God brings the garden into the city.

And the crucial link between all of these dimensions of the healing of politics is the tree. In the Garden of Eden, even though it was paradise, there was still politics. And that was because politics is as much about the best enjoyment of God's abundance as it is about the inadequate distribution of our scarcity. People still needed to balance various goods, address common issues, and get the best out of one another. The Fall of Adam and Eve focuses on the tree. After eating from the tree, trust is gone, innocence is gone, abundance is gone, and mutuality is gone. Politics is suddenly a problematic, conflictual game of resentments and suspicion and secrets and lies. The tree of Eden is healed in the tree of Calvary. The cross on Calvary is the definition of healing and the redefinition of politics. It exposes the profound horror of politics – that human interactions of power and authority could collaborate to execute the embodiment of God's abundance, trust, simplicity, joy, and truth. But in the resurrection it transforms and heals that politics, by offering the two things conventional politics finds so hard to grasp – the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

And so the third tree, the tree of life in the Book of Revelation, is about the politics of Eden and the healing of Calvary. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. What do we learn in Revelation that shapes our understanding of healing and reshapes our notion of politics?

Well, here's a little manifesto that applies equally well to your household, your workplace, your country and your church.

Revelation's politics is one of abundance. There is no shortage of light, because God's light is permanent and sufficient. Is the politics of your household, workplace, country or church one that is it obsessed by the items of scarcity that cause jealousy and resentment? Or does it constantly dwell on the things of God that never run out, the things that everyone can have?

Revelation's politics is one of diversity. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every kind of jewel and all the nations are there. The tree of life produces 12 kinds of fruit. Is the politics of your household, workplace, country or church one that is bent on a fearful preservation of a narrow certainty or homogeneity or heritage or culture? Or does it see difference and variety of identity and practice and tradition and experience as fundamentally good and enriching and renewing and godly?

Revelation's politics is one of inclusion. The gates of the city are never shut. Is the politics of your household, workplace, country or church one that sees every newcomer as a thief, every stranger as a swindler, every

chance encounter as a threat? Or does your politics seek out the unusual person, enjoy the foreigner, study to speak to foreigners in their own language, and offer hospitality to the lost?

Revelation's politics is one of reuniting the garden and the city. Is the politics of your household, workplace, country or church one that treats the mineral world as a disposable resource, vegetation as fuel for consumption, and the earth as an orange to be squeezed till the pips squeak? Or does your politics see harmony with the earth as all of a piece with peace with your neighbor and reconciliation with God?

Finally Revelation's politics is one of continuing to enjoy rather than discarding or destroying. God doesn't discard or destroy the earth, but makes earth new. God doesn't discard or destroy Jerusalem, but makes Jerusalem new. God doesn't discard or destroy the city, but makes the city new. And this is our fundamental resurrection hope. God doesn't discard or destroy you and me, but makes you and me new.

And the word for making new is "healing." And the other word for making new is politics. This is what the politics of heaven are about: abundance, diversity, inclusion, reunion, healing. Politics begins the moment you realize discarding or destroying are not options available to you, and you have to work with and enjoy and celebrate and renew what you've got. That's what Revelation finally teaches us. In the kingdom of heaven, healing is what politics is finally about.