

Sermon Given by

Bob White

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Revelation 21:1-5 - "The Christian hope"

Welcome to the New Year. It's the first Sunday not just of a New Year but of a New Decade. The New Year is a great time for new starts. A great time to look forward, isn't it? The newspapers and TVs are full of their predictions of all the exciting changes that will happen in the coming year.

- Endless new electronic gadgets, TVs and internet games
- New fashions
- New holiday destinations
- faster broadband so we never have to face the real world
- and so on

Yet at the same time we know we live in a broken world.

- A world where we see the suffering of hurtful and abusive relationships;
- of a billion people living in poverty on less than £1.30 a day.
- Of the obscenity of an estimated 700 million obese people while there are 800 million malnourished in a world of plenty.

Which is the real reality? Of course we often glimpse God's goodness in the beauty of the natural world, in the joy of family and friendships we enjoy again at Christmas. But it's as if the world is marred, is somehow running out of kilter to allow all those bad things to happen and to go on happening.

So yet again we make our New Year resolutions to be better people in the hope that this time the resolutions really will last longer than a week. Though often they are the triumph of hope over experience, as Samuel Johnson observed of second marriages. Or as someone else put it: A New Year's resolution is something that goes in one Year and out the other.

The joy of the Christian message is that it doesn't ignore the broken-ness in this world and pretend that we can make it better if we just try harder. Because we know from experience that will never work. Rather the bible faces it head-on. And the good news is that God has come into this world to set things right for all time. Today's passage in Revelation 21 is a wonderful one setting out the certainty of our hope for the future.

It's a future where God will bring a new creation that removes forever all the brokenness of this world, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain. Isn't that something to long for in a world racked by death and pain? I have to say that we don't often think about that new creation in our everyday lives. We probably barely give it a thought from one month to the next. But I want to say today that the certainty of the new creation should be the bedrock of our faith. The whole Christian gospel of Christ's death on the cross and his forgiveness of sins makes no sense without it.

Let me explain. The Bible narrative gives a cosmic view of all of God's dealings with his creation and in particular with us, his people. From alpha to omega, from beginning to end as it said in our last reading (Rev 21:6).

We start off in Genesis chapter 1 with God creating the whole cosmos – everything that exists. And at the end of that he sat down, saw everything he had made and pronounced it to be 'very good'. Yet within a couple of pages in Genesis 3 we find that humans, created by God in his image, have purposely turned their backs on their creator God. That's why we, and indeed this world is in the mess it is now in. We don't serve God as his people in his world. We don't care for the world on his behalf as he commanded us to do in Gen 1:28. Instead humans have said that they want to be in charge. It's as if we have said '*my will be done, not thine*'. And we reap the consequences daily. But the Christian good news – the gospel – is that God hasn't left us in this mess. He loves us enough that Jesus, his own son, came into the world on that first Christmas day. And he was willing to die on the cross to take the punishment that we deserved for turning our backs on God. Which allows that relationship to be restored between the creator God and ourselves. It's as if, says Paul, we *become a new creation* (2 Cor 5:16–18). It's a fresh start. So that new creation is already breaking into the world now. Everyone who puts their trust in Christ is part of that new creation. But of course we know that we are still subject to numerous failings day by day. We still sin. We fall short of God's standards. That's why we say a confession at every one of our church services.

So the Bible summary of all of history so far:

- God created a world which was very good
- Humans spoilt it by refusing to acknowledge God as sovereign, and trying to put themselves in his place
- Christ came to earth and took the punishment onto himself that that rebellion deserved so that our relationship with God could be restored

All of that is already done. **But it's not the last word.** Because one day the Lord Jesus will return to this earth and every single person will recognise him for who he is – God himself. At that time, all those who have acknowledged Jesus as their Saviour will have that relationship with God confirmed. While all those who have turned their backs on him will also be confirmed in their separation from him. It's a final judgement. Then the New Creation will be ushered in for all eternity. And it's that New Creation I want to concentrate on for the rest of my time, because it is the final, true home of all Christians. It is the solid reality of the future.

I have 3 brief things to say about it from this passage.

1. The Nature of the New Creation
2. The Blessings of what will and what will not be there
3. What it means for us now

The Nature of the New Creation

a) Its extent

¹Then 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.

The 'new heaven and new earth' simply means everything that exists – the whole cosmos – the whole show, in other words. Absolutely everything will be made new.

b) It is a real material world

There is no suggestion at all that this will be simply a spiritual or non-material place. It won't be somewhere we float around on clouds with wings sprouting out from our backs, playing harps. This isn't a pie-in-the-sky utopia.

It will be a real material world where there will be animals, shady riversides, houses, places for people to live, a city. A place where we will truly be at home. Properly fulfilled as the people God always meant us to be.

We don't of course know exactly what the new creation will be like. But the resurrected body of Jesus gives us some clues.

- He still had a body,
- He was certainly recognised by his friends and disciples and hundreds of others
- He ate meals
- His body still bore some of the scars of what had happened to him in the crucifixion.

But equally, the matter of which Jesus body was made had different properties from those we are used to. He could, for example appear and disappear at will in places far apart. He could walk through walls and locked doors and so on.

We shouldn't be too prescriptive about what the new creation will be like in detail. Because we don't know. But we are told that it will be a material place in perfect harmony. It will be the world that God always intended it to be before human rebellion spoilt it.

c) All things will be made new.

⁵He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

God says that he will make all things new. **He will renew them.** There is a really important point here. God doesn't say he will make all new things. Instead he will make all things new.

There is a symmetry here with the creation in Genesis. God said that everything he made then was very good. But it was spoiled by human rebellion against God. But in the new creation God will restore the material creation to how he intended it to be. We saw that in the first reading from Romans 8:19–22: *¹⁹The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed... 'in hope ²¹that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.*

The author Paul is saying here that renewal of the whole cosmos – of all the matter of this world, the stars and galaxies, the rocks and rivers, the trees and animals – is tied up with the return of Christ when the children of God (that is all Christians) will finally be free to live in the new creation. Until then, human sinfulness is preventing the created order from reflecting God's glory in the way he intended it to do. ²²*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

Paul suggests that the pain suffered by all of creation is akin to that of labour pains in childbirth. Of course I haven't experienced labour pains, but I have seen them at first hand. And they can be terrible. But the amazing thing is that in the joy of a new child being born, all those pains disappear into the background. That's what it will be like for the whole of creation, says Paul. Now we live in a broken, marred world. But its pain is only temporary, like birth pangs. In the fullness of time they will be replaced by the joy of the new creation. It's a glorious picture.

So in summary:

The Nature of the New Creation

- a) Is the whole cosmos, everything that is
- b) It is a real material world
- c) All things will be made new, renewed.

2. The Blessings of what will and what will not be there

a) The blessing of what is NOT there

No more sea.. 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.* Why no more sea? Many of us would love to be sitting by the sea somewhere on a tropical beach today. Some of you may remember Clive (ex-Treasurer) and Sue Irving who moved down to Devon specifically to be by the sea where Sue grew up. What's wrong with the sea? Well, in Biblical times the sea was seen as an extremely scary place. Unknown and dangerous. Chaotic. So it won't be there in the new creation. There will be none of those threatening, frightening forces present in the new creation. Nothing whatsoever to be afraid of.

[In fact God has always been sovereign even over the sea monsters. In Gen 1:21 it specifically says that 'God created the sea monsters'. In Job it talks about God playing with the Leviathan, the sea monster, like a fisherman with a fish hook. The sea monsters weren't a force in opposition to God. He made them so he had control over them. He made the sea and put bounds on it. He controlled it.]

No more death or crying or pain.

⁴He 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."

Death is the final enemy. It separates us from our loved ones. But Jesus has already won the victory over death. He proved that by returning in his resurrection body. And that will be true for everyone in the new creation. That's why this reading is often used in Christian funeral services. No more death. No more crying or pain either. The new creation will be a world put back to rights. Isn't that something we all long for? And if we just turned the page of the bible to Rev 22:3 we would find that 'nothing accursed will be found there any more'. Nothing at all. There won't even be any night, that time when evil deeds are so often done in darkness, because God's glory will illuminate everything (Rev 22:5). This is creation as God intended and purposed it to be.

That's what is NOT there: what about what IS there?

b) The blessing of who IS there

²I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³And 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."

It boils down to one big truth. God will live in the new creation with his people. God will come down to live with his people, much as he did at the beginning in the Garden of Eden, when he walked with Adam in the cool of the evening. We will have unobstructed access to him.

And notice too that God will come down to live with us. We should get out of the habit of saying that when we die we will go to heaven to be with God as if its some otherworldly, spiritual place. God himself will come to live with us. And one of the pictures given here is of a new Jerusalem – a city – a place where God's people will live together in perfect harmony, security and fulfillment – a place of righteousness. '*I will be their God and they will be my children*' says Rev 21:7. God's glory will be everywhere.

- So we've seen something of the nature of the new creation – its all embracing renewal of everything that is marred in this world:
- And something of the blessings of the absence of anything bad, or discordant, or to be fearful of and its replacement by security, by righteousness, by the presence of all that is good. And most of all by God himself dwelling with his people – with those who have acknowledged his call on their allegiance, who have accepted him as their Lord.

3. Finally, How should this understanding of the new creation affect our behaviour now?

First, the distinctively Christian attitude is underpinned by **hope**. By the certain hope of a renewed creation. It's in marked contrast to the secular world which really can say nothing in the face of a broken world except 'lets try harder'. And like so many of those New Years resolutions, at the end of the day, trying harder usually doesn't work. It doesn't work because of the persistent traits of human selfishness that are present in all of us.

It is worth working in God's creation now, not only because God commanded us to do so, but also because what we do now matters for that future. The certain hope of a renewed future creation is not a license to abandon care for this one. Rather, the opposite is the case. The great reformer, Luther is recorded as having said that if he knew Jesus were returning tomorrow, he would plant a tree today. What he meant was that we should already be practising living in this world in the way we shall for all eternity in the new creation. The decisions we make in this world, the things we do and say, our personalities, will all in some sense carry forward to the world to come. They will be purified (1 Cor 3:12–15) and transformed. The wrong-doing and dross will be laid bare and stripped away says the apostle Peter (2 Peter 3:10) – but the Bible is clear that how we behave in this world has a bearing on the next. The 'glory and honour of the nations will be brought into it' – beautiful music, great art, fantastic volcanic eruptions that don't hurt anyone.

Jesus said that the kingdom of heaven is already here – of course, only in a pale, muted sense. It's not yet fully realised. But it is already breaking into this world. We should have faith, not that all things **can** be different, but that things **will** be different. We need to work in this world because Jesus gives eternal meaning to that work. Second, the Christian view is **holistic**: we should have a concern for the material as well as the spiritual reality of this world because the new creation will also embrace both aspects. We should care for God's creation in a manner that shows our love and obedience to him.

So to return to what I said at the beginning: we are starting a New Year. What do each of us look forward to? What do we put our hope in? Is it our pension plans, our financial security, our jobs, our health, our belongings, our homes, our family, our friends, our resolutions to do better this time? If we take the bible seriously, we need to see that all those things are secondary. It's not that God doesn't want us to enjoy all the blessings of a good life. Of course he does. But the inescapable fact is that all those things are ephemeral. We know that of course. We know that when we die we can't take any of it with us. But we behave as if we could. The Bible's perspective is that the one thing of primary importance in this life is our relationship to God our creator. Do we submit to him as our creator God? Or do we turn our backs on him and say we want to do things our way, not his?

It matters because in the fullness of time the Lord Jesus will return to this earth. In the fullness of time there will be a new creation. Neither I nor anyone else, not even the Lord Jesus, knows when that will be. It might be this year or next, or the next century or millennium, or even a million or a billion years from now. We need to start living now as if it could happen at any time. Because one day it will be too late to start, either because we die or because Jesus returns.

And when God does return it will usher in a new creation where he will dwell with his people. If you are not a Christian today you need to consider whether or not you want to put your trust in him. And if you are a Christian, the New Year is a good time to consider honestly what in fact do you put your trust in on a daily basis. Where does your hope lie? Do you live in the light of the certainty of Christ's return and the new creation that will follow?

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)