

*Coming down from heaven*

In our services here in this church we usually follow something called the lectionary which sets the Scripture passages that we read each week. This is a way of ensuring that churches all over the world are considering the same Scriptures on any given Sunday. And in recent weeks the lectionary has been combining passages from the Book of the Acts of the Apostles with the Book of Revelation, that strange and mysterious book at the very end of the Bible written by a man named John. And in our services we have been reading passages from both books, but focusing only on Acts. This week, however, I want to address both passages for I couldn't help but notice something that links them, something rather intriguing. Both passages contain visions, and both passages are visions of something coming down out of heaven. I wonder if you noticed that! And as I thought about this I began to see a connection between the two which I would like to explore.

So let's begin with Acts and we find there the disciple Peter describing an extraordinary vision that he saw. It was a vision of a sheet coming down out of heaven and in that sheet there were all kinds of animals that he was forbidden to eat – animals that were regarded as unclean and which had no place on any Jewish menu. And Peter is told to eat, which he does after an initial protest that he can do no such thing. And as we read on we discover that this vision is not really about diet and menus and food, it's about people, and about which people could belong to the new community that was being formed by the Spirit of God after Jesus' resurrection. To Jewish people, you see, the world was divided. A chasm ran through it that couldn't be crossed. The world was polarised between Jews and non-Jews, i.e. Gentiles, and Jews were the chosen people of God and Gentiles were not. And Gentiles were often referred to as dogs and they were considered unclean and one thing that you could certainly do as a good observant Jew was sit and down and share food with a Gentile. And what Peter was being told to do here was to go to the house of a Gentile, a Roman soldier no less, and to baptise him as a child of God and to welcome him into God's new community, the church. And to Peter that was as offensive as eating unclean food. It was unthinkable. But it was what God was telling him to do. And in so doing an ancient division was being overcome; an

ancient wound in the world, a festering sore – the separation of peoples, of Jew and Gentiles - was being healed.

Now, you might be forgiven for thinking all that is ancient history. Nothing to do with us today. But I want to put it into some broader context. I want to see how it is part of a bigger picture that concerns us. And in order to understand what was happening on that day in Joppa I want to introduce another verse from the New Testament that we didn't read but which belongs here. It's a verse that comes in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians where Paul speaks of a plan that God has for the world – something that God is doing in the world. The events of the world at times may seem entirely random and chaotic but in Paul's eyes a plan, a purpose is unfolding. In that first chapter from Ephesians Paul speaks of 'a plan for the fullness of time to gather up all things in Christ'. Paul, you see, looks out at a world that is torn and fractured. He sees a world that is broken and fragmented. He sees a world where we human beings are set against one another, and we are estranged from God, and we are alienated from nature and we are at odds even with ourselves. Surely we are a divided and scattered race. And Paul says that God has a plan to heal it all. He has a plan to gather up the broken fragments and to unite them together in Jesus Christ. And what happened that day in Joppa was a decisive step in that plan. That sheet, coming down out of heaven, proclaimed that this deep rift between human beings was being healed – as Jew and Gentile were gathered up, bound together, in Christ.

That brings us to today and the world we live in – a scary world, still fragmented and scattered and wounded. And we wonder. We wonder about the future and end of all things. Is the universe that began with a big bang destined to die away with a whimper? And little planet earth, troubled little planet earth that seems intent on destroying itself, will it all end in tears and destruction?

One of the most disturbing and yet moving visions of the future of this planet comes in a recent novel by the American author Cormac McCarthy. It's called *The Road* and it is set in an unspecified future after some fearful, apocalyptic calamity has struck the earth. We never learn exactly what has happened but it is a terrifying world that is portrayed. The narrative follows a sick, haggard, unnamed father and his young son as they stagger across a charred and scarred and corpse-strewn landscape in search of survival. Sunlight is obscured by dense clouds of ash, the snow is grey and rivers run clogged with soot and debris. The man and the boy are dressed in rags. They must

search desperately for food and the father pushes an old shopping trolley containing all that they can scavenge. Constantly they are threatened by marauding bands of cannibals and ghouls from which they must hide. Their companionship is all that they have as they cling to one another in the freezing nights, and their abiding love and their deep fear of each other's death is what binds them close together. And it is almost unbearable when towards the end the father dies, leaving the young boy bereft.

It is a staggeringly powerful book and there are two quotes from it that I would pick out. The first comes when father and son encounter an old man tapping his way along the road with a stick. Speaking of whether or not people were prepared for what was coming the old man says, 'People were always getting ready for tomorrow. I didn't believe in that. Tomorrow wasn't getting ready for them. It didn't even know they were there.' There we have it. The future is entirely indifferent to us. It isn't getting ready for us. It doesn't even know we are here.

The other quote comes right at the end after his father's death when the little boy encounters a loving family who adopt him. We read, 'The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you. She would talk to him sometimes about God. He tried to talk to God but the best thing was to talk to his father and he did talk to him and he didn't forget.'

So McCarthy leaves the ending ambiguous. God is spoken of but God is an unknown and ultimately in a dying and afflicted world, whether or not God exists, we are left only with love – the love of a father and a son, the love of a family who open their arms wide to this destitute child. And we wonder: is that all that we can hope for as we face the spectre of destruction, humans clutching one another in a last, desperate, defiant love in the face of a godless world?

Well, that takes us to our passage from Revelation 21. Listen again:

'I saw a new heaven and a new earth... no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready like a bride adorned for her husband...'

What we have to understand is that where John the author was coming from was not so very different from the world depicted by Cormac McCarthy. Jerusalem, the pride of the Jewish people, the dwelling place of the Most High,

lies in ruins and ashes – reduced to rubble by the marauding armies of Rome in AD70. Some thought that this must be the end of the world, but they were wrong. For John looks far beyond those catastrophic events. He looks far beyond into a distant future and what does he see? Well, what he sees is a future that is not indifferent to us. Here is the consummation of God's passionate love affair with the world. Here is the final realisation of that ancient plan to gather up all things and to unite them in Christ: a new heaven and a new earth. And held finally in that divine embrace our tears are wiped away, for the old order has gone.

You see, McCarthy is right. In the end there is only love. It's all we are left with. But it's not just frail, human love that remain. It's the scandalous, all-inclusive divine love that comes down from heaven and that is pictured in Peter's vision in Acts as a sheet lowered down from above. It's the love that comes down from heaven in the Holy City, the new Jerusalem that John glimpses.

And that old man with the stick, tapping his way along the road was wrong. Tomorrow knows we are here. The future knows, and it is getting ready for us as a bride adorned for her lover. Amen.

O holy and gracious God,  
 eternal Maker of all things,  
 we praise and worship you who  
 has created this beautiful world  
 in all its loveliness.  
 bring All around us are things that bring joy  
 to our senses,  
 things to touch and to hear and to see  
 and to taste and to smell.  
 And you have made human beings in your own image

that we might find joy in one another  
as one human family,  
bound together in your divine love,  
celebrating our differences and variety.  
O God forgive us for our failure to love one another.  
Forgive us for the divisions and the conflicts  
that spoil your good world.  
Forgive us that we find excuses to exclude people  
and to avoid the challenge of those  
who are different from us.  
O God, have mercy upon us we pray.  
Teach us to meet you in one another.  
Teach us to respect our differences and diversity  
and so enrich our common life.  
We pray these things in the name of our brother  
And Saviour Jesus Christ, in which words we  
Pray together, saying...

Living God,  
We bring before you our broken, fragmented world:  
where Jew is divided against Palestinian,  
and where Christian is divided against Muslim,  
and where Christian is divided against Christian,  
and where Muslim is divided against Muslim,  
and where governments are divided against their own people,  
and where rich are divided against poor,

and where the human race is divided against nature,  
where young are often divided against old  
and male against female.  
O God, come, we pray,  
gather up this scattered world and unite us in Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Bring peace, we pray, where there is conflict -  
to Syria, and to Iraq;  
bring an end to Islamic State with its hatred and murder.  
And we pray for your church,  
that it may be a place of healing and reconciliation,  
a refuge for those who are discriminated against  
and who feel excluded and rejected.  
Bless any of us in particular need today:  
those who are struggling to find work,  
those who are grieving over losses,  
those who are far from home and missing loved ones.  
O God make us a community of comfort, and care and hope.  
And we pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ,  
our Lord and savior. Amen.