

Sixth Sunday of Easter (C/RCL)  
Revelation 21.10, 22-22.5  
May 13, 2007  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

Elizabeth II, the Queen of England, visited the United States last week. On Monday there was a wonderful welcome ceremony at the White House, complete with a military color guard and a fife and drum band whose members wore powdered wigs, tricornered hats and red jackets. In his remarks President Bush mentioned that the Queen previously dined with ten other U.S. presidents, and then he reminisced, “You helped our nation celebrate its bicentennial in 17—“ He caught himself before he completed the sentence that would have made the queen over 200 years old ☺. At that point there was silence as the Queen and the President looked at each other. President Bush then turned back to the audience and explained, “She gave me a look that only a mother could give a child.” (*New York Times*, May 8, 2007, A21)

This weekend of Mother’s Day we’ve been given a beautiful Gospel from St. John about love. (If that’s not the heart of motherhood, what is??) We’ve also been given a beauty from the Book of Revelation.... People associate that last book of the Bible with dire predictions about Armageddon and cosmic battles and other harrowing, mysterious, highly symbolic particulars about the end of the world. They may be so confused or frightened by all that, that they forget the Book of Revelation also includes lovely passages like the ones we’ve been hearing throughout this Easter season. Last week we heard a comforting, not-terrifying-at-all passage often read at funerals:

“God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes.  
Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more....”  
Revelation 21.3-4

This week’s snippet from Revelation may not be as familiar as that, but it’s just as magnificent, poetic, powerful. In its description of heaven **ahead**, it’s **heart-en-ing here**, as in making our hearts glad despite whatever sadness we feel, and in its description of heaven **then**

it's **en-courage-ing now**, as in making our hearts brave despite whatever makes us afraid. Listen again to the life-giving Word of the Lord:

I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night there.

Revelation 21.22-23, 25

Wonderful! But what's strange to me, and maybe to you, is that heaven is pictured as a **city**. Green pastures, maybe, or a fluffy cloud bank, but a **city**?? What spurred urban renewal was the **decay** of our cities.... There was a **reason** for the flight to the suburbs! But here the city is **not** used as a stand-in for pollution or prostitution or poverty but for **paradise**.

Why?? Because at its best the city is a **community**. At its best the city is where people realize they are interdependent on each other, because everyone's contribution is needed and welcomed. It's not like life on the farm where you **could** live in isolation from the world, producing your own food and clothes and shelter. In the city you **need** the tailor and the grocer and the carpenter and the plumber and the bookstore owner. We think of the city as anonymous, but the reality is, if you live in isolation, you die in the city, if not physically, then emotionally and spiritually. **Heaven**, on the other hand, is **community**, where, as someone has said,

“The beauty of life is not a solo but a symphony.”  
*Revelation, Interpretation Series*, p. 219

The heavenly city pictured in the Book of Revelation is heart-en-ing and en-courage-ing because it is **full of God's presence**, so much so that there is no need for a Temple, for a sanctuary of any kind to “house” God's presence: it's everywhere! With God's presence comes safety.... Therefore the gates of the city, meant for security, are never shut. There is no danger to wall out anymore. God and God's goodness are over all. “Its gates will never be shut by day – and there will be no night.” In St. John's Gospel, after Judas leaves the Last Supper to betray

Jesus, we read, “It was night.” Night is symbolic of evil, of the time when Satan holds sway. In the heavenly city there is no night. Satan is deposed. Evil is vanquished.

God’s presence means safety, here as well as there, now as well as later. The Queen’s visit was, of course, not the **only** news last week. A tornado devastated a small town in Kansas, to the point where street names had to be spraypainted on what was left of the roads, since no buildings were left standing by which even lifelong residents could get their bearings. When the town is rebuilt, all buildings will probably have cellars, because it is mostly folks without cellars who died in the two or three minutes that the tornado took to tear up houses by their roots and drop them like kindling on the ground.

A young mom and her infant were supposed to go to a neighbor’s house for shelter, because their own home had no basement. The neighbor who was expecting them grew worried because he knew the storm was going to hit in a couple minutes and the mother and baby had not arrived. He looked outside for them and had to retreat when flying debris began to hit him. He and his teenage daughter descended their cellar steps as the wind roared above them. He tearfully told her he was worried about their neighbors. She immediately said, “Pray, now.” They did. When the calm after the storm came, they hurried outside to find their friends, expecting the worst. They heard a cry from the rubble that had been their neighbor’s house, and began to dig in the debris. They uncovered the baby’s leg, and finally extracted him, miraculously safe and sound. His mother also survived....

The deaths and devastation in that town make it clear enough that this is not heaven on earth yet, but I for one don’t doubt that prayer summoned God’s presence and protected that mother and baby.

The heavenly city is **heart**-en-ing and **en-courage**-ing because it is full of God’s presence, shown by the ever-present light given off by God and the Lamb, and by the sight of the river-that-runs-through-it, the life-giving “river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing

from the throne of God and of the Lamb, through the middle of the street of the city.” It’s like heavenly amniotic fluid, continually nourishing new life. Heaven is not a freeze-frame of all motion; it’s the place where God makes all things new.... That river of the water of life flows from the throne of the Lamb there and from the baptismal font here. This weekend we wash Joshua Michael Greenspan in the waters of Holy Baptism. He will be awash in grace, flooded by God’s love, purified of all which is death-dealing and made an heir of all which is life-giving. The Lamb was sacrificed on the cross and from His side flowed water and blood when the centurion pierced Him with a lance. That, too, is the river of the water of life. For His death is life for us.

So many need healing in this world: mothers and fathers and children: everyone who **is** one, everyone who **has** one. Revelation says that in the heavenly city “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal,” is flanked on either side by the tree of life, bearing a different fruit every month,

“...and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.” Revelation 22.2

Our sharing in that healing comes now through Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. We don’t yet dwell in heaven, but we taste it: the joy and security of God’s presence summoned in prayer and channeled through Word and Sacrament, the light of Christ shining through faithful people, the waters of life flowing from the font, the healing we find in our imperfect but holy community, the Body of Christ. This day and every day, be **heart**-en-ed, be en-**courage**-d by this vision of paradise and by the glimpses we get of it daily. Amen