

Revelation 21:1-22:5

A city and a river

Christian Adam, from Meldorf in Germany once spent 5 hours and 9 minutes cycling 40 miles whilst playing the violin. Oh, and he was cycling backwards. Here's a photo of him doing it...

You'll probably be glad to know though that I don't have a photo of Barry Kirk doing his world record.

Barry, who has now changed his name by deed poll to Captain Beany is the holder of the world record for baked bean bathing, set in Wales in 1986 when he shared a bath with tens of thousands of baked beans for no less than 100 hours.

I don't know about you but my first thought when I hear about records like that is WHY?

Why would you do that?

What could possibly motivate someone to do something as utterly stupid, pointless and uncomfortable as spend 4 days of their life sitting in a tub of beans?

The answer, of course, is that people are willing to endure all sorts of discomfort and public humiliation for that great prize – an entry in the Guinness Book of Records – a book that many own but few ever read – except when they're looking for an opening illustration for a sermon!

If I came round with a roving microphone (don't worry I'm not going to!) and asked some of the Christians here this morning what keeps them going, what helps them endure when times are hard, I suspect that most of them would say it's the hope of heaven.

It is the prospect of eternity in heaven that is the most powerful motivator for Christians to live the Christian life, whatever persecution, hardship or suffering that life may bring.

The only problem with that is that the images most people seem to have of what eternity in heaven will be like are, frankly, so dull, that I can't imagine even wanting to go for a day trip let alone spend eternity there.

Revelation 22:16 however explicitly says that the vision of eternity presented in these verses is "for the churches" – it is designed to encourage Christians under pressure, like those who lived in the churches of ancient Turkey this letter was originally written to.

Our understanding of these chapters is meant to be an encouragement to every Christian to live the Christian life.

So in order to understand this passage and actually be motivated to live for Christ in a godless world we may well need to rid ourselves of some of our preconceptions of what eternity will be like. And we need to try and understand the images in this passage in the way John intended when he wrote them down.

And I think that if we understand Revelation 21 and 22 properly it will be a genuine encouragement to live the Christian life, even in the face of all the struggles of a messed up world. I know that it has been to me this week as I've looked at this passage in preparing for this morning.

The first thing that I think will help us understand these chapters is to recognise that, like any really good author at the end of a book, John ties together lots of the theme, ideas and images that we've seen throughout the whole of Revelation.

And, in fact, he brings together in these last two chapters of the Bible all sorts of really important ideas from throughout the whole of the Bible.

Some of the relevant references will appear on the screen as we go through – please don't spend the whole of my talk looking them up but if you want to write them down and chase them up in your own personal Bible study this week it will really help you see how Revelation fits in with the story line of the entire Bible.

Unfortunately for me that makes these chapters really difficult to split up into any sort of sections, because the images and ideas from the previous 20 chapters of Revelation and the previous 65 books of the Bible just keep piling up and running into one another.

I've had a go though and I think there are three things about God's future plans for his people, for every Christian in this room today, that John wants us to understand:

1 God will remake everything for his children (21:1-8)

Jeremy and I are off to Washington DC next week to spend a few days at Capitol Hill Baptist Church; we hope getting lots of ideas that might help us here at Christ Church.

As we fly off from Manchester airport on Thursday morning my principal fear is that I'll be really bored for about seven hours sitting in a cramped economy class seat.

But 2,000, or even 200 years ago the thought of crossing the Atlantic ocean would have been pretty terrifying for most people.

SLIDE:

If you go into the astonishingly beautiful entrance hall to the Port of Liverpool building down on the waterfront (and if you've never been you really should) you'll see that surrounding the massive central atrium are these words from Psalm 107:

"They that go down to the sea in ships that do business in great waters these see the works of the Lord and his wonders of the deep."

For the ancients the sea was a terrifying place. A place of uncontrollable forces. Of chaos and power.

You may remember from earlier in Revelation that one of two beasts that was opposed to God came out of the sea.

Well here in Revelation 21 we see that in the new heavens and the new earth there is no longer any sea.

That doesn't mean that when God recreates the world there won't physically be any sea.

What there will not be is what the sea stands for – chaos.

What there will be, v3, is God living amongst his people, so close that he reach out his hand and remove the last ever tears of sadness from their faces.

God will make everything new.

For pretty much all of us that will mean some fairly major career changes.

Because most of our skills will be utterly redundant when God makes the heavens and the earth new.

V4: there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

So in our own congregation Rob and Neil and Jeremy and Nick and Rosie and Hilary and Sarah and about half the rest of the congregation will no longer need their skills as

doctors because there won't be an sick people.

And Sarah and Kath won't need their nursing skills to sort out all the mess the doctors have made of their patients.

And Hazel won't have any X-rays to do because there won't be any broken bones.

And Nath won't be regenerating any run down areas of the new earth because there won't be any.

And Ngaire won't be catching any criminals because there'll be no need for a police force.

And Neil won't be doing any counselling.

And Rob and Matt and Pete and Ken and I won't be teaching the Bible because we'll be able to ask God any questions that we have about him face to face.

You see much of our experience of life is about managing and limiting the effects of sin.

That's one of the reasons it's so hard to get our heads around a world made new, where all of that has simply disappeared.

But that, astonishingly, is the future that God promises for his people.

It's so mind blowing that it is, in the end, impossible to get your head round it. But it's also so powerful that just to grasp a tiny glimpse of the perfect reality God has planned is sufficient to transform your life.

God will remake everything for his children. And that should hint to us that, whatever the difficulties of interpreting some of the images and concepts in the rest of this passage, eternity will be more like this world than I think we often tend to imagine.

God isn't inventing an entirely new sort of universe. He is making everything new.

God's plan for his people is more different to this world than we can ever imagine but it's also much more like this world than all those pictures of harps and clouds and pink fluffiness tend to suggest.

And the picture that God reveals to John of what it's like for God's people to live with him is that...

2 God's people are a perfect city (21:9-27)

Of all the bits of Revelation I think this is the one where people find it most difficult to get our heads around the images.

We tend to think of the city of God as a place where God's people live with him. And some of the images in this chapter do point us in that direction.

But actually the main way the images are used here is to tell us that God's people ARE the city.

Look at v9. The angel promises to show John "the Bride, the wife of the Lamb."

And the New Testament is really clear that the Bride of Christ is the church – not a building but God's own people. Those who love and trust Jesus Christ.

So the new Jerusalem described here is not primarily a place where Christians will live.

The new Jerusalem is us, together, Christian, the church, God's people.

And it's an awesome picture of God's people in two different ways.

Firstly if you take the whole thing all together it's just an overwhelmingly beautiful picture isn't it?

Everything in these verses shine and sparkles and gleams and glistens.

Everything is precious and perfect and awesome.

Everything is rare and yet abundant full of light and life.

Once you understand that this is a picture of God's people and how he views them and how he will make us you can't help but be struck with thankfulness and amazement at God's vision and his grace and the wonder of his plans.

He will make people like us into a city like that to bring himself honour and glory and praise.

But as well as the overall picture there are all sorts of fabulous details that speak of God's care and concern for his people.

We'll just run through a few of them. And as we do we need to remember that these images are not about a physical city in the future – they are about people.

a) 12 gates and 12 foundations (v12-14, 19-21)

This city is built on two things. On God's people of the Old Testament – the 12 tribes of Israel and on his people from the New Testament – all who believe the message of the apostles.

In other words the people in this city are all those who looked forward to Jesus throughout the Old Testament – Abraham, Moses, David and the rest of them – and all those who since the coming of Christ have put their trust in him.

And the 12 gates are distributed on all four sides of the city.

People will come from North and South and East and West through open gates into the city of God. That's another way of showing us what we already know from earlier in Revelation – the people from every tribe, every nation, every ethnic group speaking a multitude of languages will be included in God's people because of their faith in Jesus.

b) A measured 12,000 stadia.

If you've got some translations of the Bible it will say something in v16 like the city was 1,500 miles wide. That completely misses the point.

The first thing we need to know is that the city is measured. In other words God knows exactly how many people will be his forever.

That's shown to us by the dimensions too. You might remember that back in Revelation 7 the number 144,000 symbolically represented all of God's people.

Well here the wall is 144 cubits thick.

And it is 12,000 stadia long and wide – that's 144 million I think!

Everything about the dimensions of this city is designed to show is that it is all of God's people who will be with him forever.

Not one Christian in however many billion will be missing from God's perfect community.

You won't be left out. God has it all measured.

c) A perfect cube

The city is also 12,000 stadia high. In other words it is a perfect cube.

And as far as I'm aware there is only one other perfect cube in the whole of the Bible – the holy of holies. That was the innermost part of the Jewish temple where God himself had his presence.

Only one person, the high priest, could go in there once a year. When Jesus died the curtain that separated it from the rest of the temple was torn in two – anyone could now enter the presence of God.

Well in Revelation 21 the perfect cube is God's people. God will be perfectly, completely with all his people, forever.

And that means that there is no need for a temple (v22).

d) No temple

Read v22.

There's no special place in this city where God dwells. Because we already know from v3 that then the dwelling place of God will be with his people.

Wherever you go in eternity God will be perfectly and completely present. And you will be perfectly and completely aware of his presence all the time.

e) No sun or moon

Read v23.

Now if you're a physicist here you don't have to worry about what effect the sun and moon might have on gravity or anything like that.

The point of this isn't to say that there won't be any other physical bodies in the universe.

What John is saying is that the central source of illumination among God's people will be God himself. We won't be relying on anything else apart from his own presence.

f) Gates always open

The cities of the ancient world were shut at dusk to keep out those who might threaten the safety of the inhabitants.

But no-one will ever threaten the safety of this city – so its gates are open all the time.

The other side of death, if you are a Christian here this morning, there will be nothing to threaten your safety. In a sense that's already true – because if you are a Christian nothing

can take away from you the eternity that Jesus has won for you on the cross.

But then it will feel true. You will never feel insecure or doubting or worried or anxious ever again.

And that's just the start. This city won't just exist for a moment, or even for an age – because...

3 God's promise is eternal life (22:1-5)

Read 22:1-5

Everything in these verses is designed to point up contrasts between the world as we experience it at the moment and the reality of God's new world.

Some of the things here Christians already possess in part but then we will have what God promises in all its fullness.

There will be water. Living in a country which is either blessed or cursed, depending on your point of view, with abundant (some would say excessive) rain it's difficult for us to understand the life giving power of a river.

But in much of the world where there is no river there is little or no human life.

In God's remade world there will be abundant, perfect, continuous water.

And there will be a tree. Not just any old tree but a tree that hasn't been seen since the first man and women walked in the garden of Eden – the tree of life.

It will fruit continuously – there will never be any end to the life of God's new world.

This that there will be some specific place somewhere in God's recreated world with a big tree that every human being will have to visit regularly to get a bit of fruit to keep them going.

The tree is a symbol of the life that God gives to his people.

What this is all saying is that God's eternal, remade world is real.

I don't know if you've ever visited a ruined castle or church.

I used to be forced to go to hundreds by my mum and dad because it was usually a cheap afternoon out!

You can see that they were once amazing places. Imagine the height of the walls, the sound of choir or feasting. Think about how majestic it would have been.

But there are some aspects of it almost beyond imagination. The colours in the stained glass, the wall hangings, the furniture, the are.

Imagine if you could wave a magic wand and see it restored.

Well God doesn't need a wand but that is what he's going to do with this world that he made.

We live in a ruin. A shadow of the world God made spoiled by our sin and rebellion.

A world where the windows have been smashed in by famines and earthquakes.

Where the furniture and paintings have been looted by war, and disease.

But for everyone who recognises their responsibility for the spoiling of God's world and trusts in Jesus, God's solution for making all things new, God promises restoration.

In order to witness that restoration – of our world and of ourselves – to right relationship with the God who made us all God asks us to do is to endure.

To keep trusting in Jesus until he returns.

He promises, 22:20 that that day is coming soon. It was coming soon 2,000 years ago and it is coming soon today. Not too soon. God will not rush his great project of restoration. But not a moment too late either. At just the right time Jesus will return and John invites us to be asking Jesus to come back – Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

The prize that God offers us – his own presence and comfort is infinitely better than anything else you can imagine.

That should put all of life – its possession, joys, sorrows, achievements and ambitions into perspective.