

God's New City

Sixth Sunday of Easter

1st May 2016

Revelation 22:1-5



Following a nuclear holocaust, the world has become a desert wasteland. Civilization has collapsed. Survival is all that matters. It's most a horrifying, gloomy, disturbing scenario. In the wake of an ecological disaster and moral decadence, loner, Max joins forces with the mysterious Imperator Furiosa and a group of warrior women as they flee an evil despot across a sun-parched wasteland.

I am, off course, referring to the George Miller's amazing award-winning movie, Mad Max: Fury Road. Released last year, the movie is one of many in what is known as an "apocalyptic" genre. Such movies include The Terminator, Children of Men, 2012, The Planet of the Apes, Armageddon, The Book of Eli and many more.

"Apocalyptic" literally means to "unveil", "reveal" or "disclose knowledge". However, in popular culture it generally refers to a catastrophic event or events related to the end of the world.

Hence, in Terminator 2 a 21st Century computer named Skynet sends a virtually indestructible killing machine out to destroy the leader of the human resistance. Meanwhile, in Children of Men humankind faces extinction as the unexpected discovery of a lone pregnant woman leads to a desperate journey to defend her against destructive warring parties. And in the movie 2012, unprecedented solar storms wreak havoc as the earth's core heats up, becomes unstable and threatens the entire human race.

Stories about the end of the world send shivers up our spines. Indeed, there are branches of many religious traditions that exploit this kind of fear. I remember back in 1967, as a young

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bloke growing up on the Central Coast, being challenged to come forward and give my life to Christ because the current Six Day War in the Middle East was surely a sign that the world would soon come to an end and Jesus would return to gather up the faithful.

And into this mix comes the Book of Revelation.

It's one of the most difficult, complex and misunderstood books in the Bible. It's not bed time reading and we don't normally read it to our children. We rarely refer to it in our Sunday worship. This is because much of the book is a mixture of ferocious symbols and gory images with vicious creatures and bloody battle scenes. There are horsemen, dragons, beasts from the sea, lakes of burning fire, mouths filled with swords and vultures devouring dead bodies.

Yet, while Revelation is known for its rather bizarre contents, this book has had a profound impact. It is one of the most illustrated books of the Bible and is depicted in architecture, tapestries, paintings and altar pieces. Revelation features in literature and poetry with the works of Dante, John Bunyan, William Blake, T.S.Elliot, Charlotte Bronte and others all containing references to this last book of the Bible. Indeed Revelation has also influenced music including Handel's Messiah and Julia Ward Howe's Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Revelation tells of the "unveiling" of the end times and because of this Revelation can be obsessively read. Here people start to speculate on present historical events and try to link them with an unwise and somewhat irresponsible predictive reading of Revelation. Hence the "beast" in Revelation (Revelation 13) becomes Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, Ayatollah Khomeini or Osama Bin Laden. Links are also made to the rise of Nazism, Communism and now radical Islam as the forerunners to a world catastrophe and the consummation of time.

Revelation is scary. It's scary because the world really can be a spine-chilling place. Indeed, it's understandable that we become anxious about terror threats. Look at what happened in Parramatta last October as a Police staff person was shot dead in cold blood on the street.

It's easy to become worried about the possibility of another global economic crisis as we contemplate what happened to the world financial sector in 2008, of what is happening in Whyalla as Arrium Steel pulls out of the city and what is happening in Townsville as Queensland Nickel goes under.

And financial concerns continue as Australia's mortgage debt level reaches dangerous levels. A sharp rise in interest rates would be devastating. Meanwhile house prices are beyond the reach of many, particularly young families where only an estimated 4 per cent of homes on sale in Sydney are affordable for first home-buyers.

The scary nature of the world continues as we face a rise in extreme climate events. The past month of March was the warmest on record while authorities indicate additional warming of between 1 and 5 degrees centigrade for Australia by the end of the century.

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This will mean longer dry spells interspersed with periods of increased extreme rainfall. Droughts and bushfires will be more frequent while tropical cyclones will occur less often but with greater intensity. Across the globe rises in temperature will impact tragically particularly on vulnerable communities in places like the Philippines, Cambodia, India, Bangladesh and the Pacific Island nations.

But while Revelation prompts us to raise serious questions the text is actually unmistakably hopeful. It is unmistakably hopeful in terms of a future under the sovereign love and grace of God!

Revelation was written in the late first century in the form of a letter from John, a Christian who was exiled on the island of Patmos. John addressed this letter to the seven churches in a region we now know as Turkey, an area that was, in John's time, under Roman occupation.

Here many Christians were doing it tough because they refused to worship the emperor and were, therefore, considered to be disloyal or unpatriotic. They were subsequently imprisoned, tortured and even executed. Meanwhile, other Christians simply backed down by accommodating themselves to the prevailing religious and cultural rituals of the day. This came in an effort, out of fear, to evade intimidation, shun ostracism and avoid being deprived.

The twenty first and twenty second chapters of Revelation are important here. The context of John's writing is the overwhelming and overbearing power of the Roman Empire with its tyranny, violence and oppression. And in these final chapters of Revelation the churches are offered new hope as the "new Jerusalem" is revealed.

This "new Jerusalem" comes, according to John, "*down out of heaven from God*". It's not like the old city because there is no need for a temple. This is because God's presence permeates everything. Meanwhile, this is not a closed community for the gates of the city are permanently open to all nations and the gifts of creation are abundantly available to everyone.

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There is a “tree of life” planted on each side of a river or “the water of life,” producing leaves for the “healing of the nations”. Here there is kindness, justice, truth, grace, love and justice.

This is a spectacular vision as it concerns the in-breaking of God’s grace, healing and power within a community that is tormented and persecuted. Indeed, it’s the fulfilment of what we pray each week when we say: *“your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”*

Friends, this “new Jerusalem” speaks profoundly and eloquently about God’s abiding presence. It’s a promise, indeed, it’s an assurance that God will never abandon God’s people - no matter what. Moreover, this “new Jerusalem” offers a vision of what things look like when God is fully present to us. It’s a most magnificent vision where everyone has a place, where justice and peace reign and where love, mercy and compassion abound!

Jesus provides us with a glimpse of this during his earthly ministry when he offers his peace to the disciples and when he assures them they will not be left vulnerable or abandoned. For the “Advocate”, the “Paraclete” or the Holy Spirit will be given to them. And this is none other than the ongoing presence of the risen Lord Jesus himself.

These days, apocalyptic movies are all the go. And I must admit my favourite apocalyptic “feast” is played out in that long running television series, Game of Thrones. Here the “White Walkers”, a brutal, vicious mythological race with incredible powers, descend on civilization from the Arctic regions wiping everything out in their path.

For those of you who are into such stuff, Episode 8 in Season 5 offers, possibly, the most visually spectacular battle scene you will ever see on television as thousands of “White Walkers” come billowing down a mountain side to attack a fledging “Wilding” community.

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Now I hope you don't think I am some kind of maniac or narcissist! The truth of the matter is that I actually have a fascination for the heroes in Game of Thrones, especially inimitable John Snow, and their ways of circumventing or managing all the scheming, the treachery and the betrayal that dominates this popular television series.

And in all of this it's vital that we stop and hear the voice of Jesus who challenges the fear-mongering and who censures the violence with his words: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid"* for *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you....."*

And here we are urged to go on and read Revelation. In doing so, don't stop with the beasts, the dragons, the plagues and the lakes of fire - read on to chapter 21 and 22. For here we discover hope. Here we encounter assurance. Here we sight a future. And that hope, that assurance and that future is, in the midst of the turmoil and tragedy, gifted to each one of us by God.

Revelation presents this to us in the form of a radically new city, the "new Jerusalem". And we are invited, as a People of God, indeed, we are summoned as the church, to become residents of this new, vitally exciting community.

There are many images and there many ways of describing the church. Indeed, one way is to describe the church as an "ark". Here the church becomes a sanctuary, a place of peace and security, a place of protection from the turbulent, chaotic, threatening world outside.

Indeed, the main section of a church building is called the "nave" and this comes from the Latin "navis" meaning "ship". Hence, the church is a shelter, a refuge or a haven. Within its walls we can sail safely through the treacherous waters that surround us.

Another way of describing the church is as a lampstand. Revelation actually refers to this image on a number of occasions (eg. Revelation 1:20; 11:34) and here the Christian community becomes, not so much an object in itself, but a means by which others may know the way.



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Indeed, here the church is open, vulnerable and generous to the tumultuous, threatening world around it with the purpose of making a difference, with the intention of casting a light in the darkness and with the of basis of bearing witness to hope amidst the pessimism, fear and despair of the times.

In my reading of Revelation, this latter image of the church points profoundly and most accurately to the “new Jerusalem”, the new city of God. For this is a community, this is a church where real freedom, gracious acceptance, mutual respect, radical hospitality and extravagant generosity abound!

And isn't that what we are really on about?

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is not an illusionary thing. God's new city that offers hope for today and a vision for the future is no fantasy or make-believe. Rather, it is a gift. It is a bequest, it is an offering to us from God. And in acknowledging and embracing this truth we are called to rise above the cynicism, the duplicity, the despair, the hostility and the inhumanity of our times to be God's authentic, loving people.

In accepting this provision we are exhorted to cast our eyes above the doom and the gloom that surrounds us. We are urged to raise our sights above the defeats and failures that taunt us. We are spurred on to heighten our vision above the fears and threats that cast such a long shadow over us. And in doing so, we are invited to become residents of God's new city!

Which city do you live in? - the old with its measure of fear and despair? - or the new with its promise of hope and a future?

“Behold, I make all things new!” says the Lord. In this God calls us to take up residency in God's “new city”.

How do you respond?



John Barr