

# New Kilpatrick

Sermon

21st July 2019

Revelation 21:1-8

***Loving Spirit... in the words we use and the imaginations we have... may we meet you... and see ourselves and our community... are we are yet to be... May we live into the hope... the possibility these words bring... So be it... Amen***

I remember when I was a probationer minister... being asked to lead a discussion bible study group in the church where I was training... If you have been to such bible study / discussion groups... you'll know they can often be a bit twee... asking questions like... 'Why do you think the Levi crossed the road to avoid the beaten up man?'... 'How do you think the beaten up man felt when this happened?'...

They aren't questions that particularly stretch us... and don't offer much depth... So to begin a discussion on Revelation 21... a new heaven and new earth... which was the text I was given... I remember naively deciding to make a few naively controversial comments in order to provoke a deeper discussion... commented to all those sitting there... all of them at least three times my age... that I didn't think the idea of heaven was all that relevant...

To which someone quietly replied... "That's because you aren't as close to needing it to be relevant as we are!"... and I think it was me who learned more than night than anyone else...

Over the summer we are taking some of the big dilemmas of the faith and touching base with them... and the idea of immortality is this weeks dilemma...

But this morning the question will not be answered or resolved... because the honest answer is we don't know... we have belief... but no proof of what that future will be like...

But that belief about the future... shapes who we are now... Perhaps the bible offers us... a place to get to called heaven... but it offers us something more significant... less focused on a place to get to... more focussed on a way of being...

And Revelation is case in point... You can read this as a picture of what it is going to be like in heaven... or you can understand this as a book written to folk in the midst of

persecution... and these visions were offered to keep them true to the faith now... that the author knew... what we trust about the future... has a direct impact on how we live now...

And that is extraordinarily relevant for us today... with all the well rehearsed comments this week about populist racism, leadership elections and moon landings... in that context... what we believe about the future... shapes how we live and respond now...

When you consider what is on offer in the religious supermarket... and how we talk of salvation... and eternity... Much of what goes for religion... perhaps it always has... but especially in more recent times... is really well-disguised self-interest... We've tagged heaven on as a reward for belief... and it has become the focus...

I read somewhere... It is all quite selfish because faith becomes ultimately about a high premium fire insurance for the afterlife... when in actual fact... faith is about self-emptying love...

We are always in danger of selling religion as an insurance policy... I remember again when I was a student... on summer mission... We were a great team of folk... or so we thought... and twice a week... in the town of Forres in the North East... we performed street theatre... We did the most ridiculous sketches... but each one of them invited people to make a choice... we've got the secret to eternal life... come and join us and we'll share...

Not all of us believe the priority of faith is our own personal salvation... Many of us recognise that the more we prepare for our personal salvation... the less we care for others and the suffering of the planet... In many versions of Christianity... we've convinced ourselves... our own immortality is more important... which is simply self-centred... and that has skewed the Christian message... and allowed us to do a lot of damage... We have reduced the message of love down to our own needs and place in heaven...

Yet... Jesus talked far less about how to get to heaven than he did about how to live on earth... Where in the Bible did Jesus heal people for the next world?... He didn't...

He healed their *present* suffering... yet we have pushed the goal of Christian faith into the future... as Richard Rohr comments... making religion into a petty reward / punishment system inside a frame of retributive justice...

And if you remember last week... we chose to see God's justice as restorative...

And Richard Rohr goes on... Once Christianity became a simplistic win / lose morality contest... we lost most of the practical... transformative power of the Gospel for the individual and society...

What we believe about the future... shapes how we live now... and how we talk of immortality and heaven and the afterlife... shapes the kind of world we are either willing to transform for good... or let alone to be corrupted by those who have no optimism or good news for anyone other than their own salvation... and to me that is not just a religious faith question... but a question our society is responding too in its increasing liking of populism... it is a selfish road...

We have a choice... Will we engage this moment with kindness or with cruelty... Will we engage with love or with fear... with generosity or scarcity... with imagination or a heart that is embittered...

Two events this week illustrate this... the anniversary of the moon landing... and a series of comments about four US politician... If we choose kindness... love... generosity... and imagination... then we will discover in choosing that... the kingdom of God... we will be living out what salvation means... and what we imagine heaven is like...

If we chose narrowness... racism... fear... bitterness... then that is how we shape our future... and how we understand the struggle, the race and the narrowness of salvation...

These aren't irrelevant theological dances we are performing... These are existential realities... Heaven and hell are states of being... How we see the future... is how we play out the present...

If salvation is for the few... then we will see our world as dim and narrow... If salvation is for the breadth of humanity... then we will live more generously... If we see the narrow

gate as the entrance to heaven... for believers... of a particular kind... then narrow shall be our politics... where many people will be less than us... If heaven is more universal... filled with Samaritans and Syro-Phoenician woman women... then so will be our now...

In many ways... we chose the heaven we get...

Someone wise once said... "We can only embody heaven now... We cannot 'get there'... Love... is not so much an action that we do... but a reality that we are"...

Because heaven is not the goal of religion... Salvation isn't a reward... it is a way of living towards each other now... This is the message of Jesus... it is living so we free folk from that self-centred way of being in the world... and live more fully and freely in the world...

So the whole idea of immortality... and the future promise we believe in is vital in our world... If we believe any future is about wholeness with and in God... a completeness with love... then we will live towards than now... which is what the world needs now... and that transforms us and our society... and when we live like that now... what happens next... no longer needs to be the focus or concern of our faith...