

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

Sermon at the Eucharist on the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts. 16. 9-15; Revelation 21.10, 22 - 22.5; St John 14.23-29

YOU may have noticed by now (and if you haven't, it's late in the day for me to point it out) that the readings at the Eucharist on the Sundays of the Easter season conform to a pattern. The first reading is not from the Old Testament, but from the Acts of the Apostles. The second reading is from the Book of Revelation. And the gospel reading is from St John. The Acts of the Apostles show us the power of the risen Lord Jesus animating and enlarging the company of believers, and the news of his resurrection spreading from place to place. The Book of Revelation shows us St John's vision of the risen Lord Jesus in the glory of heaven. St John's is the gospel to which the Church always turns to mark the great moments of the Christian Year. In St John's Gospel we see Jesus in his earthly life, but a life back-lit by the power and glory of the resurrection to come. Acts, Revelation, and John are all Easter books.

And so, turning to this morning's readings in particular, we see Paul and his companions at the pivotal moment of moving from the continent of Asia to the continent of Europe. We see St John's vision of the risen Lord in the heavenly Jerusalem. And we hear the Lord on the night before his death speaking to his disciples about the power of the Spirit which will be theirs when he has risen from the dead. In all three readings we see an interplay between earth and heaven; between the things visible and the things invisible of which we speak in the Creed. If I were to give this sermon a title it would be the not wholly original *A Tale of Two Cities*: the life of the earthly city, and the life of the heavenly Jerusalem.

In The Acts of the Apostles, Paul and his companions are in Troas on the Aegean coast of what we now call Turkey, not far from ancient Troy; and a vision summons them to cross over to Greece where they eventually find their way to Philippi. Paul is not travelling on a whim, nor is he following some missionary strategy of his own devising; he is responsive to the Spirit and directed by a heavenly vision.

In the Book of Revelation, the heavenly vision fills the whole book, for here we see, as it were, the centre of operations; the Lord is on his throne of glory, and the nations of the earth, distracted, conflicted, divided, are all the same moving towards a heavenly climax.

And in St John's Gospel, we hear the Lord quietly conversing with his disciples on the night of his passion, and telling them that they belong to two worlds (two cities, he might have said): this world in which they will find no peace, and their true home in their Father's presence, where the only true peace is to be found.

Now there are two ways of telling this biblical tale of two cities. One is to say that because the invisible city, the heavenly Jerusalem, the Father's home, is *there*, the visible city, the life of this world, is of no importance. Christians have sometimes talked like that, but I don't find that message in the Bible. The other way of telling the tale of two cities is to say that because the heavenly city is *there*, the earthly city is *all the more* significant. Because God created both the heavens and the earth, what belongs to this world matters to God, and should matter to us; as Christians we have earthly obligations – to our city, to our country, to our world. Our heavenly obligations, our duty to God, reinforces all the more strongly those earthly obligations.

Jesus, we are told in the gospels, wept over Jerusalem. Not the heavenly Jerusalem, but the earthly, historic Jerusalem. You do not weep over something you do not care about; and Jesus cared deeply about the fate of Jerusalem. It's a model, a pattern, for the intense, even tearful concern that as Christians we should have for the fate of our city, the fate of our country, the fate of our world. We should do all we can to bring good news to our earthly city – just as Jesus longed to bring good news to Jerusalem; just as Paul and his companions longed to bring good news to Troas, and Thessalonica, and Philippi.

We belong to two cities. Paul reflected on this in the letter he later wrote, interestingly enough, to the Christians in Philippi. If we read on in the Acts of the Apostles, we find that Paul's visit to Philippi resulted in a riot, a beating, and an imprisonment for Paul and Silas; the overnight conversion of the gaoler, and their release the following morning. Paul and Silas left Philippi, but they also left the seeds of a community of disciples, to whom Paul later wrote the epistle of that name. And in that letter, Paul reflects on belonging to two cities. 'Our citizenship' he writes, 'is in heaven; and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ'. 'Our citizenship is in heaven'. That's sounds like one city, not two; until we remember something quite particular about Philippi. It is mentioned in this morning's reading from Acts. Philippi is described as 'a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a *Roman colony*'. What was a colony in the Roman empire? It was a settlement, somewhere away from Rome, where Roman veterans were given houses and land, and

where, crucially, they retained their rights as Roman citizens. It was Augustus Caesar who made the Greek city of Philippi a Roman colony; which meant that the veterans who were settled in Philippi, and their descendants, could say, with pride, ‘Our citizenship is in Rome’. We may live in Philippi, in Greece, but we are Romans. And this is exactly what Paul says in his letter to the Christians in Philippi. ‘Our citizenship’, he says, ‘is in heaven’. That is who we are – heavenly citizens, and we look to heaven for our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. But we only make the point about our heavenly citizenship, because our actual place of residence is elsewhere, in the earthly city. Just as the Philippians would only make the point about being Roman citizens, because they lived elsewhere – in Philippi. So in our tale of two cities we live in the earthly city, and we love it, and care for it, and weep over it, and long for its welfare – rightly so; but all along we are citizens of another place, the heavenly Jerusalem.

I began by saying that if this sermon had a title, it would be *A Tale of Two Cities*. Those of you who know Charles Dickens’ novel of that name may have spotted a different reason for calling it that. There is a phrase in the novel that plays an important part in the plot, and also provides a commentary on some of the characters and their destinies. The phrase is this: *recalled to life*. It is the cryptic message sent to England to announce that an innocent man, long imprisoned in the Bastille, has been released. It also sheds light on the lives of other characters who, in different ways, find redemption, new life, new hope, new purpose. The novel is a tale of two cities because it is set in London and Paris; but it is also, like this morning’s readings, a tale of life in the cities of this earth, and life in the ‘far, far better’ place to which some at least of the characters aspire.

It is a coincidence (but a happy one) that the phrase *recalled to life* occurs in this morning’s collect:

God our redeemer,
you have delivered us
from the power of darkness
and brought us into the kingdom of your Son:
grant, that as by his death
he has *recalled us to life*,
so by his continual presence in us
he may raise us to eternal joy.

In the Acts of the Apostles, we saw Paul and his companions, recalled to life by the risen Jesus, spreading the good news of his resurrection. In the Book of Revelation, we

caught a glimpse of the heavenly Jerusalem filled with those holy souls recalled to life by the risen Jesus. In St John's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the peace not of this world, which is promised to those whom he recalls to life. And for us, who also are recalled to life by the resurrection of Jesus, we serve our two cities – the earthly city of our present lives, with all its spiritual and moral obligations, its sorrows and its joys – and the heavenly city from which our ultimate citizenship is derived. It is for the service of our two cities - for this world, and for the world to come – that we are recalled to life.

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