

Lent V Passion Sunday 2018

In the first three weeks of Lent, Fr William and I reflected on Christ's Temptations in the Wilderness – reflections on materialism, with the challenge to change stones into bread, on pride and invulnerability with the second temptation and on the pursuit of power when on the mountain the Devil offered Christ sovereignty over all things if only He would bow down and worship him.

And we have tried to ask what the temptations would have meant for His ministry and the character of His Messiahship if He had given into them and how His ministry clearly refuted them. How are His temptations our own?

Last Sunday we reflected on Jerusalem, as the physical city in Palestine, the goal of Jesus' ministry, and what it meant to the Jews of Jesus' day and of what it might mean to us as Christians now, and of the sense of a place made holy by the presence of God. What makes space sacred, we asked?

Today we turn to the heavenly Jerusalem, heavenly Salem. What is to gain for us in the hereafter? How might we find our journey's end? What awaits us?

Shakespeare, of course, has it that 'Journeys end in lovers' meeting', a quotation untimely ripped from Twelfth Night to provide RC Sheriff with a title for his compelling anti-war drama of 1928. We might well think that in God we come to meet our Lover at the last.

A long-standing friend of mine has just published a book called Waiting for the last bus. In his reflections on life and death which some of you may have heard as a series of lunchtime essays read on BBC Radio 4 last year, Bishop Richard Holloway explores what it means to die, offering the wisdom of his own years and the poetry of others to explore sensitively and subtly the last taboo.

He writes especially well of *anamnesis*, the Greek word that means not just an act of remembrance, in the way that the Last Supper is memorialised by what we do at every eucharist, but also is about how memory shapes and forms the present. We can call to mind, as we speak it, such that we can experience, those whom we have loved and we can stumble across a memory; a signature on a flyleaf of a book we haven't opened for years, a phrase from a song or chord of music that we chanced hearing and that comes flooding back to us.

Three times in the Gospel Jesus commends us, commands us even, to remember. 'Do this in remembrance of me', the priests say at the altar as the broken bread and wine outpoured are sanctified.

And when the unnamed woman wipes his feet with her hair in the house of Simon the leper He commends that the act will be made known throughout time in her honour; ‘Truly I tell you wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her’ (Matthew xxvi, 6-13).

Perhaps we can think usefully of the heavenly Jerusalem as a palace of memory. Jesus in his own teaching is clear that the realm is one of habitation. ‘In my father’s house there are many mansions’ (John xiv, 2). Jesus tells his disciples that He goes ahead of them to prepare a place for them. Many religious communities, founded around a shared common table but with individual cells, or in the Carthusian tradition each in his own little house, might help us to picture this sort of existence.

For Jesus is very clear what the life to come holds for us. In Matthew’s Gospel in particular, written with a Jewish audience very much in earshot, Jesus repeatedly offers the image of the heavenly banquet as the place of our encounter with God. We are brought to the presence and are fed.

And for the writer of the last book of the Bible, The Revelation to St John, the vision of the heavenly city is one of the most spell-binding evocations of a walled city with its gates and towers, gleaming with so many jewels to suggest a blinding light beyond all our realities (Revelation xxi).

Both pick up on the prophecy of Ezekiel, accorded to him in the year 3372; the new Jerusalem, *Jehovah-shammah*, is where God is, a city centred on the rebuilt Temple, the so-called Third temple that is the capital of the Messianic kingdom where the Twelve tribes of Israel gather, each with a gate named for them (Ezekiel xlvi, 30 -35). Ezekiel offers a town-planners’ guide in eight chapters of his book (40 – 48), taken up by Zechariah ii, 4 – 5, and then overlaid with the Christian inheritance of the Apostles in the penultimate chapter of the Revelation to St John.

So not for us the paradise of the Elsyian fields, an seductive image from the East, but rather the harder reality of being city dwellers at the last, housed and fed but no doubt with all or some of the day to day irritations that can come with urban living. Rural communities can appeal to us with nostalgia although their livelihoods are often so much less secure than our own. We who live in one of the greatest cities of our world might do well to use this week of Passiontide to prepare ourselves to be dwellers in that eternal city, the heavenly Jerusalem.