

The New Creation
Sermon on Revelation 21:1-8
By Bishop Walter F. Klaiber

The theme of this Oxford Institute is “New Creation”. In this service we want to share something of our thoughts and insights with you as a local congregation; but as members of the Institute we also want to listen to the words of the Scriptures, to realize what God wants to tell us.

We have heard already two biblical texts which are crucial to our theme “New Creation”. Let us now listen to a third one, maybe the most important of all texts which deal with this theme.

Let us listen to Revelation 21,1-8. Apocalyptic visions boom. Movies like “Apocalypse Now” and “Armageddon” attract the masses. But also more subtle classics like Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” seem to be more current than ever.

Here is a vision of a totally different nature: it is a vision of God. After all the threatening images of a totalitarian empire of evil and of its final defeat through Christ’s victory the stage of the drama of the universe opens now for a totally different scene which shows: Who is God.

Therefore in the first part of this sermon we will look at:

I. God’s vision for his creation

It is difficult to fathom in a few minutes the depths of the insights of this vision. Let us just look at three basic images of it:

1. The new heaven and the new earth – the universal horizon of the new creation and also the radical nature of it: The first heaven and the first earth have passed away. God’s new creation is a totally new beginning. It is not only the renovation or reconstruction of some damaged parts of the old – no, it is a new creation.

There is only one detail given which illustrates this: The sea is no more. Some of us may regret this, because we like to dive or to surf. But this shows the very nature of the vision. It is not a topographical map of a recreational paradise God will provide: everybody in a cottage on a mountain with a view of the ocean and easy access to the beach.

This vision describes nothing other than the impact of God’s immediate presence in the world. Therefore there is no longer a place for the sea as a symbol for the powers of chaos and evil which were only restrained by the first creation but still endanger the life of all that has been created.

The earth is no longer a place of exile, estrangement, pain and death. The new earth is the place where people live with God, it is the place of pure life and perfect peace.

There is a second image:

2. The new Jerusalem, the city of God, the human face of the new creation. The city of God coming from heaven is a symbol for the fact that God’s new world is a safe place, a place for community and social interaction. God’s new creation is habitable – and it is habitable because God dwells in his city: “See the home of God is among human beings. He will dwell with them as their God!”

The Greek text has a lot of allusions to other passages in the Old and the New Testament.

It speaks literally of the tent of God who camps among his people. This reminds us of the tabernacle, the tent of meeting: God's presence with his people marching through the wilderness. And it reminds us of the promises of the prophets who said that God will dwell in a new way with his people. And it alludes to John 1:14. The word became flesh and lived (literally: camped) among us.

God is with his people – not only with the chosen ones: all peoples will be his. God is with his people – not only in a tabernacle or temple protected by a wall and boundaries but with them as a father or mother with their children, comforting and caring especially for those who need it most.

He will wipe away every tear – people do not have to parade in front of the victorious God; he will touch their faces, heal the wounded, be with the victims. And because there is no longer separation from God there is no more death. The sting which poisons life is removed – no mourning, no crying, no pain. The first things have passed away – a world marked by suffering and death.

But new creation is more than the absence of evil: new creation is the presence of God and therefore life, joy and shalom i.e. peace.

3. The third image shows: God is in charge, it is his divine authority which holds the new creation.

See I am making all things new – that is the core message of the Book of Revelation. It is done! – that answers the “it is finished” of Golgatha.

The Lamb that was slaughtered is worthy to receive power! The one who solved the problem of guilt will solve also the problem of power! He who spoke the first word: “Let it be” speaks now the last word: “It is done!”

And the last word is not the end, but open's the door for real life. Real life is what people long for. And God's answer to the basic needs finds again a very moving expression: to the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life. Wiping away the tears means healing the past. Feeding those who thirst and hunger for real life means caring for the future.

People thirst for real life, thirst for the living God – whether they know it or not. Water of life – symbol of fulfilment of the genuine delight to be well and alive. The spring of the water of life is nobody other than God himself – God in Jesus through the Spirit: God gives himself – that is water of life.

God gives himself – as a gift – literally: free of charge! You do not have to pay, indeed you cannot pay. It is free because life is grace!

This may make us suspicious – not openly – we know grace is free for all. But maybe unconsciously because: What costs nothing is worth nothing!

Whoever grants me something must want something – order your free copy now!

Only what I can buy is really mine! We are so quick to say: “No, no, I can pay for it.”

But God's way is different: Only what is given to me is really mine. I think that is an insight into human relationships and into God's wisdom. The crucial question is: Are those who are thirsty open for the water of life free of charge or do they want to buy their own drinks and drugs?

II. We must speak in the second part of this sermon about

The human response to God's creation.

We must now deal with the last part of our text, especially the last verse which may cause problems to most of us.

I have to confess, normally I would have omitted reading this passage. It seems to disturb, even to destroy, the wonderful vision. Are not all included?

Is there still a place for a lake that burns with fire and sulphur in God's new creation?

But I remembered one of the last verses of the book of Revelation:

If anyone takes away from the words of the book this prophecy, God will take away this person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city! (Rev 22).

Although I am not frightened too much by this threat I thought we should try to understand how - or even whether - these words belong to the vision of God's new creation.

Obviously they want to tell us: This is not just a cheap happy ending, the superficial promise:

"Everything will be okay – you 're fine just the way you are!"

There are attitudes and actions which are incompatible with God's new creation because they are incompatible with life.

In this "catalogue of vices" we hear about vices which are thought to be typical of a pagan world: murder, fornication, idolatry – actions of people who want to save their lives at the expense of others – taking away what others need for life or even killing them; violating their dignity or trying to manipulate the powers which reign the world.

But obviously in this context this is not said in order that we may be able to mark those outside for the last judgement. It is a warning to the church. The vices which are added are the vices of those who see themselves inside. The dangers which threaten the church are: cowardice – we compromise to be accepted and undisturbed; unfaithfulness – we don't really trust God; hypocrisy and untruth: What we live is not what we say!

It is not necessary to look at the great scandals in the history of the church, par example at the failure of the church in Nazi-Germany, to see the truth of this warning. It is the everyday life of the church which is spoiled by cowardice, unfaithfulness and hypocrisy. I have to confess this even as a bishop!

And the really threatening question is: Are we so entangled in such behaviour that we also live at the expense of others, destroying their lives and their dignity? And are we so attached to these vices that our lives are part of them and therefore belong to the reign of death which has to be annihilated?

What would be the alternative? The Book of Revelation says:

Those who conquer will inherit these things and I will be their God and they will be my children! Who are those who conquer? The heroes of piety and mercy and self-denial? The prayer warriors and victorious soldiers of evangelistic crusades?

Many of us will remember that each of the letters to the Seven Churches closes with a phrase: to the one who conquers I will give ...

Who are those? Not necessarily those who "have a name of being alive", not necessarily those who speak so often about our "great church", but those who keep the word and do not deny the name of Jesus, although they have but little power. They are those who open their empty hands to receive and to be kept by his hand; those who let go of what seems to be their pride and may turn out to be their ruin, those who are ready to receive free of charge what God alone can give them: his love and new life.

III. In the last part of this sermon I want to summarize what we have heard speaking about the nature of new creation.

What kind of reality do we ascribe to the new creation in the future or even now?

Let me first answer with two negative statements:

- New creation is not what we achieve. We are not to create the new creation. The city of God and the new Jerusalem is not the church elevated to heaven by the joint efforts of all well-meaning Christians. And this is important because it has always been extremely dangerous when people think they should create paradise or establish the Kingdom of God. They often thought that in this case the end justifies the means, and this has always been disastrous – whether it was done by either the church or non-Christian Marxists. “A brave new world” may only be fiction, but it is so close to reality!

- New creation is not only an improved copy of the old one which God will put at our disposal when we have spoiled it. Last year Michael Schumacher crashed his Ferrari and it turned out that the spare racing car he got instead was much better than the old one. There are Christian people who seem to think that this world is meant for immediate consumption because God has a spare one. But in a biblical perspective it may turn out that those who know about a new creation are much better prepared to care for the old one because they know about its hidden purpose. To know about God’s new creation just saves us from all escapism and helps us to share with the present suffering of so many.

New creation is neither a program or the final strategy of the church nor is it a miraculous parallel universe which God will put in place when the old one is worn out; new creation is the presence of God in its ultimate fulfilment!

Therefore Paul can say: If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation (II Cor 5:17). Because, whoever is in Christ lives in the loving presence of God! He or she realizes: this is my God! The God who loves me, who died for me, who blesses the poor, who calls the weary and wipes away the tears! But he is not only my God, he also the God of my neighbours, even the God of my enemies. Therefore Paul says not only: If anyone is in Christ there is a new creature, a newly created person, which says: “I am saved and this is enough.” No. There is a new creation – a reality of love and life which goes beyond my own existence and experience, including others and also pointing to a fulfilment which goes beyond what we can experience now. But here, where people are in Christ, new creation begins. It begins when tears are wiped off and faces are touched - faces which even may no longer be able to weep. In Sierra Leone we saw faces which seemed to have wept all their tears and were now almost petrified. New creation will occur when God also touches these faces. New creation is where people no longer are only numbers or figures in the statistics which tell them: you are too many, you are too old, there are too many immigrants, you are superfluous. New creation starts wherever people have faces and names.

New creation begins wherever the church becomes a safe place for those who suffer, for the poor and for those who were hurt, even if by the church!

New creation begins wherever we hear the groaning of the old creation, longing for fulfilment and sighing for help

New creation begins wherever the presence of God is so overwhelmingly real that we no longer need the old boundary markers of our Christian or denominational identity so that they are only useful signposts for the reality of the presence of God, and people are included in God’s love which we would never have dreamt of.