

St. Paul's May 6, 2007  
A reflection on Acts 11:1-18, Rev. 21:1-6, and John 13:31-35  
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**“I SEE A NEW HEAVEN AND A NEW EARTH”**

For some Sundays, the assigned readings don't appear to hang together much but this is not one of them. This Sunday we have from John the Divine's Revelation a retelling of the creation story but a retelling in the form of a future vision of creation. A vision of what the kingdom of God will be like. In the Acts of the Apostles Peter shares his vision that this re-creation will be for all humanity and not only for the elect few, and finally, in John's Gospel Jesus tells us how we will know when this new creation has become a reality. Jesus says that it will become real when we have love for one another, when we love one another as he has loved us. Well I could stop there and make this a very short reflection. I've already given away the punch line. But...

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth and the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Gen 1:1). The Hebrew text of Genesis is more specific and more evocative because it says that the earth was chaos (*tohu vavohu*) and the waters were submerged chaos; lovely metaphors for the entirely unknown and unknowable. The Spirit of God then molds and forms this chaos to establish the order of all things, light and dark, the passage of time, all living creatures, and finally humankind. God saw that it was good and dwelt with humankind in this creation in perfect communion, God walked with them in this Garden. Well we know the story from there. Humankind could not maintain this communion with God. If we could summarize most of the rest of the Bible it might be that it is the story of how God and humanity struggle to reconcile their relationship, to re-establish this vision of perfect communion that was in the beginning.

John shares his vision of this longed for future with us; “I saw a new heaven and new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no more sea.” There was no more sea because in this future all things will be revealed there will be no more “*tohu vavohu*,” no more hidden unknowable chaos. Just as God first created the Garden for humanity, John now sees Jerusalem, the Holy city, as the center of this new creation. He sees it coming down from heaven, established by God, “as a bride adorned for her husband.” The bride here is the Church who had her beginnings in Jerusalem. It is the teachings of the church that will inform and guide this new creation. Just as in the Garden, God will dwell with humanity in this future, God will dwell with humanity and the people shall be God's people, “and God himself shall be with them and be their God.” “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” John envisions nothing less than the re-establishment of that perfect communion that was between God and humanity at the first creation. He envisions this future as the living out of what St. Athanasius wrote about the potential of humanity. He writes, “He made them after his own image giving

them a portion even of the power of His own Word; so that having as it were a kind of reflection of the Word, and being made rational, they might be able to abide ever in blessedness, living the true life which belongs to the saints in paradise.”<sup>1</sup> I am the alpha and the omega the beginning, the first creation, and the end, the new heaven and the new earth.

In our reading from Acts Peter is being chastised by his Jewish followers for eating with the uncircumcised, the gentiles. He then tells them of the vision that he had. In his vision he recoils at being told to eat of ritually unclean animals, food that was forbidden by Jewish dietary laws. He says, “By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth.” The voice from heaven responds by saying, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane.” We know that Peter gets the message because when he’s called to minister to a gentile family he doesn’t hesitate but says, “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us,” between Jew and gentile. The inclusiveness of God’s vision is driven home when Peter meets with them; “And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning.” His Jewish followers now also realize that, “God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.” Peter’s vision in Acts assures us that this future, this vision of the new heaven and the new earth, is to apply to all humanity, not only those that dwell in Jerusalem.

Well these are all visions of an inclusive and wonderful future for humanity but yet we struggle, we look at the reality of our world and we realize that we are far from John’s new heaven and new earth. We are far from a place and a time where “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more,” the first things are far from passed away. What is it that will lead us to realizing this vision of the future? Our brother Jesus tells us. He tells us that this future will be realized when we love one another as he has loved us. How many times have we heard this? It sounds so simple, perhaps even simplistic; that we are in danger of not understanding the depth of what God calls us to. In our English translations of the Christian Testament we use a single word for love. In the original Greek there are many words for love. There is *philia* or brotherly love, there is *storge*, or affection within families, there is *eros*, for passionate and sensual longing, and then there is *agape*, the self sacrificing love given to both friend and enemy. It is this *agape* that we are called to when Christ says that we are to love one another. It’s not merely brotherly love or affection or sexual attraction that we are called to. It is not enough to love those who love us, those who will reciprocate, those who are like we are. It is a call to difficult and messy love. It is a call to love those who hate us, those who will not reciprocate or will respond in anger or violence, those who are wholly other than us. This love leaves us nowhere to hide, if we have not this love, we have nothing we are “sounding brass” or a “tinkling cymbal.” St. Paul says, This love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

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<sup>1</sup> Dei Incarnatione 3.3 [St. Athanasius de Incarnatione -Athanasius on The Incarnation. – translated by A. Robertson (Long Acre, London, 1911) 108 pages.

[This] Love [this *agape*] never ends.” St. Augustine in his tractate on the Gospel of John says: “Strong as death is love, for by this love it comes to pass that, dwelling in this still corruptible body, we die to this world and our life is hidden with Christ in God, nay rather, love itself is our death to the world and our life with God. For if death occurs when the soul goes out of the body, how is it not death when our love goes out of the world? Therefore strong as Death is love. What is stronger than that by which the world is conquered.”<sup>2</sup>

So John’s new heaven and new earth, his vision of the universal future of a re-created humankind depends on this agape love that our brother Jesus lived out among us even to death on the Cross. It is this love that never ends, that transcends death, this love that bears all things, which will banish pain and sorrow, this love that hopes all things that will empower us to see and live toward this new heaven and this new earth. Let us live out this love, thanks be to God.

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<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine. Tractate 65 on the Gospel of John. *In: Late Have I Loved Thee – Selected writings of St. Augustine on Love*. J.F. Thornton and S.B Varenne [Eds.] (Vintage Books, New York; 2006) p. 288.