

Revelation 4

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, 'Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.' At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne! And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald. Around the throne are twenty-four thrones, and seated on the thrones are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads. Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn eleven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God; and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal.

Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle. And the four living creatures, each of them with six wings, are full of eyes all around and inside. Day and night without ceasing they sing,

*'Holy, holy, holy,
the Lord God the Almighty,
who was and is and is to come.'*

And whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the one who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall before the one who is seated on the throne and worship the one who lives for ever

*and ever; they cast their crowns before the throne, singing,
'You are worthy, or Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they existed and were created.'*

Luke 19: 11-28

As they were listening to this, Jesus went on to tell a parable, because he was near Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately. So he said, 'A noblemen went to a distant country to get royal power for himself and then return. He summoned ten of his slaves, and gave them ten pounds, and said to them, 'Do business with these until I come back.' But the citizens of his country hated him and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We do not want this man to rule over us.' When he returned, having received royal power, he ordered these slaves, to whom he had given the money, to be summoned so that he might find out what they had gained by trading. The first came forward and said, 'Lord, your pound has made ten more pounds.' He said to him, 'Well done, good slave! Because you have been trustworthy in a very small thing, take charge of ten cities.' Then the second came, saying, 'Lord, your pound has made five pounds.' He said to him, 'And you, rule over five cities.' Then the other came, saying, 'Lord, here is your pound. I wrapped it up in a piece of cloth, for I was afraid of you, because you are a harsh man; you take what you did not deposit, and reap what you did not sow.' He said to him, 'I will judge you by your own words, you wicked slave! You knew,

did you, that I was a harsh man, taking what I did not deposit and reaping what I did not sow? Why then did you not put my money into the bank? Then when I returned, I could have collected it with interest.’ He said to the bystanders, ‘Take the pound from him and give it to the one who has ten pounds.’ (And they said to him, ‘Lord, he has ten pounds.’) ‘I tell you, to all those who have, more will be given; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. But as for these enemies of mine who do not want me to be king over them – bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.’

After Jesus said this, he went on ahead, going up to Jerusalem.

First, let me apologise for the length of the two readings set for this morning. There is a lot to take in, and each is quite complex in its own way. I suggest it might help to read them again at your leisure, either in your Bible or on the church website, where they prefix this morning’s sermon.

So, what is your idea of heaven? Is it a place where you meet again all those loved ones who have gone before? Is it somewhere which reflects your favourite place here on earth – rolling hills, lush fields, calm seas, a beautiful garden or woodland? Perhaps it is somewhere where you can enjoy your favourite pastime – for ever!

In our first reading from the book of Revelation, the writer is describing his idea of heaven, filling it with rich jewels, with God seated on a throne, surrounded by those worthy of being in his presence. There is immense power, represented

by thunder and lightning and strange creatures. And, of course, there are hymns of praise, sung day and night without ceasing. You no doubt recognise the words, sung in our church on many occasions – when we are allowed to sing, that is!

Incidentally, the four creatures who are singing have been assigned by Christian tradition as symbols of the four Gospel writers : the human face, or angel, represents Matthew, the lion, Mark, the ox, Luke and the eagle, John. You will sometimes find these symbols in churches – and if you have the opportunity to look at the Book of Gospels which we have become accustomed to processing in church before Covid, you will see these symbols on the front.

There is no mention here of the many souls who have passed from this life. The writer is there in spirit witnessing the magnificence of heaven. However the idea of judgement, a time of deciding who can enter heaven is one which has exercised the imagination of many down the centuries, and the decision of where souls should go - to heaven or to hell has been depicted in many ways. The church in the village of Fairford in Gloucestershire contains some of the most beautiful Mediaeval stained glass in the country. The huge West window depicts judgement day, with the angels escorting the 'righteous' to eternal bliss while the devils enthusiastically poke the 'sinners' with their pitchforks, sending them to eternal torment. In an age when most people were illiterate this was a timely warning to parishioners to behave, or else!

Our Gospel reading also contains a parable concerned with how we should behave. The nobleman who leaves for a

foreign country gives strict instructions to ten of his slaves to 'Do business' with the pound given to each one of them. It is clear that they are intended to make money – a bit like working on the stock exchange! So the one who simply wrapped the pound in a cloth was ignoring his master's instruction and deserved to lose the money with which he had been entrusted. You will notice in this version it is not the slave who is punished by being cast into outer darkness, as in Matthew's version of the parable of the talents, but the master's enemies 'who do not want him to be king'. It is also clear at the beginning of this reading that those listening to Jesus were expecting the kingdom of God to appear immediately, 'because Jesus was near Jerusalem,' so this parable has something to say about who is fit to enter the kingdom – the one who obeys the master and does what is required.

This reminds me of a verse from the prophet Micah, perhaps the best way to conclude:

And what does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?

Amen