

What is our church life like here at Penshurst during a typical week? I usually come to the office around 6:30 in the morning. I feel clever early in the morning, so I get up early to work on my sermons. Bart comes between 8:30 and 9. During the day we talk about sermons and issues, sharing our thoughts. I often borrow books from him, and every time he says: “ Don’t lose them”. I leave at about 4:30, Bart stays till late. We usually have different meetings in the evenings. Tuesday morning we have English class here. Friday night is for the youth group. I think you have different cell groups and prayer meetings that are all run at different times of the week and at different places. The gardener comes every now and then. Garbage bins are emptied on Tuesday morning. Some of you go to work during the week; some of

you stay at home looking after children, and teenagers go to school. But Sunday is the best time of the week, because we all come back here as a family. This place is filled with people, bustling with noise and excitement. It's no wonder why on Monday morning Bart and I always feel a bit empty and lost. This is our church routine. It's nice, it's simple, we are comfortable. However, this is not what the Apostle John has seen in his vision: when he sees the church, he sees a new heaven and a new earth, and he sees that we are the new Jerusalem. Let's pray, that the Holy Spirit will help us to share John's vision and fully understand God's word to us. Father, thank you for the scripture, open our hearts so we can understand your word, in Jesus' name, Amen.

The book of Revelation was written during the reign of Domitian, in about AD81-96. The apostle John would have been in his eighties. He was exiled to the island of Patmos. His readers were on the brink of trouble at the time he wrote. There were three basic problems faced by John and his readers. Firstly, the Jewish synagogues, in comparison with the churches, were both well-established and well-connected. They regarded the rapidly growing Christian movement as a dividing and heretical cult. The Jewish communities may have earned the name “synagogue of Satan” because they reported the identity of Christians to the government authorities. Secondly, the churches were troubled by various false teachings. And life for Gentile converts living in the pagan world of that time was always difficult. A multitude of gods

were worshiped in temples of the Greco-Roman world. Mysterious religions from the East promising healing and immortality flourished in the cities and towns of the empire. Desire to control events and other people led to the wide spread practice of magic. A whole range of sexual practices including temple prostitution and homosexuality were accepted as normal. Christians were subjected to daily conflict. The situation for Christians in Asia had worsened. The Roman governors had increasingly participated in rituals for local deities. The Emperor Domitian had decided that he should be called “Lord and God”. As reports came to John on Patmos, he probably discerned that in a very short time, life for Christians would become very painful indeed. History has proved John’s prophecy to have been correct.

From the time he wrote and for the next 200 years the Roman state and the Christians were locked in mortal combat. 200 years, you think about it, that's a long period of persecution of churches. Thousands of Christians died as martyrs for Jesus. There is a mood of impending crisis running through John's book: 1.3 he says: "The time is short". 2.10....the devil is about to throw some of you into prison. 3.10...the hour of trial is coming on the whole earth. Then 12.12....woe to you , O earth....the devil has come down to you in great wrath. If you think of the policies in the last century of Stalin and Hitler towards Christians, you'll see that John's prophecy has been confirmed in its accuracy many times over. John's prophecy is correct in a much broader sense as well. Down to our own time Christians have suffered from

discrimination because of their religious views. Some of you have suffered for standing up and speaking up for Jesus in the workplace. We don't have that many pagan temples in Australia, but we are surrounded by a complex mixture of values: individualism, materialism, consumerism, secularism and hedonism. We suffer from struggling with all these "isms" in our daily life.

Out of these desperate situations and crises, however, John saw a new heaven and a new earth. In the closing chapters of Isaiah, which was written almost 800 years before the writing of the Revelation, God promised that he would create a new heaven and a new earth, which would remain before him forever (Isa 65:17). But what is this heaven we are talking about? Last year, one day I was working in my office, the

receptionist rang me, saying : A lady is waiting downstairs, who would like to speak to a minister. So I went down, saw this lady. She looked very upset. She told me that her mother passed away a few months ago, and because she was overseas at that time, she was not able to be with her mother while she was on her deathbed, and she missed the whole thing including the funeral. She also explained that she was not a Christian but her mother was a Christian. Now she was missing her mother so much, and her concern was, “Where had her mother gone?” Basically she wanted to know whether her mother was in heaven. I said to her that since her mother believed in Jesus, I was 100% sure that she was in heaven now. Then you could tell from her face that she was relieved and comforted. Then she said: “Oh, I don’t

think my mum can play the harp.” Too often heaven is looked on as a vague, though happy, realm of formless spirit existence. We may laugh at some cartoon representations showing people with haloes, wings on their backs, harps in hand, and standing in clouds.

Unfortunately this is close to many Christian’s conception of heaven. The Old Testament view of heaven, and the historical person of Jesus Christ, who took upon himself our humanity, are telling us that heaven is God’s dwelling among his people. In the fourth Gospel, John writes that the word became flesh and dwelled among men so that they saw his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father (John 1:14). Interestingly, Marxists and secular humanists also believe in a new age, but one that arises out of, and in continuity with the existing

order. Therefore communists start violent revolutions; humanists on the other hand, wait for a peaceful evolution. But what John sees in his vision, is not a new order created by human beings. John sees a totally brand new heaven and earth initiated by God himself. This description of a new heaven and a new earth is to emphasize the glorious reality of God dwelling among his people. He has given us a new life, He has signed a new contract, a new covenant, that is superior to and replaces the old. John says that in the new earth there is to be no more sea.----- So what does this mean? No more walking along the beach? No more surfing or fishing? No, no, that's not the idea. In the mind of John, it is Isaiah 57:20, which describes evil as a tossing sea that cannot rest, whose waters toss up mire and dirt. John

must also know Daniel 7:3, which talks about beasts from the sea. In Job 41:1-13, the great beast of the sea seems to symbolize Satan. Back in Revelation 13:1, it is out of the sea that the beast who blasphemed God and made war on the saints had arisen. The sea in the mind of Ancient people is the great dark unknown from which evil comes. John says here in the new creation not only evil, but also the habitat of evil and the environment of evil will be no more. Anything that is about evil God will get rid off.

John's vision gives us the wide-angle view of the new heaven and earth. Now verse 2 seems to focus in on the holy city, a new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven. Why is it a city? I think living in modern Australia we possibly have lost the identity of city and the marks of

city lives. In Ancient time, a city was a closed community. Cities were often walled for security, with gates that were opened during the day and closed at night. And city life was an important element of Ancient society. In the context of the prosperity and the political unity of the Roman Empire, John sees a magnificent city descending from heaven. It is not constructed by human hands, it is not designed with human wisdom, it is God's gift from heaven. It is not secured with walls and gates, but with God's sovereignty. Now, what is the city of Jerusalem? Matthew 5:14 which we just read, says that **we** are the city, a city that is built on a hill for prominence, so we will be noticed and we shine light upon the rest of the world. Interestingly, this church happens to be on a hill, sort of. But the city on a hill in Matthew 5 is

the symbol of the ideal of perfect community, which is a family. We all know the story of the old Jerusalem, one of the oldest cities in the world, the habitat of God's people—the Israelites. During its long history, Jerusalem has been destroyed twice, besieged 23 times, attacked 52 times, and captured and recaptured 44 times. Today, the city of Jerusalem is called the holiest city in the world, but it is absolutely chaotic there because of the political and religious conflicts. Here in John's vision the new Jerusalem will never again be conquered by foreign nations. The city is not only peaceful and beautiful, but it is seen as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. Why is this holy city, this new Jerusalem likened to a bride? The answer is given in verse 3, *I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's*

dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. So this new Jerusalem is a city because God will dwell there and it seems to be likened to a bride because God will be in marriage covenant with his people who live with him there.

Now in John's vision he sees that holy city, the new Jerusalem and it is not a temporary dwelling place. God's dwelling in his church is permanent, it's forever, it's eternal. It's a city.

And so, in verse 4 John now describes the benefits that come to God's people when God dwells among us. God's presence guarantees that there will be no more sin and evil, and the effects of sin and evil like sorrow, death, mourning and pain are all part of the old order of

things, which are now past and gone. They belong to a previous order which has now become history. This fulfills what Isaiah prophesized in Isaiah 25:8, “He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.” It fulfills Isaiah 35:10, “Sorrow and sighing shall flee away”, and Isaiah 65:19, “no more shall be heard in it the sound of weeping and the cry of distress.”

Friends, we remember that John was in his exile, the church was about to confront the persecution of 200 years, and John saw this vision, a vision that went beyond those churches at Asian minor during his time. He saw the new heaven, the new earth and he saw the new Jerusalem, the city on a hill which shines brilliantly for the world to see, that is us. And this is not a delusion! I am

hoping that one day Wendy will gracefully buy me a Harley Davidson. But I understand that hope without fulfillment is a delusion. Yes I understand that. But Christian hope is not a delusion for its first fruits have already been revealed in history, two thousands years ago in the resurrection of Jesus. Our church is the long awaited new Jerusalem descending from heaven to earth. And although our church life is simple, we are being made new as God changes us by his glory for this world. We may be living in a period of tension, suffering and conflict just like in the days of John, but we are the city on a hill for people around us. We are the new Jerusalem for this suburb. And we are called to wipe tears from other people's eyes, to offer a Gospel that brings comfort to their mourning and pain.

Pray: Father thank you for your son Jesus, who died and was resurrected for us, now we have you dwelling among us. Thank you for your creation of new heaven and new earth, thank you for bringing us to the new Jerusalem. Now we are being made into a city on hill. Thank you Lord Jesus. Amen.

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