



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**24 May 2020: Matins Sermon**

**The Sunday after Ascension**

**Isaiah 65:17–end, Revelation 21:1–8**

**The Revd Canon Graham Ward, Regius Professor of Divinity**

**‘The Visionary’**

It’s a fine, clear day in Israel. It’s the tail-end of winter and Jerusalem is built on a hill among other hills. The winds have been bitter, but today the winds have subsided and the sky is postcard blue and cloudless, the temperature rising. I have been leading a group of church-goers and students on a pilgrimage of the country. For some of the elderly, in their eighties, this is the last and only time they will be here – and they have lived with this place in their imaginations for decades. But they’re a sprightly and determined bunch. The coach dropped us off at the foot of the garden of Gethsemane and we have walked up the steep incline to reach a luxury hotel on the top of the Mount of Olives, which has a panoramic view over the old city. There among the camels waiting for a photo opp we stand, breathless, and gaze down over the ancient Jewish necropolis to the honey-coloured Crusader walls, the ornate Golden Gate (now blocked-up) through which the Messiah is expected to come, the Temple Mount and the brilliant cupola of the Dome of the Rock. Here is the place where Abraham is supposed to have offered up Isaac, where Jesus walked the Via Dolorosa from the Praetorium to the cross, and where the prophet Mohammed stepped off on his Night Journey to the heavens, returning on a white, winged horse. This is one of the most photographed views in the world over a city ravaged by wars and factions, pockmarked from bullets and shell-fire. But from up here it’s just a glorious spectacle of a human, deeply religious, desire; a vision of hope and beauty. In the necropolis, the bodies of venerable Jewish figures rest, waiting for the Messiah’s return and their resurrection.

All this comes back to me when I read the New Testament lesson appointed for this morning from the Revelation of John, the Divine. And what more could be needed in a time of turbulence when many of us are still in some form of lockdown, and around the world the virus is taking more lives, requiring long stays in hospital, long periods of debilitating recovery? This country – and we are not alone - has known death and

bereavement, weeping and loss, on a wartime scale, and this is a passage frequently read at funeral services. “And God, shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death; neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” The vision is of a vast generosity, a vast consolation, and a consummation of all living things in divine love. The vision of the new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down from heaven like a bride adorned is not a vision of Christian triumphalism, but of a great celebration, an expansive wedding feast. For “Behold,” God says, “I make all things new.” How we long for all things to be made new, especially in a time when the virus may be receding here, but its aftermath remains a dreadful prospect. There’s a verse in the *Book of Proverbs*, chapter 29, verse 19: “Without a vision the people perish.” Why do they perish? Because the visionary enlarges our imaginations. He or she gives us glimpses of the impossible possible. They lift our eyes from the ordinary to the magnificent; from the soul-destroying to the soul-inspiring. And to be inspired is to live and breathe freely. The visionary generates new thought, new imaginative connections, new levels of ingenuity: things never seen before, experienced before, which transform all our seeing and experiencing. Poets and prophets, architects and musicians, painters and sculptors are each, in their own way, the fashioners of visions. They are the dreamers of dreams, and they give expression to the deepest and most enduring of our human longings. Civilisations have been sustained by the quality of their visions. The Dome of the Rock is built upon the Temple of Solomon, and the Temple of Solomon (existing now only in Biblical accounts) is the inspiration behind all our great basilicas and Cathedrals: St. Peter’s in Rome, Chartres in Normandy, Ely, Durham and even our own little gem here at Christ Church. The builders of Babel may have wished to make a name for themselves, but true vision transcends who we are and what we want. It aspires to express our immortal longings. Caught between the angels and the animals we don’t quite know where we are most of the time. But the visionary names our desire.

John is commanded: “Write,” God tells him, “for these words are true and faithful.” Faithful to what? To the divinity that is written into all things by God, the Creator of all things; God in whom we live and move and have our being. The stone, the glass, the wood, the metals, the fabrics that compose our cathedral come into their own truth and faithfulness in giving expression of the God who transforms, the God who “makes all things new.” We come to know these material things for what they are and what they were made for; to glorify God as “the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end”. Without their visionary transfiguration we would perish. We would shrivel inside,

overwhelmed by the chances and changes of a living that is so much less than our desires. Our imaginations would be eaten away with the death and disease, the labouring and the making ends meet; and sometimes ends just don't meet. We move from coping to despair. "He that overcometh shall inherit all things," John is told. And the visionary, inspired by the Spirit of God, leads us into seeing creation in Christ; what we might be, how we might live – how we will live.

I doubt any of us who walked up the Mount of Olives and stood in the late winter sunlight staring down at the old city of Jerusalem, will forget that panorama. We laboured uphill to get there. Some laboured more than others. But when we arrived, there was no memory of the labouring. We persevere. Fortitude is a Christian virtue forged in hardship. As Christians we don't escape hardship; nor the pain of bearing witness to the hardships endured by other people. But the hardship is not the full story; the hardship is not where it ends. And the visionary keeps us from perishing; keeps us alive. "And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away."

### **Revelation 21:1–8**

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*'See, the home of God is among mortals.*

*He will dwell with them;*

*they will be his peoples,*

*and God himself will be with them;*

*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.'*

*And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a*

*gift from the spring of the water of life. Those who conquer will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my children. But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death.'*