

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
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Proper 16, Year C

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From Hebrews: You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The three readings this morning do not have much to do with each other. I thought I'd take on the second reading from Hebrews and see where it takes us. The book of Hebrews is not a letter. There is no greeting at the beginning nor closing at the ending. It is rather a discourse, perhaps used as a way to educate those preparing to be baptized. Its audience seems to be Jews and those who are familiar with the Torah and the sacrificial cult of Judaism. The unknown author uses the sacrificial cult as a metaphor to speak about how our sins are all removed by Jesus. In today's reading we are nearing the end of the discourse. He or she contrasts two mountains. One is Mt. Sinai where the law was given and that is surrounded by clouds and fire. It is dangerous, and the people were forbidden from getting too close to it. We are not going there, but to another mountain, Mt. Zion. *"You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant."* This is similar to several passages in the book of Revelation. Chapter 21 of that book starts, *"Then I saw a new heaven and 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, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as bride adorned for her husband."* Back in chapter 5 of Revelation we read, *"Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriad of myriads, and thousand of*

thousands.” These are visions or images of our future. This City is where we are headed. This is Jerusalem the Golden. And by the way this is what our new South window will depict.

The point of this imagery is what is called The Christian Hope. This is a particular part of systematic theology and one about which little is said these days. So let us consider this theme of Christian hope for a bit. First contrast the beginning of the human journey and its end as the Bible depicts it. We start in a garden, with one solitary human being, then two and then we mess it up and are kicked out. The Bible ends, not with a return to Eden, but with our entering a city. We start as solitary and we end in a community, a rich and unending web of relationships. We are headed to a place where there is no limit to the love we can give and receive. In fact praise itself works better in community. In the Greek of the text of Hebrews, when it speaks “innumerable angels in festal gathering”, festal gathering is πανηγύρει (panegyrei.) meaning a gathering of everyone. Our word, “panegyric,” means an oration of praise given at such a gathering.” In other words our praise is better when we do it all together.

This topic of the Christian Hope is worth considering as hope itself is a virtue that we are called to practice. And we can practice hope by considering what we are actually hoping for. Please take out the red Prayer books and turn to page 861. This is the last topic covered in the Catechism. (The Catechism, like the book of Hebrews, is designed to help prepare people for baptism.) Let’s read this together; I will read the questions and we will all read the answers out loud.

Q. What is the Christian hope?

A. The Christian hope is to live with confidence in newness and fullness of life, and to await the coming of Christ in glory, and the completion of God’s purpose for the world.

- Q. What do we mean by the coming of Christ in glory?
- A. By the coming of Christ in glory, we mean that Christ will come, not in weakness but in power, and will make all things new.
- Q. What do we mean by heaven and hell?
- A. By heaven, we mean eternal life in our enjoyment of God; by hell, we mean eternal death in our rejection of God.
- Q. Why do we pray for the dead?
- A. We pray for them, because we still hold them in our love, and because we trust that in God's presence those who have chosen to serve him will grow in his love, until they see him as he is.
- Q. What do we mean by the last judgment?
- A. We believe that Christ will come in glory and judge the living and the dead.
- Q. What do we mean by the resurrection of the body?
- A. We mean that God will raise us from death in the fullness of our being, that we may live with Christ in the communion of the saints.
- Q. What is the communion of saints?
- A. The communion of saints is the whole family of God, the living and the dead, those whom we love and those whom we hurt, bound together in Christ by sacrament, prayer, and praise.

Q. What do we mean by everlasting life?

A. By everlasting life, we mean a new existence, in which we are united with all the people of God, in the joy of fully knowing and loving God and each other.

Q. What, then, is our assurance as Christians?

A. Our assurance as Christians is that nothing, not even death, shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Now I will be the first to concede that several of these answers raise more questions that are not addressed. Nevertheless, it gives us something to start with. And certainly the last four are very encouraging. So when life gets dark or hard, remember this hope. God makes all things new.

It is this vision of our ultimate destiny that has let us to ask our glass makers to use image of the heavenly Jerusalem as the theme for our new south window. When it is there, it will always remind us that the end of our story is a great party, a community, and more love than we can imagine. That is our hope.