

Revelation and its River

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When I was 20 years of age, I heard Nelson Mandela speak at a prayer service for the people of South Africa. It was one of the most moving occasions that I can recall because it was the first time I realized how truly inspiring it is to meet someone who is sustained by hope. Sustained by a vision of what might be.

It was also the first time that the book of Revelation meant anything to me at all.

As a university student, I sat up all night, just months beforehand, to watch Nelson Mandela's release from prison. I have always been drawn to people with the courage of their convictions, especially when it leads to personal sacrifice. As we all know, Mandela spent 27 years in prison for his convictions.

The service of prayer was in Sydney's St Mary's Cathedral. I am still surprised that I was there at all. I was a decidedly un-prayerful person then. Yet I am very glad something drew me in.

The book of Revelation became special for me from that day forward because the reading offered during the service contained the following verses from Revelation 21:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away... And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... And the city has no need of sun or

*moon to shine on it, for the glory of the Lord is its' light
... Then the angel showed me the river of the water of
life, flowing from the throne of God ... On either side ...
was the tree of life... and the leaves of the tree are for
the healing of the nations.*

The service was deeply moving. Beautiful hymns were raised. An African choir sang with an emotion that took people's breath away. Magnificent prayers were offered.

Yet I had been given ears to hear only the words of Nelson Mandela and the writer we know as John, a prisoner on the Island of Patmos, who was not far from death at the time he wrote.

John had a great vision of what God's new creation might come to be, in God's own good time. And he knew, as did Mandela, that holding fast to your dreams is the way to endure all hardship.

I sat below the grand windows and arches of St Mary's. I looked up at Mandela. I listened to his courage and his hope. I heard his words of faith. Then I heard John's vision of a world made new. I heard all these words not only with my ears. I truly heard them somewhere deeper than that.

A holy city with a life-giving river, which brings healing for us, and healing for the nations.

For the first time, I knew that I was a Christian – and not for any of the reasons that I expected. I was overwhelmed by the realisation that it is through the power of hope that God draws and saves. And does so now. God's transforming power is the

river of life and it is a river of hope, flowing into our lives from the throne of God. Healing for us. Healing for the nations. God is the hope and salvation of the nations.

John, the author of Revelation, knows that human language is incapable of expressing the reality of eternal things. Yet, rather than be paralysed by the finitude of human existence, he is set free by his inspired imagination to portray the wonder of the Gospel in a masterpiece of hope. In the end, we will meet the beginning.

The idea of a heavenly Jerusalem that would become the ultimate home of the people of God is not an original one. John is not just a visionary. He has, in fact, gathered the wisdom of many others. Like a number of Christian authors before him and beside him, such as the writers of Galatians, Philippians and Hebrews, this idea of a heavenly city was already present to John in the apocalyptic tradition of Jewish thought. 'Apocalyptic' being a form of writing that sought to paint word-pictures of what hope looks like.

And this is where the real inspiration lies.

In John's vision God says, 'See, I am making all things new' (21: 5) and so we note that God does not say, I am making 'all new things'. God cares for *this world* and seeks to transform and renew it. It will not be replaced by a 'new' world. At the end of our hoping, we find the renewal of all that is here and now. This world is not dispensable.

And John gives very moving expression to the Christian conviction that in the end we meet, not an event, but God. In the end, there is no temple, because there is no longer need for a

special place or special time to encounter transcendence. In the end, there is God. God will be all in all.

I once thought of these visions as day-dreaming and Christianity as a puff of smoke. Now I think these visions, and the hope they inspire, are more important than anything else in all the Scriptures.

Revelation and its River brought an end to my adjustment to what is, and were the genesis of my decision to live for what might be. Hope is the way God stirs hearts. As we ruminate upon rivers, we recall God's river of hope, which brings healing for us, and healing for the nations.