

## Evensong Easter 6A (10 May) 2026

### Towards the City of God

**Psalm 87, Zechariah 8:1-13; Revelation 21:22-22:5**

So, tonight we have two readings and a psalm, all concerned with the City of God. To those who know that much of my theological research centres on Augustine's magisterial book called the *City of God*, I feel I need to be clear: I did not rig the Lectionary! What we have here this evening is a number of meditations on the ideal community – which isn't an isolated hut on a desert island or out in the bush somewhere, but a city. Both the readings in fact deal with our aspirations for the ideal city.

The prophet Zechariah describes God dwelling in the midst of Jerusalem, God living with God's people. Jerusalem was the centre of Israel's worship, and the place of pilgrimage for all the people – but the city had been overrun, its Temple destroyed, and its leading citizens carted off into Exile. Here, though, is a picture of a better life, when the pains and sorrows of the past will be over, when people have returned from Exile and Jerusalem is being rebuilt. And what will this life be like? Picture, for a moment, a public park in the middle of the city, when old men and women are sitting basking in the sun with their walkers around them, when children are playing safely in the streets. Grapevines are yielding fruit, vegetables are growing all over the place, and bountiful crops are being gathered in. It's a vision of peace and plenty, of a people blessed by God and living together with God.

We get the same thing in Revelation – a book, remember, written to believers in actual, named cities. It's here that Augustine's image of two very different cities, the City of God and the Earthly City, is most explicit. Jerusalem – the new Jerusalem – symbolises the City of God, the final fulfilment of the hope in which all God's people share. Here is a picture of the ideal city, the realisation of all human dreams for their community. And it's an outward-facing community: "the nations" – that's jargon for "outsiders", those originally not part of the people of God – are streaming in, and the leaves of the tree of life "are for the healing of the nations." It's peace and plenty again. This is how it will be: this is "happy ever after" – and the end of the world will be a city, the City of God. This might seem paradoxical for those who instinctively spiritualise "heaven" – but that's where we hope we're heading.

This is where, at the end, life comes full circle. For Augustine, humanity is social by nature: we were created to live as part of a community. At a deep level we are all kindred, because of our common creation in the image of God, and so we seek out community. We do, don't we. In essence, Augustine's *City of God* is an extended reflection on good and bad community. Good community, life in the City of God, is life as it was meant to be lived – in relationship with God and with other human beings. Living well means living well with others; unbridled individualism doesn't belong in a good community. Bad community isn't like this. Life in the Earthly City can be so unpleasant, and that's because a community which isn't centred on God can be one where people are focused on themselves, rather than on others; a life shaped by self-love rather than love of God and neighbour. We know what that looks like, don't we; we see it on the news every day. Many of us have probably found ourselves in communities like that – in schools, workplaces, sports teams. Some communities leave scars.

That's not how it's meant to be. Revelation is the final book in the Bible and it's a series of pictures of how the world as we know it will end and how a new heaven and a new earth will come about. Spoiler alert: goodness – the goodness that is God – wins in the end, and in the end is life in the City of God. In Augustine's famous phrase "the life of the saints is social" but crucially this is a life lived in relationship with God, it's human community with the divine. We're called to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves.

And we're called to worship. That's the picture at the end of Revelation: the throne of God, and of Jesus the Lamb of God, in the middle of the City, and of God's servants at worship. It's Zechariah's theme too: worship flows from the fact that God dwells with God's people. Just as we were created to be in relationship with God, we were created to worship. Worship – and especially worshipping together – is foundational to living a Christian life. We really can't be Christians on our own. And it's worship that enables us to become more fully the people we were meant to be from the beginning. That's why the Church needs to make sure creating and sustaining relationship with God really matters, for us as a community and for us as individuals within it. It's in relation to God that we are human, and as we relate to God, as we consistently and consciously choose God and God's way, we become a truer version of ourselves. How are we doing at that?

What we love matters. We're defined by what we love, and that determines the sort of community we are. Augustine reckons that if we want to observe the character of a particular people, the way to do this is to look at what they love. The City of God is created by the love of God, and those in it serve one another in love. In the Earthly City, on the other hand, people are busy trying to dominate one another. So here's the thing: when people observe the Church in action, what do they see? Can they discern communities shaped by a common love of God and a mutual love for one another – or do they see something else? What about our community, here in this parish – what does this say about us?

The invitation of tonight is to think about these things. There's no pat answer, and there's certainly no magic wand I can wave to transform us or transport us instantly into the City of God – we'll have to wait until the end of the world for that to happen. Until then we're on a kind of pilgrimage through this world, journeying together with one another and helping each other on the way. And the thing about understanding life on earth as a pilgrimage is that both the journey and the destination are important. We must always remember that we journey towards God and we journey together with God, towards that place of which we can say, "Glorious things are spoken of you, O City of God."

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