

## Tears in Heaven

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, on the fifth Sunday of Easter, May 14, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Acts 11:1-8; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35.

**IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.**

St. John, in his Revelation, saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more. He saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And he heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "The home of God is among men and women. God will dwell with them as their God. 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.

I believe that if we want to understand the Revelation of St. John we need to look at great art. We need to listen to great music. I've read many scholarly and academic commentaries on the Revelation of St. John but I've never read a commentary that enabled me to get the feel of what John saw in his vision. Then I listened to a song by Eric Clapton. Yes - I thought - that's it. That captures what John saw. That captures John's hope.

Some of you've heard of Eric Clapton. For those who don't, I'll tell you a little about him. Clapton is a guitarist - maybe the greatest. If you go back to the sixties - Clapton played with some of the greatest rock groups ever - the Yardbirds, Cream, Blind Faith. When he played, some people held up blasphemous signs declaring "Clapton is God". But Clapton was a wounded god. He was wounded by the death of some of his closest friends - Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and others.

He became involved in a painful relationship with George Harrison's wife that led to a divorce. Eric and she got married and then divorced. He tried to get rid of his pain through alcohol. He became an alcoholic. He got hooked on Cocaine. He almost killed himself. It took him years of painful struggle and broken marriages to get unhooked from drugs and alcohol but, somehow, he managed.

Four years ago, at the age of 45, he was faced with the greatest loss and tragedy of his life. In March of 1991, Clapton's four year old son, Conor, fell to his death from the window of the Manhattan apartment tower where he was staying with his mother. The boy had been playing. He'd been running in the apartment and ran right through a window and fell - he fell 53 stories to his death. Since that day Clapton has dealt with his grief by turning to religion, by attending therapy session, by attending Alcoholics Anonymous, and by writing music.

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A year after his son's death, Clapton appeared on MTV's "Unplugged". Andrew taped it so we could view it later. Before one of his songs, Clapton spoke of his grief at the loss of his son. He said, I'm moved by "the sympathy I get from people who come up to me." He said, "I wouldn't want to insult [my audience] by not including them in my grief." Then he began to sing and play a song. The song obviously refers to his son.

I wish you could hear it. Maybe you have heard it. It's a beautiful ballad. If you have heard it, maybe you'll hear it in your memory when I read the words. This is how it goes:

Would you know my name  
If I saw you in heaven?  
Would it be the same

If I saw you in heaven?  
I must be strong and carry on,  
'cause I know I don't belong here in heaven.

Would you hold my hand  
If I saw you in heaven?  
Would you help me stand  
If I saw you in heaven?

I'll find the way,  
Through night and day,  
'Cause I know I just can't stay here in heaven.

Time can bring you down,  
Time can bend your knee,  
Time can break the heart -  
Have you begging "please", begging "please".  
Beyond the door  
There's peace I'm sure.  
And I know there'll be no more tears in heaven.

St. John answers "yes" to each one of those questions. In the vision St. John sees, the Lord is there. He knows our name. He takes our hand. He helps us stand.

St. John lived in a world gone wrong. John had seen friends and loved ones die. Some died of old age. Many were tortured to death - burned, beheaded, crucified. John had seen so much heart-break - so much death. He had shed so many tears. He himself had been stripped of his freedom - banished to the lonely island of Patmos. But God gave him a vision. That vision has sustained Christians for nearly 2000 years.

That vision of a new heaven and earth has enabled men and women and young people to stand fast in the face of persecution and temptation. We think of the persecution of Christians taking place back in the time of the Roman Empire. But there've been more men and women who've died for the cause of Christ in this twentieth century than any other century. Fifty years ago this month, Dietrich

Bonhoeffer, a German Christian who opposed Hitler, went to the gallows and died. Last year we saw the bodies of hundreds of Rwandan Christians slaughtered before the altar in their parish church. Millions of men and women have died for Christ rather than deny their faith. They died for Christ because they really believed - they hoped for a new heaven and earth. They really believed that God is alive. They really believed that the One who came to them in Jesus Christ will one day make his home among us. He will dwell with us. We will be his people. He will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

What is heaven like? John says that heaven is like a city "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." Heaven is like a city where God lives. Heaven is like a city where Jesus walks the streets. A clean city. A safe city. No boarded up buildings. No bullies standing on the street corners. No drug pushers in the alleys. No people sleeping on heating grates. Heaven is a place where no child is abused, forgotten, malnourished, unwanted. Red and Yellow, Black and White men and women and children living at peace with one another. And whatever else heaven is, heaven is where God dwells with us.

Heaven, according to John, is not in some never-never land. The holy city, the new Jerusalem, comes down out of heaven from God - comes down to earth - an earth that's been purified and refined and made new. Think about what we pray in the Lord's Prayer. We don't pray, "Take us to your kingdom in heaven." No - we pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." That's

what we Christians have been praying for for 2000 years. We pray from heaven to come down to earth.

And we believe the new heaven and earth has already begun. There are still tears. There is still crying and pain and mourning and death. But the new heaven and earth has already begun. It began that night Jesus was born in the city of Bethlehem. It began when God himself, incarnate in that Child, drew near to us and made his home among us. It began when Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus. It began when he said, "Arise little girl" to the lifeless body of a little girl and she got up alive. It began when he touched the casket of the son of the Widow of Nain and raise him to new life. It began when he took the little children in his arms and blessed them. The new heaven and new earth began when Jesus died on a cross and was raised by his Father and became the victor over all the evil and violence, all the ugliness and death that haunt our lives.

We know in Jesus Christ that John's vision will finally be fulfilled. God will dwell in the midst of us, as our Ruler and Father. God himself will wipe every tear from our eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

*"O Lord, thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven." Amen.*