

New Testament Poems and Proclamations 5: The Shining City

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In the New Testament there are three divine descents, each of which is a vision of a fair and just society on Earth:

- Jesus the divine Word come down Earth to announce the imminent reign of God, which is good news for the poor and hungry.
- Paul's vision of a new humanity 'in Christ', as one body with one spirit, all sharing the same bread.
- The beautiful city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven to Earth.

That vision is in Revelation, the last book of the Bible:

I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, dressed as a bride for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying:

'See the home of God is among humans.
He will dwell with them.:
They will be his people
And God himself will be with them;
He will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'
(21:2-4).

It is the marriage of heaven and Earth, the divine and human, 'God with us'. We can think of heaven as the realm of the imagination, which can only be realised by us: the divine vision 'come down, embodied, become human'
(Council of Nicaea 325).

This final chapter of Revelation goes on to say of the beautiful city: 'the glory of God is its light' (v. 23) – it doesn't need any lamps. The Proto Indo-European root of our word divine *diu*, *div* meant 'shining' (as also in Zeus, Jupiter [Diupiter] Deus, Dios, Dieu...). The divine shines like the sun and all that it shines on shines.

The city has a river of the water of life and 'on either side of the river is the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit... and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations.' (22:2)

The poet William Blake understood this coming down to Earth in his poem 'Jerusalem', in which he sees his own London transformed into the new Jerusalem:

The fields from Islington to Marybone,
To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,
Were builded over with pillars of gold
And **there** Jerusalem's pillars stood.

Her Little-ones ran on the fields,
The Lamb of God among them seen
And fair Jerusalem his Bride
Among the little meadows green.

Pancras and Kentish Town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upon the starry sky.

The Jew's Harp house and the Green Man,
The ponds where boys to bathe delight,
The fields of cows by Willan's farm
Shine in Jerusalem's pleasant sight.

The beautiful city *shines* – the divine shining come down to Earth. Then at the end of this section of his poem 'Jerusalem' Blake says:

In my Exchanges every Land
Shall walk, and mine in every Land
Mutual shall build Jerusalem
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

As I am writing this in London in Spring, every day I walk through my little park, St Martin's Gardens. The London plane trees are beginning to come out with their new green and when the sun shines, young people working locally come out and sit picnicking on the central grassy mound in their lunch hour. There are also benches to sit on for the less agile. I often sit and look at the trees sprouting a bit more as the season advances, and feel their healing power. Children are playing together in the playground with mothers and fathers keeping an eye on them and chatting. Some chat in English and some of them chat in many other languages. London speaks more than 300.

Those 'ponds where boys to bathe delight' are on Hampstead Heath and are not just for boys but adult men and women. April is when it starts getting warm enough for most people to swim (some hardy souls swim all the year round).

My small local park, St Martin's Gardens, has mostly plane trees, Hampstead Heath has all kinds of trees and the River Fleet runs from its source through the Heath ponds. Although London is also the 'city of dreadful night', you can get the feeling, especially on a sunny day, that this vision of the shining, happy city is at least partly realised here, down to Earth in London.

On the other side of the world the Nicaraguan poet Ernesto Cardenal also had a vision of his own capital city realising the vision in Revelation. In his poem *Oracle upon Managua*, written just after the devastating Managua earthquake in 1973, he says something similar;

After all God is also City...
 A classless city
 the free city
 where God is everybody
 He, God-with-everybody (Emmanuel)
 the universal City
 the City where God's humanity
 is revealed to us.

Cardenal joined in the struggle to overthrow the Nicaraguan dictator Somoza and after the triumph of the Revolution in 1979 he became minister of culture in the Sandinista government, which tried to implement this vision of a kind and fair society. For a decade they had considerable success. When they came to power one of the first things they did was abolish the death penalty and Cardenal's ministry of culture set up poetry workshops all over the country. (They also had a poetry marathon once a year in Ciudad Darío, at which I was invited to read my poems. I translated some of Ernesto's poems and when he came to London we read them together in the South Bank Centre Purcell Room.)

The Nicaraguan Revolution inspired the whole world but it is devastating what is happening now with President Daniel Ortega, together with his Vice President wife Rosario Murillo, bringing in repressive policies, imprisoning and exiling opponents, including many of his former Sandinista colleagues.

The same thing happened in 1789 at the time of the French Revolution, which also inspired the world. The poet Wordsworth wrote: 'Bliss was it



Reredos Batik in St Botolph's without Aldgate, London

in that dawn to be alive but to be young was very heaven'. But following the Terror and with the rise of Napoleon intent on Empire, when he invaded Switzerland in 1798 many felt bitter disappointment, which the poet Coleridge expressed in his 'recantation' poem 'France: An Ode'. (This poem also referred to John Milton, who was himself disappointed in England's abandonment of the 'Good Old Cause' in 1660.)

Because attempts to create a better society, envisioned in the book of Revelation, frequently seem to fail, some Christians retort: 'That just shows we should leave it up to God. We shouldn't try to play God. That invites hubris.' However, two millennia have passed since Jesus preached the imminent coming of the reign of God on Earth 'in the lifetime of some of those standing here present' – and nearly as long since the vision in the book of Revelation. But God still has not made it happen.

I think we should conclude that God is not going to do it, so we have no option but to keep trying to bring it about ourselves. Sometimes we do make improvements to our society. We can't just give up; we have no option but to keep on trying.