**Easter VII (in the Octave of the Ascension), 2025**

The Christian story, it has been said, begins in a garden, but ends in a city. Over the last few weeks we’ve heard from S. John’s vision of the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city, the perfection and completion of the earthly city ‘Old’ Jerusalem.

Recalling the beginning of the Holy Scriptures here in the final words of the last book of the Bible is a deliberate device. Just as John’s Gospel opens with the same phrase as the Book of Genesis (“In the beginning”), here in the Apocalypse he’s clearly recalling the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. For their sin of eating from the tree of knowledge of Good and Evil, they are cast out of Eden, and the way to the second tree, the tree of Life, is closed to them. Here, at the end of Revelation, S. John sees the way to the Tree of Life, within the heavenly city, open for the Elect, “those who wash their robes” in the Blood of the Lamb, those saved by the Sacrifice of the Cross.

What Christ accomplishes on the Cross undoes the harm done in the Garden – “so that the evil one, who conquered on a tree [the tree of Life], might likewise on a tree [the tree of the Cross] be conquered” as the Preface of the Holy Cross puts it. But the salvation He brings is greater than man’s first state was before the Fall: not a garden, but a city, teeming with the redeemed, man no longer solitary or coupled, but in community. Of that city we are even now citizens, we who wait for the Coming of the Lord Jesus, our bright morning star.

But our citizenship in the heavenly city means exclusion from another city. Normally I’m stealing from S. Thomas Aquinas in these sermons, but today I’m plagiarising S. Augustine, whose great work “On the City of God…” saw an implacable opposition between the City of God on the one hand, and the City of the World, on the other. And it’s one of those arrangements where you can’t hold dual nationality: you’re either a citizen of one or the other, because “no man can serve two masters,” and the masters of the two cities are not the same. The Master of the first is God; the master of the other is self.

In some ways the City of the World is identified with the Old Jerusalem, the old dispensation, those who refuse the saving work of Christ. For that reason I find it so striking that S. Stephen, the first martyr, is “cast […] out” from the city, from Jerusalem, to be stoned. And why? Because he saw “the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.” As the gates of the Heavenly City open to receive him, the gates of the earthly city slam shut behind him.

The whole scene is a wonderful icon of the two cities: on the one hand the enraged crowd, full of violent commotion – crying out, rushing on Stephen, casting him out, bent on his death. On the other Stephen, offering not resistance but prayer, for himself – “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit” – and for his persecutors – “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” A city of hate and a city of love; a city in turmoil and a city at peace; a city of life, and a city of death.

They say that pets become like their owners, but citizens also become like their kings: how much of Stephen’s martyrdom reminds us of Jesus, Who was also cast out of the city to die, Who also offered His soul to God, Who also prayed for His enemies. And how like their master the Devil the crowd have become, hateful and harmful, their ears stopped against the truth.

Put like that it seems astonishing, doesn’t it? That anyone should chose death over life, hatred over love. But like its master, the City of the World is also a city of lies. It seems to offer so much, doesn’t it? Pleasure, wealth, happiness, leisure, personal fulfilment. But it is all hollow. The City of God does not promise an easy life now, but heavenly peace. Describing that City, S. Augustine says “How great will be that felicity, where there will be no evil, where no good will be withheld, where will be leisure for the praises of God, Who will be all in all.”

That’s the city for which we are striving, of which we are already, by our baptism, members and fellow-citizens with the saints. But we are, for the time being, “in the world,” and surrounded by its citizens, and must tread a difficult road. That’s why the Lord Jesus prays for us as He does in the seventeenth chapter of S. John: “I am praying for the;” He says, “I am not praying for the world but for those You have given Me.”

If we look at what He asks the Father for, for us, we will see the outlines of how a heavenly citizen ought to live, I think. First, He prays that we may “be one” be united, because the city of the world is a city of disunity and fragmentation, but the City of God is a city of Communion. So we should strive to live in communion with each other, but particularly in communion with the Church, at peace with our fellow men and with our Holy Mother.

Second, He prays that we might be “in us,” that is, in the divine life of the Trinity. So we should try, at a minimum, to keep the divine life of grace alive in us, and avoid each and every mortal sin, every hatred, every impurity, every deliberate breaking of God’s laws. But more than that, we should be trying always to live the life of grace as fully as possible, coming often to the sacraments, being faithful to prayer, letting God nurture love – the life of God and God Himself – in our hearts.

Third, He prays that through that unity in God, “the world might believe,” that God loves us, and sent His Son to save us. So we should all, in some way or other, be missionaries of the love of God, telling folk of the Good News that Jesus Christ has died for them, that heaven is open for them, if they will believe.

Fourth, He prays that this united band of citizens may be “with Me where I am.” We’re in the octave of the Ascension, so this is a timely reminder to make like S. Stephen and look upwards, fixing our sights on Jesus, “standing at the right hand of God,” and with our hopes there, *not* to set our hopes on worldly pleasures and successes.

Fifth, He prays that they might “see My glory.” S. Thomas tells us that the bliss of those in heaven consists precisely in this: that they see God. Bu seeing God and His glory takes practice here, in this life, so we must bit be like the Jews who stoned Stephen, stopping up our ears in case God should speak to us; our eyes and our ears should be open to see the glory of God at work around us, in the beauties of creation, in the love of our brothers and sisters, in the promptings of God’s Spirit in our hearts.

Doing all of this, we become more and more like Jesus, our king and our model. And our ‘becoming’ is really His coming, coming into our souls to make them more like His. “Come, Lord Jesus!” almost the very last words in the Bible, should be our prayer: “Amen! Come Lord Jesus!”