
The City is a Beloved Community!

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Grace and peace to you in Jesus Christ our Lord!

It is a delight and honor for me to be in Hong Kong, a great city of the world; and I especially thank the Reverend Chung Ka Lok, for inviting me to preach today; and I thank Joey and Madeleine Fan, for their hospitality, and for making it possible for me to be here today. Blessings and grace to you!

I am Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip, in Atlanta, Georgia, USA; and I bring you grace and peace especially from that parish. I bless you from another of the world's great cities, Atlanta, Georgia. It is not as big as Hong Kong; but, it too, is a wonderful and great city!

Atlanta, where I live, is known for many things, and I want to mention two of them today. One is Coca-Cola! Atlanta is where Coca-Cola was developed, and it is where the Coca-Cola Company flourished. People here in Hong Kong have told me that Hong Kong loves to advertise. Even the currency of Hong Kong, the dollar bills, have the advertising of banks on them.

Well, Coca-Cola also loves to advertise. One of their advertising songs was the truly memorable song, "I'd like to teach the world to sing in perfect harmony." When I was growing up, the great Coca-Cola ad slogan was the phrase, "the pause that refreshes." Coca-Cola tried to refresh people!

That is a great slogan. So, today, like Coca-Cola, I want our gospel of Christ to refresh people. I want the Christian Church to proclaim a gospel that is refreshing! We are not supposed to be a complaining church; we are supposed to be a refreshing church!

The other notable feature for which Atlanta is known is that we are the home of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr, certainly one of the great civil rights activists, and one of the great lovers of peace, of our time.

He had a dream of reconciliation and unity that brought tribes and races and nations together in peace; and he went to the mountaintop. One of his recurring images was "beloved community." He talked of creating "beloved community," as a vision for both church and city.

The same gospel of Martin Luther King, is the gospel I want to proclaim today. The Christian Church is a beloved community. When Jesus told his disciples at that Last Supper night, "I give you a new commandment, that you love another," Jesus gave the Church a new definition of community; the church would be a beloved community, refreshed

always by love. He said, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Thus, we, the Christian Church, were meant to refresh the world with love.

Our scripture lesson this morning comes from a controversial book of the Bible, the Revelation to St. John. There are some of us who are sceptical of this book, right? There certainly are some Episcopalians in the United States who dismiss this book! We open its pages and read about strange images and horses and vials. Historically, major Christian scholars have wondered why the Revelation to St. John is even in the Bible.

But I believe that the Book of Revelation should be in scripture. For one, it tells us what people are doing in heaven. Have you ever noticed what people are actually doing in heaven when the Book of Revelation speaks about them? They are worshipping and singing!

Look at our scripture from Revelation today. The people are saying, "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God,, Amen. Hallelujah!" A great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunderpeals, is crying out, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns." I say this to everyone who complains to me about singing in church, "You'd better learn to sing, because singing is practice for the kingdom of heaven. According to the Revelation to St. John, everyone is singing in heaven!"

The other reason I like the Revelation to St. John is that it tells how the story ends! Despite its gory symbolism, Revelation also has a tremendous conclusion! People often become distracted or scared or confused about the end times, and about all these cosmic battles. But I say, "Don't be distracted. The point is this; God wins!" In the last book of the bible, God wins! No matter what battle you are facing, the lesson of the last book of the bible is that God wins.

Consider the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. In Genesis, the Bible begins in a garden. The garden of Eden was a place of peace and paradise!

Consider, now, how the Bible ends. In the Revelation to John, the Bible ends in a city! Our story, the Christian story, begins in a garden, and it ends in a city. We, the people of God, are meant to be progressing toward the city of God.

I believe in cities today, because I believe that cities, at their best, are supposed to be growing toward the city of God. Every city in this world, whether it be Atlanta, USA, or Hong Kong, China, is meant to be growing closer and closer to the true city, the kingdom of God.

And the kingdom of God is love. The challenge of every city, from Atlanta, Georgia to Hong Kong is to become what Martin Luther King, Junior, called the "beloved community" of God. The challenge of every city is to become a community of love.

In the twenty-first chapter of Revelation, John says "I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them." (Revelation 21:2-3).

Yes, the holy city, the city of God, will be a new city.

I have noticed something about Hong Kong. There is always something new! My own city, Atlanta, is also not very old. It started in the 1800s, and much of Atlanta was destroyed in a war. But that destruction actually gave Atlanta a chance to start something new.

My understanding is that Hong Kong is relatively new, too. One of your citizens said to me a few days ago, "There is always re-development going on in Hong Kong. There is always construction of something new."

That is what healthy cities do. They re-create and grow. Something in them becomes new. The challenge for every city is for the "new" to be the refreshing and beloved. The challenge for every city is to become a beloved community.

I am a lover of music and an amateur jazz pianist, so I love it that the saints in the Book of Revelation are always singing. The people of God love to sing.

Singing is a good image for the beloved community; for, when we sing, we use different voices. We even sing different melodies, but we create harmony together. God creates a beloved harmony with our voices.

Sometimes, when we sing, our notes seem unusual to other cultures. People exclaim, "This is not music! The harmony is not right!" But another culture might understand that harmony very well!

Yes, different cultures sing in different languages and different notes. But the music is beautiful to God! If we can appreciate different music in the same way that God appreciates it, we learn something new and lovely about God himself.

I believe this is why God calls us to cities and to "beloved community." We are supposed to learn from people who are different from us. What fun I have had in Hong Kong learning from people who are different from me! When I learn something about you, I learn something wonderful and lovely about God, too! For that, too, is what the Revelation to John said: "the dwelling of God is with mortals!" The dwelling of God is with human beings in cities!

God calls us to cities, to beloved community, and to church. Yes, I believe Christians need church, because Christians need community.

Have you heard the phrase which is popular in the United States these days? It is the phrase, "I am spiritual, but I'm not religious." Unfortunately, Americans often use the phrase as an excuse not to go to church.

But I think it is impossible to be spiritual and not religious. Spirituality is wonderful, but it is useless if it stays inside us. The moment our spirituality touches someone else, then we have religion. In fact, the moment our spirituality touches someone else, then we have community. The moment our spirituality touches someone else, we have love. In Christ, we have beloved community.

It is hard to live in community, for sure. In that lovely garden of Genesis, Adam and Eve ended up blaming each other. One of their sons ended up murdering his brother. We have to learn how to be spiritual with other people. We have to learn how to love. We have to learn how to grow toward the new city of God, where God actually dwells with humanity, the beloved community!

I rejoice in this beloved community today! You are different from me, and I love how God dwells in you. I can see that God really does love you. God loves you enough to dwell with you, in love and refreshment. I honor the Christian beloved community in Hong Kong, and I pray that God will lead us all "from Atlanta to Hong Kong" to that heavenly city of God, the beloved community of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

AMEN.

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Comments? Contact Dean Candler at: SCandler@stphilipscathedral.org