

Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5 A Vision of the End  
May 26, 2019

One of the more popular situation comedies in television history was called, M\*A\*S\*H, and it was about life in an army hospital in a in the early 1950's in Korea. The show could be enjoyed on a couple of different levels.

The first involves standard comedy, the same kind of comedy that might be set in a 1960's suburban family like "The Wonder Years," or a group of young working professionals living in New York like in, "Friends," or a middle class suburban Detroit family like in, "Home Improvement." The comedy was standard and could be funny in any setting. One could watch just for the laughter.

On another level the show offered social commentary about the absurdity of war; the contradiction of doctors trying to save lives so they can be sent back into the battle to be wounded again, or even killed.

The show began in 1973 based on a 1969 movie, both of which were commentaries on the Vietnam war, which was very traumatic and up until that time had not been depicted on television. The writers disguised the anti-war, anti-Vietnam commentary in two ways to make it palatable to those who might otherwise be offended by it.

The first is the comedy itself, which was very funny. The second was the ingenious angle of setting the

drama in the 1950's instead of the 1970's, and in Korea, instead of Vietnam.

Apocalyptic

The genre of Jewish and later Christian Apocalyptic literature in general and the Book of Revelation in particular employs a similar strategy. In order to hide the deeper meaning from those who may not take it well, Revelation, uses fantastic imagery instead of comedy to disguise the main message.

The higher level or deeper meaning is disguised also by ancient references in history. For instance, the vision describes the fall of Babylon the Great, which happened 600 years before this book was written. It clearly refers to Rome and predicts the Fall of the Roman Empire, which was still 350 years in the future.

Like M\*A\*S\*H, there was harsh social commentary, in this case about a society that was out-of-control drunk on its own power, its pursuit of lavish wealth, and its willingness to impoverish its own people in order to attain its desired ends. The Christian Apocalypse was written for an oppressed minority living in what is now western Turkey, suffering life under dominion, precarious and dangerous, so the message was hidden.

The Warning

The general idea is that life on earth is filled with danger to be patiently endured. The warning is against

the use of rebellious and violent tactics against the oppressors who are sowing the seeds of their own destruction. The shoe is on the other foot for us, who mostly have been a part of the dominant culture in the country of our citizenship, but there is a warning for the powerful too.

One should avoid excess greed, be unwilling to disregard the well-being of our neighbors to achieve a desired end, and seek justice no matter the cost of the sacrifice required to attain it. Both warnings apply to everyone. But it also serves as a warning to everyone that deceit, greed, abuse of power are condemned, along with violence and rebellion. Life is more than the accumulation of things.

### The Promise

But there is also a much more hopeful promise in the apocalyptic writings and in our reading today we have run into it. The vision sees a *new* heaven and a *new* earth. It envisions a consummation of the age which ends in justice and righteousness tempered by mercy and love.

The fantastic image is of a city in the shape of a perfect cube, which stands for the Holy of Holies, the inner room in Israel's temple that stood for the everlasting presence of God, and in which the high priest offered an annual sacrifice for the sins of the people.

### Traits

Light - there is no night in the city, the doors are never locked.

Splendor - the splendor of the nations, the very leaves on the tree of life are for the healing of the nations.

Impurities - there is nothing shameful in the city, no deceit, the curse has been removed.

### Sanctuary

The main idea is that in the New Jerusalem there is no temple because the New Jerusalem *is* the temple, the place of God's dwelling. It has been 2,000 years since the last Jewish Temple was destroyed, and since then people have been coming to places like this one to sit in quiet reflection, to sing their faith, to hear sacred scripture, to listen to someone speak God's message, and to have relationships with other believers.

Very often we speak of the place where we meet for worship as a sanctuary, or a chapel or a cathedral or a nave. Sometimes people want to get away from the traditional language and call it a worship center, or something else. I like the word sanctuary because it speaks of "getting away," "stepping out of the world." It is a place of peace, security, and rest, just like the New Jerusalem was described in today's reading.

It is a place to get away from the mess of daily life with all of its stresses, pressures, and unkindnesses. It is a place to go to get away from reality for awhile.

Some people have replaced church with fishing or golf or sports, or shopping, because they have the same affect; a few hours away from life's craziness. In other words, an escape.

But I think of a temple or a chapel not as an escape from reality, but rather a place to face it. We leave the world of 10,000 X10,000 things and focus for an hour on the one needful thing. For there are some aspects of our human experience that are never really faced, at least not in a healthy way, out in the chaos of the world.

### Mortality, Morality, and Meaning (Tillich)

We need a sanctuary to face down the mystery of life and of our mortality as well as to rest and be restored. We need a place to confront our failures to meet the standard of goodness that challenges all of us but which none of us can attain; a place to contemplate forgiveness, reconciliation, and redemption. And we need a group of people to be with and talk to and to help and be helped by as we ask after life's meaning.

Issues of mortality, morality, and meaning *are* the central features of what is real, and if we ignore them, we can't be healthy. We go into the world each day to lose ourselves in work, in family and friendship, and the pursuit of pleasure and happiness. We return to

the sanctuary to face our precarious vulnerability, to contemplate the mystery. The eternal city is such a place.

### The Promise

And our reading for the day tells us that indeed there is a place of God's presence; of justice, glory beyond comprehension, a place where everyone is included, except for those too selfish to include themselves, and where, at last, we see God face to face and nothing is hidden, or needs to be hidden from our eyes, or from the world.

It is a beautiful promise. No wonder that believers invented vaulted ceilings and stained glass to capture us up in it, not to shield us from the reality of the world, but to expose us the the reality of God. Mostly it is a place of homelike beauty, security, and love. All we are asked to do while we wait is to *have some faith*, and let that faith build our character, from now until the new city arrives.

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