

13th Sunday after Trinity, Year C

Hebrews 12.18-29

Sometimes people I meet have a hard time picking my nationality. They'll ask me, politely, 'Where are you from?' To which I reply, with a smile, 'That's a short question with a long answer.' Invariably, of course, they mean whether I'm from Australia or not... of course whether you consider Adelaide to be part of our country or not is beside the point! But most of my memories of growing up were in the country town of Katherine in the Northern Territory. Every time we went to Darwin I thought it was *really* busy place. Later when we moved to Darwin and went on trips to Adelaide, I thought it was even *busier*. Then when we moved to Melbourne, it was *incredibly busy*! And then when I went to Sydney...

One of the things I really enjoyed about living in Melbourne was looking at all the sites and places that were on offer. I've always enjoyed history and Melbourne has a quite a large number of places positively dripping with meaning from the site of the proclamation of Federation, the building where the first meetings were held for the forty-hour working week, the shrine of remembrance, magnificent parks and gardens and so on. It's almost overwhelming and bewildering. Melbourne of course has its darker side: poverty, homelessness, violence, unemployment, vice, drugs and squalor. Now I'm not drawing a parallel between the New Jerusalem mentioned in Hebrews and Melbourne, but it does hold to this extent: the city that we're promised, the city of which we are already citizens is so full of exciting and welcoming features that we *ought* to find it overwhelming and bewildering. The writer of Hebrews lists them one after another in verses 22-24, but there's a great theme to our passage today.

Earlier in Hebrews, the great theme is of the true heavenly Temple into which Jesus has gone on our behalf, and into which we are now invited because of what he's done. Now it reaches its climax in the great theme of our passage today: the new city *is* the new Temple, the place where God lives in glory and invites his people to share his life. He invites *us* to share his life, a life of holiness. God's own holiness, once revealed on Mount

Sinai as terrifying and unapproachable is now, through his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, a holiness that is welcoming, cleansing and healing.

At this very point, we should be careful not to slip. Often it's imagined that the contrast between the law of the Old Testament and the gospel preached by Jesus was this: the Old Testament law was an exclusive holiness that keeps people out and the Gospel is an inclusive holiness that simply lets everybody come as they are. Okay, that's a real simplification, but the point about the new heavenly city is that every feature described in verses 22-24 emphasise the fact that all of us who now live with one foot in that city haven't simply been told to come as we are, but that we've come in response to the lavish grace of God. And it's that lavish grace of God that has worked such cleansing, such transformation, that we now belong as of a right, by the sheer grace of God, within the holy city itself. It's no accident that when I say the invitation to communion that I borrow a phrase from the Orthodox Divine Liturgy when I say 'Holy Things for *Holy People*'. We are privileged today to be citizens of the new heavenly city, fed, nurtured and nourished by the body and blood of Jesus.

The most striking thing about this, according to verse 22, is that we who live by faith and hope have already, in a sense, arrived at this new heavenly city. We already belong there; in prayer and worship we are already welcome before God's throne. This leads to the obvious question: does our life of prayer and worship, whether alone or with fellow believers, carry the sense of joy and excitement that comes bubbling out of these verses?

This leads to another question though: who do we worship?

God, as Hebrews has shown, is not to be taken lightly or casually. There is a promise that God is going to take creation by the scruff of the neck and make it; at last, what he always intended it to be. Heaven and earth will be shaken in such a way that everything transient, temporary, secondary and second-rate will fall away. Then that which is new creation, based on Jesus himself and the resurrection will shine out more brightly. This

new creation will of course, include us, and, through us, the new world which God had always promised.

True gratitude both for the present world and all that God provides to us *and* for the world to come is the deepest and truest form of worship. When we bow down before the living God and thank him from the bottom of our hearts for what he's done and for what he will do, it is as though we are priests in the Temple, offering the purest, most unblemished sacrifice: only much, much more so. That is the privilege of being a follower of Jesus. That is the life to which God now calls us.