

Heaven on Earth

In the name of him who prayed that we may be with him always, dear friends in Christ: What do you think? Wouldn't it be nice to have if even only for a short while a taste of heaven here on earth – to be able to experience in the present just a bit of what we will be enjoying for all eternity? In this fallen world beset by so many problems and sorrows, what could be better than that? Well, it happens that imaginative people have thought it possible. From the culinary world there are certain foods that claim to provide a taste of heaven. There are for instance a number of dishes called “Ambrosia”; which, in Greek mythology was the food of the gods. I've tasted them, and let's just say they were a letdown. They definitely failed to deliver. Then we have angel hair pasta and angel food cake, which are okay I guess; but no, not heavenly. For a while there was a fast food chain that made a sandwich they billed as “heaven on a bun” (which is odd because there was no bun. Instead they substituted two boneless fried chicken breasts for the bread, and in between they stuffed slabs of bacon, cheese, and a creamy, fat-laden sauce. I think they called it “heaven on a bun” because if you made a habit of eating them the arteries in your heart would solidify and that's where you'd soon be going—unless, of course, you were headed the other way, in which case they might've called it “hell on a bun”; but that wouldn't sell very well, would it?). No, I think that people who describe any food however delicious as a taste of heaven have a much uninspired view of what the next life will be.

But if food can't deliver, there are some *places* that have been described as heaven on earth – usually by travel agents who want to book you a trip there. “It's a tropical paradise”, they'll tell you. When they say that, the chances are high that it's also a tourist trap. Nothing heavenly about that. I lived for a while in a place that could be described as a tropical paradise that was relatively unspoiled. There were endless white sandy beaches, coconut trees and tropical fruits, exotic birds ... and there were also dread diseases, crushing poverty and widespread malnutrition among the populace, giant flying cockroaches, and these vicious ten inch centipedes that could spit caustic venom at you from several feet away. Not my idea of paradise. On the other hand, some of you who have lived *here* for generations might think of life on the Iowa plains as a sort of paradise, especially when everything is green and warm and the fields are heavy with the promise of a bountiful harvest. The image of this place being heaven on earth, however, is shattered when one is exposed to the weather in the winter ... *and* the summer ... *and* most of the spring. So no, whatever place we might call paradise on earth will always fall far short of the mark. As they say: in this world, even the prettiest rose has thorns.

But we're not done trying yet. It has been the lofty goal of various groups throughout history to create an earthly paradise in the sense of the perfect society. It's an experiment that has been tried over and over again – many times especially when this country was young and utopian dreamers from Europe would come here with their followers and try to set up the ideal community. Such were the Shakers, the Moravians, the Millerites, and many others. Brook Farm, Massachusetts; New Harmony, Indiana; Oneida, New York were all started as communal colonies in which the members really believed they could bring heaven to earth. Why, just east of nearby Corning there was a group called the Icarians. They had a settlement that flourished briefly during the time of the Civil War. There's nothing left now except a marker beside the road. The same fate was suffered by all the other attempts to create a perfect community; they all failed. They share something else in common. They all thought that if they could just come up with the right set of rules and get everyone to agree to them, then they could achieve what

they were striving for. What they failed to recognize is that to have the perfect society, you need to have people who can keep rules perfectly. Such people don't exist. People always break rules. But instead of identifying the real problem – the sinfulness of man – and blaming people for breaking the rules, they all figured the problem must be that they hadn't yet quite come up with the right set of rules. All they needed to do was to make some adjustments and add a few more rules—which they did over time. With the result that life in these colonies became more like prison than paradise. Members got discouraged, gave up, and left. The exception to the rule here is the Shakers. One of their rules was that the members practice strict celibacy. Their group no longer exists because when the members died there was no one to replace them.

The bottom line is that as much as we might like to have a taste of heaven on earth, there is no food or experience devised by man, no perfect place in the world, and no ideal society that can possibly provide it. There is simply no way for fallen man to bring heaven to earth, even if only for a moment.

There was a time, however, when paradise *did* exist on this earth. The garden of God in which our first parents were placed was indeed perfection. The Lord God designed it to be that way for us. It had all we humans could ever need or desire. And because it was free of the taint of sin, and people lived there in perfect harmony with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation, it really was heaven on earth. It was lost, as you know, when our first parents fell into sin. Then this world, its inhabitants, and all creatures great and small became subject to the curse. Mankind was expelled from paradise. And sadly, we've never known it any other way. But there is in each one of us a longing, a deep almost inexpressible desire to return to the home that we never knew through personal experience but that we still have the sense of having lost. I mean, we look around this world and see its problems, struggles, suffering, and sorrows – we know them first hand – and we recognize that things ought not to be this way. The reason we have this sense is that we still feel the loss. And this is why we long for a taste of heaven on earth – even though there is no earthly way for us to have it.

We can't reach up to pull a bit of heaven down; *but the Lord God, by bending low, can deliver it to us.* And he does. This is what today's reading from Revelation is about. It describes a time when things will be restored – when heaven and earth will be united once again, when paradise will exist on this world. St. John, in his vision, sees the throne of God and of the Lamb on earth. His throne is the place where the Lord lives with his people, and the seat of authority from which he rules. And from his throne flows the River of the Water of Life. It's like the first Garden in which a huge spring came up from the ground and flowed forth in four directions to water and give life to all the earth. That's what is going on here. It shows how the Lord himself is the source and sustainer of all life. And here too John sees the Tree of Life in the garden. It bears the fruit that if one eats, he lives forever. And not just one kind of fruit: instead we're told that this marvelous tree bears twelve different crops throughout the year – a different fruit for each month, which means it's always in production. That tells us something else: that eating the fruit of the Tree of Life is an ongoing thing. Even in paradise people need to eat from the tree and drink from the River of the Water of Life. *That's* how they live forever. They are not immortal in and of themselves. They are never independent of God; rather their eternal lives always depend upon the Lord and his gifts of grace. That is mankind's proper relationship with the Creator. Remember, what got us into trouble in the first place was thinking we could be independent of him and be gods in our own right. In paradise restored, we won't have that silly idea. We'll finally understand that we depend upon the Lord for everything, and with humble hearts full of gratitude we will praise and worship him for providing it.

And we will see him there face to face. His name will be on our foreheads, marking us as his sons and daughters – members of his royal family, and heirs of his eternal kingdom. And in the endless day of the light that shines from his face, we will reign with him forever and ever.

When will it be? When can we have this taste of heaven on earth? The answer may surprise you. That's because it's not in some hazy undetermined future; rather it's happening now – at this very moment. Really, it is. This is what our weekly service here in the church is all about. It's about the Triune God who rules over all the universe bending down low to be with us right here – just as he used to walk and talk with our first parents in the garden in cool of the day. It's here that he comes to us and speaks to us through his Word. Here he has his throne: it's the pulpit and lectern from which he speaks, the font from which flows the River of the Water of Life, and the altar from which we receive all throughout the months and seasons of the church year, the fruit of the Tree of Life—for the fruit that gives eternal life is the body and blood of Christ and the tree is the cross upon which he was slain for our sins. These together are the throne of God and of the Lamb on the earth, and from which we receive our taste of heaven in the here and now.

This is where his light shines in the darkness of this world. This is where he places his name on our foreheads in Holy Baptism and makes us his children and heirs. This is where we see his kind face turned to us in the face of Christ crucified. And here too is the place where he deals with the one big problem that all those who tried to create the perfect society on earth failed to address: our sin. In the vision John hears a voice say, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the Tree of Life ...". Who are they? *They* are those who confess their sins and receive Christ's Word of forgiveness. That's what cleanses their robes and covers their shame. They are the ones who are able to eat at the Lord's Table. Who's on the outside? Who is not allowed to eat? Those who refuse to repent of their sins: "the dogs and sorcerers and the sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and everyone who loves and practices falsehood". As long as they refuse to repent of such sins, they remain on the outside. But the door is open for them to repent and return – and not just here, but every place in this world where the Triune God brings heaven to earth through the ministry of his holy Church.

In this holy Church he knits us together by his Spirit in one faith and one communion to be the holy Bride promised to Christ; the Bride who waits with eager anticipation for the day when he will come to take her to be his own forever. Then the taste of heaven we have on earth only intermittently and incompletely now will become the full fledged eternal wedding feast.

And so, if you will, you might think about what we do here on a typical Sunday as a wedding rehearsal. Whenever I do a wedding we have a rehearsal the day before. They all work out pretty much the same way. We show people where to stand, what to do, who comes in when and what not. No one is dressed to the nines like they will be the next day. And there's a certain artificiality and awkwardness about it all, along with some joking and clowning around. It's all very informal.

Until I come to the point when I have the couple rehearse the vows they will exchange. Then it suddenly gets very serious. As they look into each other's eyes and repeat the promises they will making the next day to love, honor, and cherish one another for a lifetime – and they sense the gravity of what they are about to do, and the depth of the love they have for one another ... well, even though it isn't the full-fledged marriage ceremony just yet, it becomes very real. A special moment passes between them.

Let me suggest that something similar happens in our gatherings here. It isn't the wedding just yet. There's a clumsiness to it, an awkwardness. Our hymn singing doesn't sound like heavenly choirs. There's noise and distractions all around. Our minds wander. Our robes are still stained with sin even though we've washed them over and over again. It doesn't look like paradise in here. And yes, I recognize that my sermons are anything but heavenly. But despite all that, Christ our Bridegroom is here with us. And where he is, heaven has come to earth. When he speaks his promises to us, when he washes us by his Word and Spirit, and when we eat his body and drink his blood given for the forgiveness of our sins, we do indeed have a genuine taste of heaven on earth. This ought to make us truly appreciate the moments we share with him here, and to hunger even more for the glory to be revealed when Christ our Lord comes to take us to our eternal home.

Small wonder then, that the Spirit and the Bride say, "Come". Even so, let all of us who hear say, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." In his holy name.

Soli Deo Gloria!