

ZE10042712 - 2010-04-27

Permalink: <http://zenit.org/article-29062?l=english>

The New Jerusalem, Coming Down Out of Heaven From God

Biblical Reflection for 5th Sunday of Easter C

By Father Thomas Rosica, CSB

TORONTO, APRIL 27, 2010 ([Zenit.org](http://zenit.org)).- In light of today's second reading from the book of Revelation (21:1-5a), I wish to offer some reflections on the Holy City of Jerusalem and its important place in Christian spirituality.

There is a wonderful rabbinic saying from the Babylonian Talmud (Kiddushin 49b) that reveals heaven, earth and Jerusalem as the essential components of the Hebrew soul. The rabbis say: "As the world was being created, God gave out 10 portions of joy to the world and nine were given to Jerusalem; 10 portions of beauty God gave to the world and nine were for Jerusalem; 10 portions of suffering God gave to the world and nine were for Jerusalem."

Jerusalem is the city where the joys, aspirations and pains of humanity converge. It is the city where dreams are dreamt and either realized or shattered. A well-known medieval map shows Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple at the center of the world, the continents of Europe, Africa, and Asia fanning out from the center like gigantic petals. It is a vision of world redemption arising from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the heart of the world and the center of history.

The history of salvation revealed in the Bible is situated between two visions which form the beginning and the end of the human drama: The vision of paradise lost in the book of Genesis and the vision of the new Jerusalem which descends from God in the book of Revelation. We come from God, and we return to him. These two visions are the two beacons which shed their light on everything that comes between them concerning the history and fate of humankind made up of human suffering and joy.

Jerusalem in the Old Testament

Jerusalem, as a symbol of the land itself, is called holy and the city is a symbol of the assurance of the saving power of God: "Just as the mountains are around Jerusalem, so the Lord is round about His people" (Psalm 125:2). The psalmist extols the Holy City with these rousing exclamations: "I rejoiced when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem" (Psalm 122:1-2). "May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I forget you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my greatest joy" [Psalm 137:6].

No one better anticipated Jerusalem's future than Isaiah, the eighth-century Hebrew prophet-poet. After predicting the world's destruction, Isaiah located his messianic vision of future redemption in Jerusalem's hills. He prophesied that one day all the nations will end their warring and gather in final reconciliation on the highest hill, the hill called Zion (Jerusalem). From Zion, the "mountain of the house of the Lord," the divine

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Law of Justice will come forth. Listen to Isaiah's words (Isaiah 2:1-5): "In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem."

Jerusalem for Christians

The Gospel of Luke and his subsequent account of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles depicts Jerusalem in a highly positive manner. Luke's Gospel begins and ends in the Temple of Jerusalem. The opening scene depicts the announcement of the forthcoming conception and birth of John the Baptist to Zachary, John's father, a priest who by lot entered the sanctuary to burn incense (Luke 1:10). The Gospel closes with the disciples of Jesus celebrating in the Temple each day as they await the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost (Luke 24:52-53).

There are other indications in early Christian Scriptures and writings of the great spiritual significance of Jerusalem. Paul's reaching out to the Gentiles with the message of the Gospel included a constant appeal for the "poor" of the Church in Jerusalem and Judea. It was intended to symbolize the solidarity of Church members of Jewish and Gentile origins. For Paul, who contrasted the Jerusalem below and the Jerusalem above in his epistle to the Galatians, Jerusalem remained an important anchor and reference point.

Apocalyptic Jerusalem

For Christians, Jerusalem is the city of the death and resurrection of Jesus, the center of history and of the world. It is also the city whose name evokes the new city of the future: the New Jerusalem as mentioned in today's second reading from Revelation 21. John's wild dream speaks of a city from God, by God and with God. The author describes the New Jerusalem as the goal of human history. Jerusalem is to be a model for what life with God will be "in the end." The Nobel Prize laureate Elie Wiesel touched upon this theme with his description of the holy city: "JERUSALEM should be everywhere and JERUSALEM IS everywhere where a person strives for PEACE, where the heart is opened to PRAYER, to GENEROSITY, to THANKSGIVING."

City of God for three great religions

Jerusalem is the City of God, God's sanctuary, the place where every believer -- Jew, Christian or Muslim has heard the Word of God, and because of that, wishes to adore God. This religious necessity is also an essential part of the human, individual and collective identity: It consists of persons and a people. The religious memory is also a national memory for the Jew and the Muslim in particular. For Christians, Jerusalem was and remains the Mother Church, the birthplace of the first Christian community.

Questions for reflection

Why is Jerusalem such an important city? What does Jerusalem mean for me? What aspects of Judaism and Islam have enlightened me and helped me with my own faith? How do I envision the future of Jerusalem?

When I think of the Church, what image comes to mind? How does my image of the Church reflect my experience as being part of the Church? If we are to be a living temple of God, what qualities should characterize us as church? What symbol do you think most unites us as a Christian people?

All of the inhabitants of Jerusalem are struggling today with the foundation of a society at once just and secure. The continuing drama of the Holy Land is a drama of faith. How long will religion be the cause of

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wars and disputes among believers? It is not for this reason that God has revealed himself to us or spoken to us in these holy places, but rather for the salvation of the human race, and for the love of humanity, the only constructive instrument and the only way that leads to justice.

How do I envision the future of Jerusalem? What religious symbols and metaphors nurture my vision of this holy city? Does my religious imagination lead me to a vision of peace and justice or does it engender feelings of hatred, exclusion and violence?

Fidelity to Jerusalem and Rome

I conclude with this prayer written by Jesuit Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, which appears in his book "Due Pellegrini per la Giustizia" (Centro Ambrosiano: Edizioni Piemme, 1992). I have prayed these words often during my years of study in both Rome and Jerusalem.

"Lord Our God,
We Praise you and we bless you for Jerusalem,
Because you have given this city to us
As the symbol of the story of God and the story of humanity;
The sign of your love for us and of your forgiveness for our sins;
The symbol of our earthly pilgrimage toward you,
A pilgrimage that involves so many difficulties and so many conflicts.

"We pray for Jerusalem and for all of our Jewish
And Arab brothers and sisters.
We give you thanks, Lord,
Because you have called us to serve Christ
And to carry his cross today in the Church,
The Church that has its center in Rome;
Since you have called us to be one with your Son,
You teach us to give a name to our oneness with him,
In the words of Ignatius of Loyola,

"The true bride of Christ our Lord, who is our Holy Mother Church
We thank you for the Church and for Rome
That is the image of unity
And the pilgrimage toward this unity,
And for the trials that we must undergo to achieve this unity.

"We ask you that we may be faithful to Jerusalem and to Rome,
To your Son and to the Church,
In this common journey of humanity
Toward the heart of the Trinity,
Toward the contemplation of your face
Of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen."

[The readings for the 5th Sunday of Easter are Acts 14:21-27; Revelation 21:1-5a; John 13:31-33a, 34-35]

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