

# The city of God and our duty in it

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## THE CITY OF GOD AND OUR DUTY IN IT.

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### I.

*Henceforth ye shall see the Son of man, sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven.*

Such were our Saviour's words, as he stood, a prisoner, before the high priest and the scribes and the elders, within a few hours of his crucifixion. The language was figurative, borrowed from Daniel 7, 13, and the 110<sup>th</sup> Psalm; but the divine speaker meant that the time for those prophecies to be fulfilled was already come, and that His hearers would, from that very moment be witnessing the fulfilment.

And from that moment Caiaphas and his companions did see the Son of man sitting on the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of heaven. They saw One, Whom, though a prisoner, all their power of place and influence could not move to fear. At noon that same day they saw a great darkness overspread the land until the time of the evening sacrifice, the time also, on that particular day of all the year, for slaying the passover lambs in the temple. Just then there was an earthquake, and the veil of the *ναός*, or sanctuary, was torn in two from the top to the bottom, and the *ναός* itself, as a divine sanctuary was thus destroyed, after having been defiled, a few hours before, by Judas' blood-money. But, seeing, the Jewish leaders saw not, neither did they understand. The next day they put their foolish seal on the tomb; and, the day after that, they had to hear strange tales of their victim's resurrection, tales which even their money could not stop. Soon afterwards I suppose, they would hear also of the appearances, in their holy city, of many risen bodies of the saints that had formerly fallen asleep. In seven weeks' time there were 3000 people in Jerusalem, and soon some thousands more who believed in that resurrection. We know the course those leaders

took, and how it was proved that He was sitting at the right hand of power—that Jesus whom they had crucified; and how their power melted away, while His was manifested more and more, till, in the time of that generation, as He had said, not one stone of their beautiful temple was left upon another.

Long before that great destruction there were believers, even in distant Ephesus and elsewhere, who, while going about their daily business were sitting all the time with that same Jesus *ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις*, in the heavenly places. And when at last the doom of Jerusalem was drawing near, the nameless author of the Epistle to the Hebrews encouraged the faint-hearted members of Christian Israel by showing that in coming to Christ they were come to something far better than anything visible and tangible, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12, 22), the city which St Paul had told the Galatians was their mother, as he told the Philippians that their citizenship was in heaven.

Again a few years; according to some of the best modern critics, a very few years; and the beloved disciple himself saw the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, and heard Him that sat upon the throne say, “Behold I make all things new”; even as St Paul had written to the Corinthians, “If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature: the old things are passed away; behold they are become new”; or as the Master Himself had said “The kingdom of God is at hand”, “within you”. “Behold now is the accepted time, behold now is the day of salvation.” Daniel’s four beasts, the symbols of brute empires were never seen by mortal eye rising out of the natural sea. Why should we stand looking into the natural sky for the sign of the Son of man, or listen with our ears for the sound of a material trumpet? The kingdom of God cometh not with observation. The new creation is within.

The vision of the New Jerusalem in Rev. 21 is introduced by a vision of a new heaven under which alone the New Jerusalem could be built, and a new earth on which alone the holy city could stand. Men come before cities, and there must be believers before there can be a Church. The heaven becomes new to a man when he is convinced intellectually and by the response of his affections that God loves him, and that God actually is all that He is revealed to be by His Son

Jesus Christ. Such a man finds that God dwells with him and with others, and is calling not only individuals, but also the peoples, in their national and political organizations, to be His peoples. Whatever sorrows the believer has, he finds One ready to comfort him. Mourning, crying and pain are transformed from arbitrary inflictions to fatherly disciplines. Even death is not an end of life, but a stage in it; for the believer has passed out of death into life even before he dies. He drinks of the fountain of the water of life freely. Strength is given him to conquer in the fight with God's enemies and his own. He is become a member of Christ, a child of God, and an inheritor, even in this life, of the kingdom of heaven; not a solitary knight errant, but a citizen of an eternal city that has come down out of heaven from God. Meantime, as in the parables of the kingdom, those for instance of the sower, of the weeds in the corn, of the bad fish mingled with the good in the net, we learn that, side by side with those who are overcoming, there are others who are being overcome. Side by side with the new Jerusalem there is a lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, a new Gehenna, for those who choose death rather than life.

The first eight verses of Rev. 21, though they reveal the city, reveal it mainly in its effect upon individuals. It is a vision of personal Christianity. The rest of the chapter, and the first five verses of chapter 22, deal more with corporate Christianity. Both visions deal with the same persons and the same times, our own times and our own selves included. And when men doubt the present reality of God's holy city because they see so much evil still in the world, let them look at the lake of fire in the first vision, and the exclusion of everything unclean and him that maketh a lie in the second. How could St John invite every one who was willing, to take the water of life freely (Rev. 22), in the very first age of Christianity, if it was not ready? He had heard of that water long before, as he sat with his Friend at Jacob's well, and again in the temple at the feast of tabernacles. And now he saw it, and invited men to take it, as it ran in the midst of the street of that holy city which came down from God. Yes, and there was the tree of life bearing fruit all the year round for the citizens, and leaves for the healing of the nations. Do not history and our

own experience tell us it is all true? Sealing up the words of the prophecy would have been as great an error as the sealing of the tomb.

Yet this is just what has been done. The Revelation of Jesus Christ has been regarded, not as an Unveiling, but as a Veiling. Instead of keeping the things which are written therein, and rejoicing in the blessing thereto annexed, Christian people have turned away from the book, or left it to arbitrary patchers of historical scraps, or idle prognosticators of the world's end; an event of which much less is said in the New Testament than its readers are usually aware. Neither in the parable of the tares, nor in the discourse on the mount of Olives is there anything of the kind. The consummation of an age is not the end of the world.

A word must be said on a difficulty which many devout readers of holy scripture may feel when they see the vision of the new Jerusalem placed after the vision of the great white throne and the judgment. But the camp of the saints and the beloved city are upon the earth before the judgment. Can the beloved city of chapter 20 be any other than the holy city of chapter 21? The word "camp" placed with it, apparently as a synonym, may be meant to express what S<sup>t</sup> Paul meant when he spoke of forgetting the things that were behind and stretching forward to the things which are before. We have the treasure in earthen vessels; but that treasure is the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; and S<sup>t</sup> John says of the city of God, that the glory of God did lighten it, and the lamp thereof is the Lamb. As sinners, we are in the camp, as believers, we are in the city, before the day of judgment. Besides, we have a second vision of the same judgment in chapter 21, after the first and briefer vision of the holy city. And are we sure that, in things of eternity, we are right in thinking *chronologically* of a day of judgment at all? The scriptures speak of many days of judgment. I think the whole Church is in the midst of one now. As Saviour, our Lord is the Lamb that hath been slain from the foundation of the world. As Judge, may He not have been sitting on the great white throne from the foundation of the world? He pronounced sentence in Eden; and He is the same yesterday, today, and for ever. Yes, we will rectify, if neces-

sary, our conceptions of the Judgment; but we will not dishonour the Son of God by relegating what He spoke of as at hand, into some yet vague and ever-retreating future.

## II.

The taking of Rome by the Goths in 410 seemed to the men of that age almost like a breaking down of the order of nature; so long had that great city endured, so great and so wide had been its dominion. Then it was that S<sup>t</sup> Augustine came forward with his treatise on the City of God, a treatise however, in some important parts of which Augustine sadly missed his way.

We men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have witness and are witnessing changes, mechanical, social, and political, in their way scarcely less astonishing, if at all, than the overthrow of the Roman Empire; while wonderful discoveries in science, and great changes of view in religion, have made innovations on the like scale, and with equal rapidity, in the worlds of mind and spirit. People have begun to look at the Bible in a very different way from that which was customary 60 years ago. Some appear to think its disintegration is so complete that they are trying to hide their despair in what is called Catholic consent, that is the belief, for the time being, of many millions of people, mostly very ignorant; the logical outcome of which a Roman Catholic convert expounded, a few years ago, as the liberty of Christian people to worship Jupiter, Apollo, or Aphrodite. And, undeniably, there is, for the present, a very serious unsettlement as to the authority of the Bible and its several parts.

Even when the authority is unquestioned, we are often face to face with new interpretations. Many of us remember the time when everybody, at death, was held to pass at once into endless torments of the most horrible kinds, or else into endless happiness of the like transcendent nature. And as the passport to heaven was a true conversion, which only a small minority possess, the general notion, I can hardly call it belief, was that much the greater part of mankind were brought into this world for no ultimate purpose but to be burnt alive for ever. Religion was thus a sort of Insurance against God; and an insurer naturally compared the terms and advantages offered by the various offices which undertook to make all safe.



Then there still survived, in many places, the remains of a long tradition under which churchgoing was a traditional duty. There are still persons and places, very numerous if reckoned by themselves, for whom and for which things are less changed than for others. But, on the whole, the old-fashioned custom of going to Church as a matter of course has broken down in Western Europe, and nothing of much account has come to take its place.

The bulk of the people in what have been customarily called Christian countries seem impervious to the Gospel as it is now presented to them, whether by Roman Catholics or by Protestants. When our Lord began to preach, he called on men to repent because there was good news, the news that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Our people were till lately called to repent because the kingdom of hell was at hand; true enough, if rightly put. But the preachers now falter in their preaching, and the people pass them by. Might we not do well to follow Christ's example? No doubt we cannot reproduce in these days the circumstances and conditions of the first century. But Christ preached a kingdom which was also a brotherhood; and these are days of citizenship. Should not the City of God be set before men, so clearly, so earnestly, so practically, that they may see in it the heavenly pattern of all that is best in earthly citizenship and association? Should they not be made to feel that, in entering it, they become new men, or rather *men* in the full sense of the word, citizens of a city quite as real as the city of London, or of Paris, or of Berlin, and with privileges and opportunities immensely more inspiring.

### III.

The city is called the Bride, the Wife of the Lamb. What a wonderful lesson this ought to teach us about our own marriages, as well as of Christ's love for his Church. From the marriage at Cana to the marriage of the Lamb, all marriages are to be holy.

The city has the glory of God, her light being like a stone most precious, clear as crystal. Here, as often, the Revelation re-echoes the Gospel: Ye are the light of the world: let your light shine. Would not our light be brighter and steadier, if it

sprang from truer faith in this city of God and our personal place in it?

The city has a wall, great and high. This must mean that there is a vast difference between those who are really in the city, and those who are outside: a difference, however, like the other items in the heavenly vision, to be claimed on no mere formal or ceremonial grounds; for there shall in no wise enter into this city anything unclean, or he that maketh an abomination or a lie, but only they that are written in the Lamb's book of life. But observe: it is the Lamb's book, and it is the Lamb that loveth us, and hath loosed us from our sins in his blood.

The city has twelve gates, open to all quarters of the world, and at each gate an angel. That means what we sing of in the 100<sup>th</sup> psalm, and proclaim at home by the bells of our churches, and abroad by the voices of our missionaries, those angels, some of whom the Lord hath sent forth to gather together his elect from the four winds while others stand at the open gates to welcome all comers: "O be joyful in the Lord, all ye lands, serve the Lord with gladness, and come before his presence with a song."

The city lieth foursquare. Alas for its earthly counterpart, which we men have been building! The King of the city prayed that his citizens might all be one, as he was one with the Father, so that the world, seeing their unity, might believe. And are there not signs that at least the more thoughtful citizens of the holy city have begun to see that Christian unity is only less necessary than Christian truth? Earlier in the Revelation we see the plan our Lord approved. He recognised in Asia seven churches in seven cities, one for each, not optional or congregational churches, but local, territorial, and catholic; churches not for notions but for neighbours, for places, not parties. Even at Sardis, the worst church of the seven, where spiritual life was but a name, even there, the few that had not stained their garments had no hint to depart. The divine remedy was not separation, but reform. Here is a task for the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the city lieth foursquare.

Great the task, but love is greater;  
Love can Love's own prayer fulfil:  
Holy Ghost, Illuminator,  
Show the way, and give the will.



The twelve gates are twelve pearls. It is said the pearl is the only gem which the art of man cannot improve, and that so it is an Emblem of Christ. We read indeed of twelve gates. But, after all, the way is one, and that is Christ, the pearl of great price.

The city hath twelve foundations. Unlike the gates, the foundations are of different stones, representing the twelve apostles, no two of whom were alike. While the squareness of the city tells of compactness and unity, the various colours of the twelve foundations tell us that unity is not necessarily uniformity. Compare, for instance, the epistles of St Paul and St John. On the other hand, the entire absence of distinction of honour in these various foundations shows that all the twelve apostles are on an equality of office and dignity in the new Jerusalem, so that Simon Peter has no prerogative above Simon Zelotes.

The street is of pure gold, finer than any gold on earth. Where our treasure is there will our heart be also. May there not also be a suggestion that what we tread underfoot in the holy city ought not to be our real treasure at all?

“And”, says St John, “I saw no temple therein”, or, more exactly, “no sanctuary”, no *ναός*, from *ναίω*, to dwell, no local habitation of deity. Then, there being no sanctuary, there is no sacrificing priest. The sanctuary was reserved for the priests, and consisted, in the old Jerusalem, of the Holy Place, with its ceremonial lights, its altar for incense, and its table for reserved bread; and beyond the veil, the Holy of Holies, with the Real and Adorable Presence. In Christianity there is nothing of all this. It is as obsolete as circumcision, and there can be no reasonable doubt that such a recrudescence of Judaism as came about in the middle ages, and has lately been reproduced by conscientious, but misguided, men in the Church of England, would have been met by St Paul, if he could have seen it, with the like vigorous reproofs as he addrest of old to the Galatians. In the Epistle that goes by the name of Barnabas (chap. 16) the absence of a *ναός* is pointed out as a clear distinction between Christians on the one hand, and both Jews and heathen on the other. The proper age of such externalism is past (Heb. 9, 10). The Lord God, the Almighty, and the Lamb, are our only, sufficient, and transcendent sanctuary. We dwell

in Christ, and Christ in us; we are one with Christ, and Christ with us.

Our churches are not temples; but, as S<sup>t</sup> James calls them, synagogues, meeting-places for the members of Christ, the children of God, the citizens of the kingdom of heaven. Many kinds of ministers are mentioned in the New Testament, but none of them are described as officially ministers of sacraments, still less, if possible, as priests. Baptism, it is clear, had no special administrators; and the Eucharist was at first, in the Church of Pentecost, a domestic institution, an ordinance of the Christian family, celebrated by the head of each family *at home*, as the similar ordinance, the Eucharist of Creation, on which our Lord grafted his Eucharist of Redemption, is celebrated by all pious Jews in their houses, every Friday evening, and on the eves of the great festivals, to this day.

The glory of God did lighten this city; the lamp thereof is the Lamb, and the nations shall walk amidst the light thereof and the kings of the earth do bring their glory into it. Must not this point to political, as well as personal recognition and honour of the city of God? Can any nations and their rulers be walking in the light of this city, and bringing their glory and honour into it, if they are at war with one another, or indulging in those unjust or irritating practices which lead to war, or if their only relation to the city of God is to keep the peace between contending factions of professing Christians? The glory of any person or institution in holy scripture seems to be his or its distinctive character or possession, which for the nations and their sovereigns is temporal power. How can this power be brought into the city of God? Not, certainly, to enforce the unwilling conformity of individuals; but, as certainly, to uphold and express, before the world, the Christian faith and worship of each nation as a chosen people of God; that is, by some form of what is popularly called Church Establishment, and reverently gathering leaves from the tree of life to heal its wounds, and make its temporal citizens ready to enter in through the ever open gates into the city of God; to be therein refresht evermore by the water of life, and strengthened by the fruit, withdrawn of old for sin, but now restored to those who repent, because between Genesis and Revelation One has come and bruised the Serpent's head, and

the Cherubim repel no more; while the garden of man's childhood has grown into the city of the living God, the general assembly and church of the firstborn, who are enrolled in heaven.

#### IV.

The city of God is not the Church as we see it, but the Church as it ought to be, the invisible soul or formative principle of the visible Ecclesia, and we must no more expect the perfect realisation of the ideal in the Church Militant than in the individual member of that Church. But, at present, the Ideal, so far from being realized, is not at all generally recognized.

Look at the Church of England. Its constitution is feudal, as if we were still living in the middle ages. There is no conscious or intelligible citizenship in it. The Reformation was a very wonderful work, if we consider the difficulties the Reformers had to deal with. But it left the constitution of the English Church, so far as the absence of all citizen franchise in it was concerned, untouched. The Church has no more voice, either nationally or locally, in the election of its bishops and pastors than it had 500 years ago. Its lay members are still outside of its organization, rather subjects of patrons and parsons, than members of a Christian brotherhood and fellowship; all that they were fit for, perhaps, in the time that then was, but far from what, if they were once fairly trusted, they would soon show themselves capable of becoming now. It is time, at all events, that pastors should cease to be appointed to the cure of souls by the man with the gold ring, and, when appointed, left in a practical autocracy.

One great step, then, towards realizing the ideal set before us in the sacred word, must be to do in the Church, in the lifetime of some now living, what has been done in the State in my own lifetime,—to lift up the people from serfs to citizens. Take St Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians. It is all about the Church; and there is no special message for bishops, elders, or deacons from beginning to end. Even an excommunication is to be the common act of the whole Church. The terrible abuses at the Lord's Table, where, if anywhere, according to later notions, the clergy should have intervened, are to be remedied without any special judgment of theirs. The Church

members, when they come together to eat, are to wait for one another; and that is all. The ideal of the Church, all through the New Testament, and not in the Revelation only, is not a monarchy, except that Christ is its king, nor an oligarchy, but a brotherhood, with elder brothers no doubt, a city with its chosen officers, a freely organized polity. For many a long century this divine constitution was symbolized to the eyes of all by the ritual of the Eucharist, at which all stood as equal members of a royal priesthood; their chosen president beyond the holy Table; his assistants, if any, on either side, and the people in front; a ritual which the prayers in the mass still recognise twice over, by the word *circumstantes*, though nobody is standing but the priest, and all the rest are kneeling behind him; an inconsistency of ritual which is more than paralleled by glaring inconsistencies between the ancient doctrine still exprest or implied in the mass, and the doctrine which is now associated with the mass. Kneeling is a Western innovation, forbidden on all Sundays, and every day from Easter to Pentecost, by the 20<sup>th</sup> Canon of Nicæa, and introduced, I suppose, in the middle ages, to adore the Host. All Churches would do well to restore this primitive ritual. Could not all parties in our English Church find here a meeting point? The mass, in its mediæval shape, will not be permanently tolerated by the English people; and the compromise embodied by our Reformers in the Prayerbook, might well be superseded by a nearer approach to those primitive forms which they ever appealed to, and which none of us in these days, so far as we are scholars, can dare to dishonour.

Even an Apostle, we must remember, to fill up the place of Judas, was elected by the Church, with the concurrence indeed of the eleven, but by no means at their dictation. Of course the seven deacons were elected. Compare our *Si quis*, read, it may be, in a big town church, where hardly a soul knows who is meant, and not many what. Then see how the formularies which our young clergymen have to accept, are clogged with ambignities. The Privy Council judgments in the Gorham case, in that of Essays and Reviews, in the Bennett case, and in that of the Bishop of Lincoln, leave it open to us all, in four different departments, to contradict what we have affirmed, and to practise the contrary of what we have pro-

mised. And these formal judgments do by no means cover the whole field of our inconsistencies.

In order to remedy these abuses, and to present the Gospel to the English people, and to all peoples, all over the world, attractively instead of repulsively, let us pray for a spiritual apprehension of the Christian citizenship, both in the clergy, and in the laity. The wife of the Lamb, the light clear as crystal, the wall great and high, the twelve gates, the city lying foursquare, the twelve foundations, the street of gold, God and the Lamb our only and abiding sanctuary; all the nations and their kings, throughout the earth, Christian and at peace; nothing false or unclean within the walls; the water of life and the tree of life free to all; God tabernacling with men, wiping away tears, destroying death and mourning and crying and pain; all things new for all who will believe it, but the fearful and unbelieving in the lake of fire, the second death; these to be rescued, those to be strengthened; and all of it present, in fulfilment of our Saviour's *ἀπ' ἄρτι, ἀπὸ τοῦ νῦν*, henceforth;—this is the City of God and our Duty in it. For, as that great teacher F. D. Maurice wrote in his Lectures on the Apocalypse,—“We are not reading of some city to be set up at some distant day on this planet—we are not reading of a city in some other planet—we are reading of that of which Christ is the Ruler, and therefore of which all in every place who confess Him are citizens . . . . The Apostle was shown that which is; not that which is not.”

And as to the Bible itself, the more I find the New Testament, in all its parts, and in all manner of intricate harmonies, ever revealing one Lord and leading up to one City; the more sure I am that that Lord is God, and that City divine.

And when I trace the like intricacy and the like harmony, though in ruder forms and half-barbaric adjuncts, back through the Old Testament in Prophets and Psalmists, in Moses and Patriarchs, I have small disposition to believe that the chapters at the end of Exodus are tales of a tabernacle that never was. And though I hesitate to accept the dates deduced by the old chronologers from the early chapters of Genesis, and must look upon Eden as an allegory, and the days of creation as

a mystery unexplained, I by no means throw Moses to the wolves in the hope of saving Christ. Granted the friend whom John had toucht and handled in Galilee, and then described in Patmos, and miracles, in either Testament, are but a natural accompaniment.

J. FOXLEY.

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