

# **CITY OF PEACE**

*ACTS 16:9-15; REV 21:10-22:5; JOHN 14:23-29*

## **Introduction**

Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady* sings *“All I want is a room somewhere, far away from the cold night air, with one enormous chair; oh wouldn’t it be luvly!”* According to the Daily Mail in Dec 2011 in a survey more than half of Britons secretly want to live in the countryside. Apparently this was despite 90% of us living in towns and cities. Over half of the people who took part in the survey said their ideal was a detached house with a large garden, near to countryside walks and overlooking a pretty view. Almost two-thirds dream of a large garden, 39 per cent want to live in a good community and one in five say it would be important for their home to be environmentally-friendly with solar panels and extra insulation. Perhaps you feel like that too! In my work as a pastor I meet many people who moved to MK because they were attracted by the quality of life here. Many took the chance to leave an increasingly crowded London and came to this city of trees and green open spaces – the largest and most spacious of the post-war garden cities. It may not be the ideal for everyone, and there are some parts of our borough where life is not pleasant or easy, but many of us are quite attached to MK.

## **Heavenly Jerusalem**

On the lonely island of Patmos not far off the coast of Turkey, St John the Divine, dreamt of Jerusalem and the city life he had known before his exile there. He recorded his visions in

the book we call Revelation, a book which the compilers of the Christian scriptures put right at the end of the Bible. St John had a vision of a special kind of city, a new Jerusalem, as he put it, pretty as a bride on her wedding day. We have to try and imagine what cities must have been like back in Bible days. They could be a place of refuge either from the danger of the countryside or as a place to hide from your enemies. St John the Evangelist and the BVM went to the large city of Ephesus to get away from persecution in the Holy Land and were able to live safely there until enough other Christians joined them to form a strong community. In the days before tarmac roads and electric street lighting, at least the narrow streets and close-together housing would have provided enough light from lamps and burning torches, to find your way around after dark. Not like the pitch-black countryside unlit except for stars and the moon when it was out. St John's dream city was a bit different, though. There was no need to provide artificial light for God's glory shone 24/7. In fact, so wonderful was this light that it shows the way for the whole world, not just those who live in the heavenly Jerusalem. There were other unusual things about it, too, such as the absence of a special place of worship. God seems to be everywhere and doesn't need a special place to be worshipped. The city gates never need to be locked at night-time and there is no crime for no-one comes to live there who has bad intentions. There was something which the earthly Jerusalem didn't have, but many other ancient cities did, and that was a river running through the middle. Jerusalem was a hill-top city in the Judaeen high-country so water had to be brought in specially. But in the dream-city, unlike so many ancient city rivers which stank of rubbish and effluent, the river was so pure that it made you

better if you drank it or bathed in it. *Oh, wouldn't it be luvrly!*

## **Paul's cities**

St John the Divine wasn't the only one who had visions. Around about 51AD St Paul had a vision whilst he was in the far west of Turkey, not far from modern day Istanbul, wondering where he could travel with the good news about Jesus. On the second of his long missionary journeys he crossed from Asia to Europe and began to spread the gospel in the cities of Greece. Many of the letters which make up the NT are letters that Paul wrote to Christian communities that had formed in some of the cities of Greece and Turkey. Christianity rapidly grew along the main routes that the Roman Empire had established and it took root in the cities of the ancient near East and southern Europe. It was very much an urban religion. One of the wonderful conversion stories that Luke tells in the book of Acts is of Lydia. She was a good business woman, dealing in the luxury end of fabrics, selling the dye-fast Tyrian purple cloth which didn't fade with age or repeated laundry. Whether she was by the river as part of her work with a plentiful supply of water, or because it was a place where devout Jews went to pray, Luke doesn't make clear. Paul and Silas found her there, presumably with others, either in her family or her employees, and after they shared the gospel with her she decided to follow Jesus as well. The waters of the river turned out to be more than just a way of washing her special cloth, for she and her folks were washed in the waters of baptism too! This was in Philippi, a Roman colony with special privileges and a tax-free status, where also the local jailor was converted. So began a Christian community where later from house-arrest in Rome Paul

would write one of his letters. He would thank them for their generosity, urging them to be prayerful and also to value their freedom from religious laws now that they followed Jesus.

## **My Father's House**

Jesus had inspired both St John the Divine and St Paul. When we come to today's gospel reading we hear how St John the Evangelist recalls the way in which Jesus spoke with his disciples before his death. After they had left the scene of the Last Supper and before his arrest, Jesus speaks to reassure his disciples because they are upset.

Jesus tells his disciples that soon he will be leaving them. They have followed him until now but soon they will not be able to stay close to him any longer. Where he is going they cannot yet follow. They are troubled and upset, already on edge because of the rising tension and Jesus' anticipation of his death. St John tells us of the strong reactions of the disciples, in particular the ways Peter, Philip and Thomas react. Jesus seeks to reassure them. "*Do not let your hearts be troubled*" he says. He explains that he's going to prepare a place for them *in my Father's dwelling*. In the meantime they can express their love and devotion for him by continuing to follow all that he has taught them. Soon they will receive the Holy Spirit who will help them to carry on being faithful. If they and anyone else keeps his word they will discover that he and his heavenly Father have actually come to make their home in them. Indeed the promise of the Spirit is a foretaste of what is to come. One day, Jesus said he would come back and take his followers to be at home with him in his heavenly Father's dwelling. The Spirit in their hearts would bring them

the gift of peace despite trouble, persecution and feeling bereft of him. Jesus said all of this as they made their way out of Jerusalem and to the garden where he would be arrested. Now Jerusalem means “city of peace”, but Jesus had been deeply disturbed that it was anything but a place of peace. He came to usher in a new way of being able to live at peace with God. He didn’t explain it all at the time, but through the developing inspiration of the NT and the first believers we begin to see what it means. St Paul preached, taught and wrote to encourage communities of Christian believers to live at peace with each other and to work for the greater good of their society. They principally did this in their urban environments. St John was driven by the vision of a new kind of urban life – the ideal was the heavenly city of peace, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. In this community God’s light, healing, warmth and love made human life something that was positive and saving. Christian believers who came into this way of life could live up to the ideals that the earthly Jerusalem never fulfilled. In the early days when many believers were of Jewish origin, Jerusalem had deep meaning and affection for them. As more and more Gentiles and people who had no real connection with Jerusalem joined the Church, the old Jerusalem had less meaning. Finally when Jerusalem and its Temple were ransacked and ruined by the might and fury of the Roman Empire, both Jews and Christians concentrated their efforts on building local communities of faith in synagogues and churches.

## Conclusion

We have inherited that kind of faith-culture. When the gospel first began to spread throughout the rest of Europe and in the British Isles, it took root in rural settings. We have a kind of deep-seated attachment to the village church and think of the countryside as the ideal place. Like the Daily Mail survey we secretly dream of an idyllic country life. But it wasn't like that at the start of the Christian faith. And we need to get real: 90% of us live in cities and country life can be very isolating and lonely. Here in New Bradwell, one of the strengths of our local area is the quality of community life. Our church has many connections and roots in this community and it's something for us to value, treasure and help to develop. Our local area now included in the larger urban area of MK, is where God calls us to live out the vision of the heavenly Jerusalem. As the local church we are to be a beacon of God's light, we are to offer the healing waters of the heavenly river, we are to be the place where all are welcome and find acceptance. But we do not do this in our own strength. At the centre of our life is the throne of God and the Lamb who is Jesus. Only when his life fills us individually and together can we express that life in community. It is he who draws us together by his Spirit and is in his strength that we are to share it with others.