

Revelation 21:1-7

Arthur C. Clarke, who died two years ago, was one of the most influential science fiction writers of the 20th Century. "2001: A Space Odyssey" was considered to be his greatest achievement. The man, however, was not a Christian. The following quote bears witness to this: "If there are any gods whose chief concern is man," he writes, "they cannot be very important gods." In contrast to these words, St. John writes the following from our text: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God."

These two quotes are directly opposed to each other. "If there is a god, he would not have man as his chief concern," on the one hand. And on the other hand, "God dwells with man and they will be His people, and He their God." The one quote comes from the simple mind of man, the other from the unsearchable mind of God. The one expresses the depraved nature of sinful mankind, the other shows the merciful heart of the Almighty God. The one, we could say, is the thinking of this world, the other proclaims the glory of heaven. And in the final analysis, is it not true that those who are perishing have the mindset of Clarke, but those who are being saved, the mind of Christ?

On Good Friday two men were dying next to Jesus. The one gave little thought to the man upon the center cross. He could not help him, and even if he could, why would he? The other turned to Jesus and said, "Remember me, Lord." He believed that he was the chief concern of his God; that Jesus could save him and that He would. And that attitude still lives today in the heart and mind of every true believer.

Your presence here today gives you away. If God is not concerned with you, then why are you here? If God is not interested in you, in your problems, your needs, your eternal destination, then why would you come here and waste both your time and His? But you are here as Christian people, are you not? As the people of God who believe that God desires, as He says, to dwell with you, to make His home with you now and forever.

But even as we believe this, we must admit that the thinking of this world expressed by the words of Clarke, has attached itself to our weak minds and flesh. With Clarke, at times we wonder, "Why would God care so much about me? I am so sinful, so petty, so selfish. I do so little for Him. I spend my time mainly on what I want and like and so little in His Word and in prayer. Why would God have me as His chief concern? I am a nobody in this great big world." Clarke died with those words etched upon his soul. But for you, God has something else in mind. He wants you to live and die in the confidence of His grace in Christ.

In Revelation 21 He gives John a vision of what heaven will be like. "A new heaven and a new earth...the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven...as a bride adorned for her husband...death shall be no more, nor crying, nor pain, for the former things have passed away." All over these words we hear the little word "new." Heaven will be new to us in every way. It's very difficult, in fact it's impossible to picture what heaven will be like. All we have ever known is the world in which we live. A world filled with sin and pain, with tornados and oil spills, death and sorrow, doubt and depression. In this world we must live entirely by faith for we do not see God. We hear His words, we eat His Supper, but His presence is hidden from our eyes. What we do see is all the evil around us and within us. No wonder most people live in despair. No wonder they share the sentiments of Clarke, "Why would God give a hoot about us?"

But friends in Christ, new things are coming. What we see now will all pass away. Now we have problems; in heaven your problems will be gone. Now we struggle with sin, despair, and doubt; in heaven will be only peace and joy. And God tells you now that heaven will be new for you in all these things because you are His chief concern; because in no way does He want you to think, as Clarke did, that you are too insignificant for Him to love, too sinful for Him to forgive.

John writes, "Behold, God...will dwell with man." At one time Adam and Eve knew what that was like. God dwelled with them in paradise. In Eden there was no death, no mourning, no crying, no pain, no sin. And they knew without a doubt that they were loved by God. They were the crown of His creation. He made everything for them. He gave everything to them. But that world is no more. Now we live with sin. Now people hate each other and kill each other. Now people grow old, they become sad; people are hurt, lonely, troubled. People die. God has not changed, we have. He did not move, we did. We moved away from Him, away from His truth and love.

But here in our text for today, John gives us hope. A new day is coming. A new heaven and a new earth. A new home for us where we shall see God face to face. It's paradise all over again, but a new Eden where sin, and Satan, and death can never come in.

There is a warning for us in these words of St. John. Do not become too attached to this world. Do not fall in love with the outdoors. Do not allow the things of this life to pull you away from the Word and Sacraments of Christ. This world is passing away. All that we have, except for our faith in Jesus, will one day be gone forever. Anyone who lives for this world will, in the end, perish with this world.

But God is merciful. He knows our weaknesses. He knows how we struggle to live as Christians in a dying world. And so His promise is not just to dwell with you in heaven, but to dwell with you now to help you, to rescue you. Though you and I cannot see Him, your God comes to you even as His words come to your ears, because you are His chief concern. He comes to strengthen your faith. He comes to build up your joy and your hope. He comes to forgive you. Whatever your sins against Him, against your family, your spouse, against your neighbor, He forgives you. In Christ all things are new. Your past is pardoned. Your life is now sprinkled clean with the waters of Holy Baptism.

I knew someone years ago who wanted very much to move on and be rid of his old way of living. He had struggled with drugs and violence. He had much guilt and depression over what he had been. But it was hard for him to shake off his past. It was difficult to break his old habits. One day he was reading this section of Scripture in Revelation 21 how everything would be new in heaven. "I want that right now," he said. "I want a new life...my old one is not worth keeping." I showed him in Scripture where it says, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation," and that takes place, not later, but now through faith in Him. That man has long since passed away. But he died with hope. I know because I buried him. And now he who was made new in Christ knows the joys of a new home with his Savior.

Those joys are for you. That new home is for you. The new heaven and new earth await you; you who are a new creation in Christ washed clean of your sins in His blood. Have no doubt. All this is yours in Jesus because you are God's chief concern. Amen.