

## Homily for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 2016

(Year C: Rev. 21:10-23mod)

I've been speaking all this Easter season about the passages we hear these weeks from the most-misunderstood book of the Bible, Revelation. You can find my previous homilies on the parish website, and I've also been using my Bulletin column to expand on John's story and its importance for us. Today I want to touch briefly with you on two things about the passage we just heard. Let's look first at the "New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven."

What happened to the "old" Jerusalem? It had been destroyed by the Romans a quarter-century before John was writing. Do you remember what it felt like on 9/11? Imagine what it would be like if not just the twin towers and the Pentagon, but all of Manhattan and all of Washington DC had been flattened. That's what it was like for John's congregations. And, to boot, they lost the place where they had always believed God lived on earth: the Jerusalem Temple. And the troubles hadn't ended: the destroyers of Jerusalem and the temple were to John's very day arresting his people, forcing them either to swear loyalty to the destroyers or suffer the consequences.

So John promises a "new" Jerusalem to replace the old. But note it's not a city the people should try or even hope to build: It comes as a free gift from God, not just restoring what's been lost but making something unimaginably better: "The city had no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gave it light, and its lamp was the Lamb."

John's vision has given hope to every generation of Christians who have found themselves in impossible situations. When we can't save ourselves – from persecution, or illness, or addiction, or sadness – John tells us we don't have to; God has prepared a new, unimaginably better replacement for what we have lost.

But we can't just sit back and wait for it; once the city appears, we have to be able to get in.

John says there are doorways in the city's walls – facing every which way, inviting everyone. But each is closed by a gate. Today's reading leaves the verse out, but you know what the gates are made of: "*The twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made from a single pearl.*" The "pearly gates" are no random choice: John is telling a spiritual truth here, describing in symbolic form how we get into the New Jerusalem that God is offering us a home in. This is the second lesson this week.

How do you make a pearl? You start with an irritant, something the oyster can't get rid of but has to adapt to and live with. So the oyster works over the annoyance until that irritant has become something lustrous and beautiful. We even take them and wear them as jewelry – all from an undesired, irritating, annoyance. There's the spiritual lesson.

Remember the old spiritual "Amazing Grace"? The author was once the captain of a slave-ship, carrying human beings as cargo to the New World. Then "I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see." Ex-Captain John Newton

became ultimately a better priest and a better poet because he knew what he was once capable of. Pearls don't grow in placid, irritant-free oysters.

Saint John knows that each of us either now has, or someday will have, something we wish we could be rid of – a sorrow, a chronic injury, a sinful habit, an addiction, burdensome care for a relative, a hated job – but we seem stuck with it. But rather than disqualify us from residence in the New Jerusalem John says that working over that very trouble, making something beautiful and precious to God out of it – that's why imperfect and sinful and suffering people can have hope; what so much bothers us becomes the way in to the City, whose residents are not to be the untroubled and the innocent, but those who have struggled in their suffering, who have hoped in God, and have by God's grace overcome.