

May, 26, 2019 Heaven's Gate Homily: "It had a massive high wall, with twelve gates where twelve angels were stationed and on which names were inscribed, the names of the twelve tribes of the Israelites. (Rev. 21:12)

From its inception in 1925, the American magazine "The New Yorker" has been one of the most notable literary periodicals in the English speaking world. Over the course of nearly a century, many of America's most distinguished writers and cartoonists have made outstanding contributions, and are partly responsible for making the magazine such a huge success with its readers. It is worth noting that scores of cartoonists have taken a pen in hand and poked fun at those who turn up at the pearly gates after exiting this earthly life. Passing through the gates of heaven is our life's goal, but it is not always easy. There are no free passes! In one memorable cartoon, not one, but two men, appear before St. Peter, the keeper of the keys, outside the gates of heaven, hoping to gain admission. The first one to speak introduces himself to St. Peter, attired in a judicial robe, is one Arthur Friswell. But St. Peter wants to know the identity of the one standing next to him. "My lawyer, Arthur Templeton", replied Mr. Friswell. Apparently even at the pearly gates an advocate is needed for the defendant! Just imagine the lawyer's fee!

Pause for a moment to reflect on the many jokes we have heard in the past in which there is a reference to Heaven's gate. In one story, a hapless, self-indulgent man appears before one of the sentinels of Heaven. His life was thoroughly reviewed by Gabriel the Archangel. "And why should you be allowed to pass through the pearly gates?" he cried. "In your life, you failed to perform one good deed". "Not true", protested the man yearning for Heaven, "I once gave ten cents to a poor man". The archangel then turned to St. Peter for advice. "Hey Pete! This guy wants to enter through Heaven's gate. His one and only good deed was handing a poor man a dime. What shall I do?" "Give him back his dime and tell him to go to Hell", directed the first of the Apostles.

How did the pearly gates of Heaven enter the public's imagination? The answer is found in the twenty-first chapter of the Book of Revelation. The last book of the Christian bible, the Book of Revelation is rather strange and confusing. Nevertheless, it is the climax of the biblical story of salvation. The author is a mystic, a visionary. He makes liberal use of symbols, metaphors and startling images in his writing. Just what does he see? He has a vision of the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. He has a glimpse of Heaven.

You may recall that one of the glories of the city of Jerusalem is the temple. For the Jew, the temple is the dwelling place of God on earth. Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah looked upon the temple as the holy place where all the nations on earth would one day eventually gather. "In days to come, the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest mountain and raised above the hills. All nations shall stream toward it". (Is.2:2-3) In the seer's vision in the Book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem, the temple is conspicuously missing. The New Jerusalem is not built by human hands. Its foundation is not made of stone. In the vision the entire city is a temple illuminated by the light of the Risen Christ. It is the place where humanity and God meet. It is a city of light. There is no need for the sun and the moon since there is no night. The glory of God and the presence of the Risen Christ characterize the New Jerusalem. Christians in the New Jerusalem are bearers of the Risen light of Christ.

What lessons can we derive from the visionary?

Heaven is beautiful. It "gleams with the splendor of God". (Rev.21:11) "In the saints the Church is beautiful", declares St. Ambrose, doctor of the church. Heaven is not so much a place, as it is a fellowship, a community;

If Heaven has a wall, it is only because it is set apart from the world of sin and death, violence and destruction. It is a city of peace.

The New Jerusalem is a city unlike any earthly city inasmuch as one enters through gates bearing the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. "There were three gates facing east, three north, three south and three west". (Rev.21:13) The

twelve gates speak to us of the universality, the catholicity of the Church, and that people come from all corners of the world and from every conceivable direction into the holy city.

In one of his sermons Blessed John Cardinal Newman compares Heaven to a church. And the reason is clear: it is a God-centered experience. In Heaven, we hear solely and entirely of God. We praise him, worship and thank him.

Only those who live in the light can have a vision of what awaits him once his earthly journey is over.

For the Christian, the end is simply the beginning.

Amen!