

A picture of all the Saints

Revelation 7

When I was younger my brother and sister and I would sometimes spend our summers working on large jigsaw puzzles. We'd cordon-off an end of the kitchen table and start putting together the 1500 or 2000 pieces in order to recreate the scene on the front of the box; usually some foreign scene of an unknown European city.

One summer my brother received for Christmas a puzzle with a difference. On the front of the box was a story: a murder mystery, with no picture! The aim was to solve the murder by piecing the scene together without knowing what the finished picture was meant to look like. I had absolutely no patience for such an exercise, but my brother settled in for one long summer when we lost him as he took forever to finish the puzzle and solve the mystery.

Sometimes I feel that church life is like putting a puzzle together without the picture. As we look at our church we see lots of pieces. At Waitara we have a women's craft group, a youth group, ESL, playgroups, Ministry of Game, SRE in our local school, Bible studies, four services and associated teams of people... Pieces of the whole but are they fitting together? Can they fit together? And if they do come together, what's the picture meant to look like? Or maybe we can understand the pieces as people; each piece represents each one of us individually. How are we meant to be arranged together? It would be wonderful to have a box with the picture on it, A reference point that said "this is what Waitara is meant to look like".

Well, that picture is never going to be revealed to us *in detail*. Like my brother did with that picture-less puzzle, it's our job, I believe, to work together thoughtfully and with patience so that the specific picture of what God wants from us emerges over time. But *unlike* my brother's experience, it's not as if we have no image to work with; we *do* have a picture that gives us some guidance. It's the picture, not of our own local congregations, but of the church gathered in heaven.

Today, Sunday November 1, is All Saints Day, and traditionally on All Saint's Day churches used to preach on Revelation chapter 7, a chapter of the Bible containing an image of all the saints gathered before God in heaven. This is a picture of the end result, the result that local churches of all stripes are working towards. So as we piece together the specific pieces in front of us, what's the bigger picture that we're aiming at? There are 3 things I see in this picture that I'd like to share with you I see a congregation that is *sealed*, I see a congregation that is *unified*, and I see a congregation that is *glorified*. Three things that help us think about what we are doing here at church each week.

So let's turn to chapter 7 now, and to begin with we should put this chapter in some context. Chapter 7 comes to us in midst of God's judgment. At the end of chapter 6 the earth's kings are calling the mountains to fall on them, in chapter 8 we have the

seven trumpets calling forth more acts of judgment. But chapter 7 is a type of interlude; here we have those who survive God's wrath.

The chapter opens with five angels: four of them holding back the winds of destruction, and fifth calling out to them in v3: Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God. "Just wait a minute" he says. "Stop the destruction, not everything is going to be destroyed, we need to mark out some people for saving." And so we read that 144 000 people are sealed; 144 000 people are marked as belonging to God.

Now, we need to understand that the numbers here are not literal. Whenever you see a number in the book of Revelation you need to know that the number is symbolic. Now we get 144 000 by multiplying 12 (representing 12 tribes of the Old Testament) x 12 (representing 12 apostles of the New Testament) x 1000 (representing the idea of a great magnitude). So the 144 000 is representative of the whole community of God's people—all those trusting God's promises from across time and across the globe—and it's these people who have a seal placed on their foreheads. Now when you read that they had a *seal* placed on their *foreheads*, it's not talking about a baby fur seal, we're talking here about a wax seal with a stamp pressed into it. They used to use these in the olden days to indicate ownership. This passage is telling us that everyone who believes in the promises of God, they'll be marked as belonging to God and they'll survive the great judgment.

Since moving to Waitara Jas and I have been living in a construction zone. The houses on the other side of the street have all been bulldozed and multiple stories of units are going up in their place. If you walk to the end of our backyard and turn around to look back over our roof you can see 7 cranes in the sky: bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang. It's a great metaphor for the coming judgment of God. The old has been ripped down and the new is being raised in its place. The process is noisy and unpleasant, and things will look very different once the job is finished.

But not everything is going. Because of the decrees of our local council, there are some grand old trees that have been marked for preservation. Each tree fortunate enough to be chosen has had a fence put round it with a sign attached: *Do not touch, tree protection zone*. It's a great image of what's happening here in the passage, isn't it? Will anything be saved on that last day of destruction and renewal? Well, yes. Those people who have been marked out for preservation, those people who've been sealed.

So this helps us think a bit about what our job is here at Waitara Anglican. God has elected some for salvation, and our job is to discover those who've been sealed and to put some fencing; to help them survive and make it through. As the writer to the Hebrews says: To consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds,²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

And as we meet together we see people of all different cultures and backgrounds.

In verse 4 John has *heard* that the number of those sealed is 144 000, In verse 9 he *sees* a great multitude: After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." The diversity of this group is made plain by John; the multitude before him is gathered from every nation, tribe, people and language. But do you notice that for all their different cultural backgrounds there is also a clear unity here: they're all wearing the same clothing (white robes); they're all participating in the one act of celebration (holding palm branches in their hands); and they raise their voices in one song—"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

Living on the Upper North Shore we have ample opportunity to sample this heavenly reality in the here and now don't we? I see this unity in diversity every week in my SRE classes at Waitara Public. A few months back I introduced a memory verse to the class: "God says never will I leave you never will I forsake you" Hebrews 13:5. And in that lesson I had run out of material but still had 5 minutes to spare so I thought "What can I do? I know, I'll ask them to translate the verse into another language." It was one of the most interesting activities we've done in that class. All the Chinese pupils got together, helping each other translate into Chinese. The Korean children were doing the same, we even had one Tongan translation. The poor Anglos were sitting there not knowing what to do!

I remember when I was travelling as a younger person there was a joke that was going around the backpacker hostels. What do you call someone who speaks three languages? Trilingual. What do you call someone who speaks two languages? Bilingual. What do you call someone who can only speak one language? Australian! But that's not us—well, it might be some of us—but if we are seeing both our local context and the picture of the heavenly church clearly, then this again gives us a direction to work towards, doesn't it? To be inviting the many cultures in our area to don the one white robe and to raise their voices in praise to the one God.

Those who are wearing the white robe might have come from different backgrounds, but they all share in the one glorious future. Have a look from verse 13: Then one of the elders asked me, "These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?"¹⁴ I answered, "Sir, you know." And he said, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb."¹⁵ Therefore, "they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence."¹⁶ 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat.¹⁷ For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.'^v 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'"

It's a vision of paradise first given to Israel in the book of Isaiah—that's where this elder is quoting from—and it's a vision appropriate for a community familiar with the desert. Paradise is a place of shelter from the scorching sun, a place of living water where food is plentiful. Paradise is a place where the difficulties of this life are overcome. The battles faced by our own church members may be a little different—

Sickness, relational breakdown, mental illness, unemployment—but regardless of what people are struggling with, the Bible points everyone to the glory of the age to come. So here's another goal – keep pointing people to this hope.

And note that John couldn't be clearer as to how we access this hope. The multitude has this hope because, verse 14, they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Therefore, John continues, they are before the throne of God and so on. Hope starts with being purified by the blood of Jesus. Hope starts by introducing people to what Jesus has done. Hope starts with preaching the gospel. So what does the big picture tell me to do now? It tells me to preach Christ crucified.

So that's the picture that's on the front of the ministry puzzle box, a people *sealed* and *unified* and *glorified*, and that gives us a bit to work on. Our strategy for putting those pieces together is something we'll need to think about. When you have the pieces of a puzzle laid out in front of you there are a number of different strategies you could adopt. Do you search for the corners first and then look for the edges, or do you first clump all the pieces of one colour together? And the same decision will need to be made when thinking about church; what strategy will we adopt as we journey towards this bigger picture? That strategy will come.

But one thing I do know is that the execution of this strategy will rely heavily on some professional puzzle solvers. Everyone in the church is involved to some extent in putting the pieces together. We each have a role to play in connecting with one another and helping one another as we journey towards eternal life. But it's also true that some people make church work their job. We call them our church staff, and as the Rector of the parish this is the team that I lead. And what a great team it is!

Many of you would know Vicki our church administrator and office manager. Vicki is the one who makes sure all the practical things are in place before Sundays can happen: bulletins, the service slides, the toilet paper, the kitchen supplies, the rosters. She handles the mail and phones as well. Whenever Vicki speaks about taking holidays, my stress levels go up because I know how reliant we are upon her!

We have some others who are also paid and they give some expert help in the very specialized area of children's ministry: Richard Speyer and Rachel Warner – and they are doing that work right now, so it's good to have their expertise.

But this morning I want to draw particular attention to Emily Carpenter. Emily grew up in the church, it was here she met Mark her husband Emily's father Gordon is my predecessor once removed; the minister who was here before Bruce. And at some point Emily decided that she too would enter ministry and so she attended Moore college and started work here in her home church. Earlier this year Emily was ordained, so now she's the Rev Emily Carpenter

Emily works three days a week, and in those three days she can be found: directing our children's ministry here at church, teaching scripture at Waitara Public School,

arranging the roster for 5pm church, arranging the music for 5pm church, playing music at 5pm church, playing music at 10am church before going out and directing the Sunday school, leading services and preaching at our services here on Sundays (Emily will be preaching next week, by the way), leading two Bible study groups that meet midweek, Directing HAWK in the July school holidays, training junior leaders for their roles in HAWK, meeting with walk-ins who come in off the street, cooking food for needy parishioners, organizing rosters for those who cook for needy parishioners, organizing events for women here at church, cooking for ministry of Game, pastoral visitation, and these are just the things I've been able to observe in 5 months. I'm sure there are many more things that Emily does that I haven't even seen.

In light of all that Emily does, in light of her good character and in light of her expert training, both official and unofficial, I have asked our Parish Council to increase Emily's employment by an extra day per week. Right now she is doing a whole lot more than three days a week, and a four day a week contract will bring her hours up to be more in line with what she actually does.

Parish Council agreed, but on one condition: to do this will mean setting a more ambitious budget for 2016 and so the green light was given provided we can raise \$15,000 dollars to kick-start our income for 2016. And so, now that you're all gathered together, I'm asking you, Waitara Anglican Church, to raise \$15,000 over the next 2 months so that Emily will be able to begin 2016 on a four-day contract. This is not me asking you to sell things in your garage, that's money for mission, we'll come back to that in a couple of weeks, this is me asking you to dig deep and give.

I'm going to start us off. Here's \$500 from me and Jas. \$500 above and beyond what we give in our normal offertory. I'm not doing this to show off. I'm doing this to provide leadership and to encourage some others to do the same. We now only need \$14,500. Are there 29 other people who are willing to do the same? If you wish you can write a check. It's unusual to write a check these days. In all seriousness, this is the second check I've ever written! Perhaps a better way is to transfer funds electronically, the details are here on page 7 of the bulletin. *For Emily* is what you put on the description field. Or, if you are writing a check, *For Emily* on the front of the envelope.

What's the money going towards? Well, Emily's task to help us piece together our ministry here so that we are encouraging those who are sealed for salvation, so that we are calling people of all backgrounds to praise and trust in the Lord Jesus so that they will live and worship him forever. You're helping paint this picture in Revelation 7, that's what the money is for.

In response to God's word, Jack Rose from our 6:45 congregation will lead us in prayer.

