

No Yachting in Heaven!

No Yachting in Heaven Revelation 21:1-6 "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." (Revelation 21:1) Heaven: what is it, where is it, and are you in a hurry to get there These are important questions, I believe, because I sense that there is a fair degree of confusion surrounding the Biblical concept of Heaven. Mind you, my daughter, Imogen, worked it all out some years ago, when my dad died. She worked out that Heaven was inside a box. Shed been told that Grandpa had died and gone to Heaven, and she knew at the funeral that that was Grandpa in the box, so Heaven had to be somewhere in that box! Most people who are dying that I talk to speak of Heaven as that place where they will be reunited with friends and loved ones after death. The death of yet another dear parishioner last week brings back to mind all the other good people that I have buried from this church. I started here in December 1990, and I think I have buried three-quarters of the congregation we then had (so the rest of you better watch out!) Many of those good people talked at length with me before they died about their hope of Heaven, and they did so in terms of a much-anticipated reunion with lost love ones. When I was a young man - a fresh teenage convert - I used to occasionally participate in street witnessing, where wed stand outside Woollies Town Hall (where I used to work) and annoy the hell out of people as they went by, by handing out religious tracts (pun intended). One of my colleagues in that work used to communicate the message purely by handing out rather attractive pictures of Heaven! These were pictures of beautiful landscapes with waterfalls and ocean views and people flying around without clothes on (though quite tastefully done). His idea was that we would give out these pictures, and explain to people what a great place heaven was - how you got to fly, explore new planets, and have sex with a variety of people - and then, when the person expressed an interest in going there, hed tell them about Jesus! Does that not come close to your idea of Heaven I know some people think of Heaven as being like one never-ending church service, but I suspect that for most of us, an endless church service approximates more closely to our idea of Hell! You see, people use the word, Heaven, to refer to a lot of different things! And part of the problem we have in trying to nail things down is that the Bible itself also can mean a number of different things when it uses the word. Indeed, when the Bible uses the word, heaven or heavens, its often just a reference to the sky! When Genesis says that God created the Heavens and the earth, its just a way of saying that He created all that is above and all that is below - the earth and the sky and everything in between! Another way the term Heaven is used is to refer to the place where God is. When we say, Our Father who art in Heaven, we are speaking of Heaven as a place where God is, as opposed to where we are - Gods own dimension. This is indeed the most common understanding of the term in our culture - Heaven as a sort of parallel universe, that we ourselves hope to enter upon death. It is a place that is somewhere else in the space-time continuum - in another dimension that most people rarely have contact with in life (if at all). This is, Id suggest, the popular understanding of the word, though Id suggest too that its not an especially Biblical one. Of course the Bible does speak of Gods special dwelling place, but it doesnt normally refer to this place as Heaven, and, the Bible certainly never uses the phrase of anyone that they died and went to Heaven. At any rate, there is a third and more significant use of the word, Heaven, in the Scriptures, and that is where it speaks of the Heaven or the Kingdom of Heaven as that point to which all human history is moving. This is Heaven as a historical event - indeed, as the crowning historical event of human history where all things come together in Christ. This is the Heaven we pray for when we pray They Kingdom come and this is indeed the Heaven that we read of this morning in the book of Revelation: "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more." What we have here in Revelation chapter 21 is a Biblical vision of the world as it will one day be. It is a world of peace and of love, where 'the lion and the lamb lie down side by side' and where we 'dont study war no more'. And, according to this vision in Revelation, it is a place where 'the sea is no more!' This may strike you as a rather odd detail to highlight about the world to come, but it is indeed the only detail mentioned in this opening verse. The idea of a place where the sea is no more certainly doesnt square with those pictures that we used to distribute, for they were full of seascape images! Moreover, if you know anything about the eco system, you know that where there is no sea, there are also no clouds, and while some of us might be able to imagine a Heaven without a sea, the very idea of a Heaven without clouds is outrageous! Why would the people of the Bible envisage Heaven as being without a sea Well, most likely because the people of ancient Israel were a people who didnt like the sea, and didnt have a lot to do with it! If youve read your Hebrew Bible at all, you will have heard something of the might of the armies of Israel. You never read anything about their navy though, and thats because they didnt have one. The ancient Israelites were not a coastal people. It was the Philistines who lived along the coast of that region. The people of Israel lived inland and stayed inland as much as possible. They didnt go for seaside holidays by the coast on summer breaks, and didnt get into boats unless they had to. Thats why the story of Jonah and the storm and the big fish is such a drama for the people of that time. It was every Jews worse nightmare being caught in a boat in a storm at sea, let alone swallowed by a giant fish! Moreover, if you read the account of the Creation story in the early chapters of Genesis, youll see that the Ancient Jews understood the whole work of creation as a process of God pushing back the sea in order to create life. "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters." (Genesis 1:1-2) This is the uncreated mass (the tohu wabohu in Hebrew), as envisaged before the work of creation. God moulds land and life out of the dark and formless void of water. To the Hebrew mind, God pushes the water back to reveal land, and then He holds that water back so that people might be able to live (except in the days of Noah, when he deliberately let the waters roll back over, with all the resulting death and chaos). Thats why when God parts the waters of the Red Sea so that Moses and his people can cross to dry land, its seen as a miniature re-enactment of creation - or more precisely as an extension of Gods creative work - holding back the waters and so giving life. To the Hebrew mind the sea thus comes to symbolise all that is dark and chaotic in human experience. And I can sympathise with that. There was a time when I used to think of the sea as my friend - when I used to be part of a rowing crew, used to swim regularly, and used to be out on the water or in the water on almost a daily basis. Those days ended for me when we had a boating accident a few years ago where Veronica almost drowned. There we were,

celebrating my birthday, paddling happily around in boats in the Lane Cover River National Park. One minute were all laughing and joking around. A few seconds later one of the boats has turned over, Veronica was trapped underneath it, and the boat, that had overturned on top of her, was dragging her down to the bottom. The next second I was in the water, and pulling Veronica down and then out from under the sinking boat, as the life jacket she was wearing was actually holding her inside the overturned boat and preventing her from escaping! Veronica was fine. My mobile phone didnt survive so well. Indeed a lost a few things that day in the water, but the most significant thing I lost was my love of the sea. I learnt later that lots of people have been killed on that idyllic little river. There were weeds and things at the bottom of that little river that could tie you up and kill you. I came that day to appreciate the Hebrew perception of the sea - quiet and placid perhaps on the outside, but beneath the surface there were dark and mysterious things lurking - things that will kill you if they can get to you. And if youve seen any of the documentary-type films on the undersea world, you know that this is true. Everything appears calm and beautiful to the casual observer, but theres really a war going on down there, with almost every creature in the ocean dedicating itself to the work of killing and eating all the other creatures down there. "Deep calls to deep at the thunder of your cataracts; all your waves and your billows have gone over me." So says the psalmist (in Psalm 42) - and we know that feeling - that feeling that youre going down for the third time. That feeling of being overwhelmed by circumstances beyond your control such that you find yourself sinking, splashing and fighting at first, and then ultimately relaxing and resigning yourself to your fate, unable to resist the surging waters any longer! In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, and He did so by pushing back that dark and formless body of water. He pushed it back, tamed it, and brought life and light out its dark and mysterious depths. God pushed back the sea at the beginning of time, and the sea has been doing its best to break free and engulf everything once more ever since! The whole story of the Bible could indeed be depicted as an account of the ongoing battle between God and the watery forces of chaos. When Job looks for answers to the pain of suffering and injustice, He appeals to God as the master of the monsters of the deep - Leviathan and Behemoth. When the prophet Isaiah looks forward to Gods coming, he speaks of the day when God will come down and kill the great dragon of the sea. And so when we see Jesus walking upon the water, we know that God must be in him, for He is continuing this work of mastering the deep. And so when He calms the storm on the Sea of Galilee, people stare at him in amazement and say, who is this guy, even the sea obeys him And so, when John in Revelation speaks of the coming of the Kingdom - of that final day when all of human history will find its fulfilment in the coming of the new world - he speaks in terms of the sea being no more, for all that is dark and chaotic has gone, and those of us who have been furiously paddling to stay afloat over the depths will find ourselves secure on dry land. This is the Christian hope - the hope of Heaven. It is a hope for a new world without injustice and hate, where people are treated as equals, regardless of appearance or gender or colour or caste. It is the world we long for, the world as it should be, the world as God created it to be, the new world coming that Jesus spoke of. If we understand heaven in this way, to ask where is heaven is a bit like asking where is the end of the war. ‘How do I get to Heaven Well, you wait, and you keep fighting!. The key point here is that the historic Christian hope is not that I get to go to heaven when I die. The Christian hope is for a new world for all of us, where the old things have passed away and where death and dying and pain and corruption are no more, and where all that is symbolised by the wild and raging sea has been tamed, where everyone and every thing is truly at peace The Christian hope is not just about me making it to heaven and you making it to heaven. Its about this world making it to the point where God is all in all. The Christian hope is not simply that we as individuals might be able to cheat death and go on living, but rather that the world as we know it might be transformed into the world as God always intended it to be, and that we all might enjoy life on this planet in the way in which it was always intended. This means that life, for the believing man or woman, is not just some test, wherein if we pass we get to escape from this life into a better life. Rather it is a war in which we have been ordered to enlist - a battle that has been raging since the beginning of creation, a battle against the forces of chaos and darkness, a battle which Revelation 21 tells us we will surely see won. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; 4he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. And the one who was seated on the throne said, See, I am making all things new.

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