

# The Twelve

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*Homily on Revelation 21:9b-14 – Feast of Saint Bartholomew*

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Ask anyone who has made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land about Jerusalem and eventually they will tell you their impressions of the Old City. Regardless of who you ask, they will at some point describe the walls. Cities in the ancient world were defensive weapons. You fled into the city when a foreign army came. The city protected you. Cities were also about recognizance. They were built on hills or in the case of Jerusalem, on one of the ridges between Kidron Valley and the Hinnom valley in the Judean hill country. From the city wall, you could see for miles, giving you advanced warning of an approaching foe.

Today, for a few New Israeli shekels, you can go up on the walls of the Old City. From that vantage point you can look down on the city within the walls, and look far out over the land around her. In the Bible, we find three themes which express the place of Jerusalem in God's plan for the people of God. The first is ingathering. The second is sending. The third is dwelling.

Ingathering is the role which Jerusalem plays for the Jewish people. Both in the Old Testament period and today for Modern Judaism, Jerusalem is the place "to which the tribes go up." Today, 26% of the population of Israel are immigrants. For a Jew,

“return” to Israel is called *alyah*, which literally means “to the.” It implies journey and destination.

Sending is the role of Jerusalem for the disciples of Jesus. It is “from Jerusalem” that the gospel goes out to all the nations. The term apostle in its original Greek sense means one who is delegated and dispatched, as on a foreign mission. This is perhaps the key idea around the office of apostle, he is a delegate to a foreign nation. Where as for the Jewish people, Jerusalem gathered in the one covenant nation, in the New Testament the covenant is offered to all nations. Hence, the direction of our attention is reversed. The popular traditions about Saint Bartholomew cast him as such a delegate. He is sometimes identified with Nathaniel (which explains the choice of the gospel reading appointed for today). He is said to have travelled to Mesopotamia, Persia and India before going to Greater Armenia where he is said to have been martyred.<sup>1</sup>

But neither of these themes is complete without the teaching we find in the book of Revelation. It is the third theme of dwelling which unites the other two. Walter A. Elwell, in his commentary on Revelation, offers us some insights:

In the Old Testament God dwelt with his people indirectly, by way of the tabernacle and temple, but there was always the recognition that nothing could really contain God. The Prophets foresaw the time when God would be directly

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<sup>1</sup> See Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5:10.

with his people. John sees that being established with the coming of the New Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

The New Jerusalem, not the one whose walls I walked around, but the new heavens and the new earth foretold in Revelation, is the destination to which the people of God from all the nations are making *alyah*. The sacred author describes the eschatological quality of this destination, which is not a place as much as a presence, the presence of God. Elwell tells us:

The presence of God banishes every form of evil, sorrow, suffering and death. The old order with all its limitations passed away. This too, was seen by the prophets.<sup>3</sup>

The tabernacle and the temple in the Old Testament and Jesus himself in the New Testament are the embodiment of God's glory. Elwell notes that "God's glory is essentially himself."<sup>4</sup> The New Jerusalem, then, is the point when ecclesiology and eschatology merge. The New Jerusalem is not a place or even a state of existence.<sup>5</sup> Rather, it is the fulfilment of the relationship of the covenant people with God through Jesus Christ in the Spirit. The sending phase has as its goal a new unity of humankind in the saving action of Christ.<sup>6</sup> It includes, as Joseph Ratzinger notes, "the perfecting of

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<sup>2</sup> Walter A. Elwell, "Revelation" in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 1227.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogmatic Theology, Vol. 9: Eschatology, Death and Eternal Life*, eds. Johann Auer and Joseph Ratzinger, trans. Michael Waldstein and Aidan Nichols, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 234.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 238.

the Lord's body in the *pleroma* of the 'whole Christ' bring[ing] heaven into its true cosmic completion."<sup>7</sup>

When the New Jerusalem descends, the new heavens and the new earth will become the dwelling place of God. To summarize and conclude, I want to share with you how Joseph Ratzinger ended his course on eschatology at the University of Regensburg:<sup>8</sup>

. . . the individual's salvation is whole and entire only when the salvation of the cosmos and all the elect has come to full fruition. For the redeemed are not simply adjacent to each other in heaven. Rather, in their being together as the one Christ, they are heaven. In that moment, the whole creation will become song. It will be a single act in which, forgetful of self, the individual will break through the limits of being into the whole, and the whole take up its dwelling in the individual. It will be joy in which all questioning is resolved and satisfied.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ratzinger served as professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Regensburg from 1969 to 1977. From 1976 he was Vice President of the University. He finished this manuscript in 1976.

<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger, *Op. cit.*