

## **Sermon, 6 May 2007—Fifth Sunday of Easter**

Acts 13:44-52; Psalm 145; Revelation 19:1-9; John 13:31-5

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

This year, during Easter season, the Lectionary lifts out portions of the Book of Revelation to be read. These sections are the most glorious ones in the book, full of the triumph and joy of Easter. But the Book of Revelation is also unnerving and difficult. The Lectionary has given us the opportunity to consider what is there and what it might mean to us in our own day.

The Book of Revelation was written by John, exiled on the island of Patmos for his Christian testimony. This John is not the Evangelist, but another man, called John the Divine because of the visions in the revelation given to him. The portions used during this Easter season open with a vision of the cosmic Christ, standing ablaze among seven lampstands, who says to John, “I am the first and the last and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever.” The next vision is of a Lamb “standing as if it had been slaughtered”—an impossibility only the Resurrection can resolve. Before this Lamb, twenty-four elders and four creatures fall in worship, singing, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered, and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation.” We heard last Sunday of those who now praise God, but whose robes have been washed in the ransoming Lamb’s blood when they came out of the great tribulation.

This Sunday, the ecstatic cries are those that inspired Handel: “I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters, like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out, ‘Hallelujah! For the Lord, our God, the Almighty, reigns!’” We hear that the marriage of the

Lamb has come, that the bride is ready, clothed with fine linen, which is the righteous deeds of the saints. Then, on the last two Sundays of Easter, John will describe the New Jerusalem, the city that has no need of sun or moon, because the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. These six lessons conclude with a return of the voice of the Cosmic Christ: “See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” To which the author replies, “the Spirit and the bride say, ‘come;’ let everyone who hears say ‘come;’ and let everyone who is thirsty come; and let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.”

Now it is perfectly clear what the compilers of the Lectionary have done. They have raised us up, during the Easter season, to witness and to participate in the praise and the glory which is ours in the Risen Christ. This is what God and Christ have achieved. This is their victory and our joy. This is the hope towards which we run. But you will note that in nearly every lesson there is an acknowledgement of the cost of that triumph. Last Sunday’s passage, for example, spoke of a great ordeal and of robes that become white by being washed in blood. Even the tender words “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” point to past suffering. God will console them, but the path to that comfort lies through tribulation and blood. This Sunday, the ecstasy arises because the one who corrupted the earth, bloated Babylon, has been judged and the blood of the saints avenged.

In fact, these joyous visions only momentarily suspend the troubling turbulence of this book. The songs of praise we have heard alternate with the cracking of the seals on the scroll that only the slaughtered Lamb can open, the thunder of horses’ hooves, and the rattle and blare of trumpets of doom. In breaking the first four seals, the Lamb releases the four horsemen

of the Apocalypse: a white horse, whose rider has a crown and a bow, who comes out “conquering and to conquer;” a red horse, whose rider has a broad sword and who “was permitted to take peace from the earth;” a black horse, whose rider holds a pair of scales, selling a quart of wheat for an entire day’s wages; and finally a pale horse, ridden by Death, followed by Hell. When the fifth seal is broken, John sees “under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the Word of God,” who cry out, “How long, Lord God, before you judge and avenge our blood?” But they are told to wait for those others “soon to be killed as they themselves had been killed.”

The opening of the seventh seal is the most ominous. John says, “when the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.” What is more desolate and terrifying than the silence of heaven? John continues: “Then I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them. Another angel with a golden censer came and stood at the altar.” He tells us that this angel offers incense with the prayers of all the saints. But then, he says, “the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.” Then trumpet after trumpet is blown: hail and fire burn up the earth; a blazing mountain is hurled into the sea, turning it to blood; the star called Wormwood falls on the springs of water, killing many who drink of them with its poison; and the sun and moon and stars go dark. Only then does an eagle appear, shrieking, “Woe, woe, woe at the blasts from the next trumpets!”—and what follows are prowling monsters released from the bottomless pit the likes of which are seen only in nightmares, who torture people until, in the words of the book, they “will seek death but will not find

it; they will long to die, but death will flee from them.” Friends, at this point, we are not even halfway through this book!

Now many of you are grateful the compilers of the Lectionary left these portions out and may think it unhelpful that I am recalling them. And yet, I am troubled that our discomfort with them has led us to exclude them. This book, whose name *Apocalypsis* means unveiling and uncovering, remains the least exposed to light, the least aired. To know this book is to know the fullness of Scripture, light with praise, dark with doom. To know it is to know the fullness of the church and of human history, dark and light.

The darkness of the *church*, which we are unable to see if we neglect the Book of Revelation, is religion’s susceptibility to mania, its cohabitation with insanity, its gestation of absolutism, its spawning of prejudice. In this book, we see that rage circles us relentlessly, looking for a parasitic ride on faith. In our self-destructive age, we learn again what ages we thought more naïve than ours always understood. The heavenly censer contains incense and prayers, but also burning coals to consume the earth, and it is hurled onto the world from on high. In the name of God all over the world, the button of the detonator is pushed. No intolerance is more intractable than the lethal self-righteousness stuffed and stiffened with pages torn from Scripture; no violence more satisfying than the destruction fired by prayer. Better we should know what we have dreamed than pretend we never sleep.

These dark materials excluded from the Lectionary have not therefore been “left behind” in the raptures of our readings. They continue to go to and fro upon the earth, spewing agitated cultural gibberish. They give shape to a terrified and hate-filled assessment of our world, the stuff of paranoid evangelists and, in a few alarming cases, of those who influence policy at high levels. They are not only about the darkness of the church, but more

fundamentally about the darkness of human *history*. I am deeply troubled that in our age of high-tech terrorism and environmental self-immolation these passages of horror ring more true to us than the passages of glory.

And yet, this dark picture of human history is the deepest and most systemic analysis we have in Scripture of the collusion of commerce and politics, of power and deceptive propaganda, of human rapacity and greed. Those who gloat over the blood in this book seem not to see this explicit condemnation of global affluence. The passage of rejoicing we heard today follows the chapter describing the lament over the fall of Babylon, the city seated by great waters, drunk with the blood of the saints. John says, “the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, cargo of gold, silver, jewels, and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves, and human lives.” Notice the chill of the descent from luxury items, to staples and necessities, to human bodies and souls. Babylon is condemned for the ruthlessness with which she quantified everything on earth for commercial transaction and subjected even human beings themselves to terms of exchange. The heavenly choirs rejoice at the overthrow of this mercenary and predatory approach to life.

However, Revelation also glows with exalted affirmations of the Church and of history. Those who rejoice forever with God and the Lamb are those who have endured to the end. This book was written to encourage those enduring the dismemberment of their congregations by imperial persecution in Ancient Rome. But this book is ever present. The bowls of wrath poured out are current truth for too many of our fellow Christians

around the world. For them, a ravenous beast and an engorged gluttonous city trafficking in material and spiritual goods are pictures of what they undergo and endure and survive daily. Christian solidarity, let alone compassion, demands of us that we confess that the last days, these days our earth gasps its way through, are savage dangerous days for our faith. The hymns of Revelation, which are ecstatic rhapsodies of relief and gratitude in the mouths of those invited to the supper of the Lamb, become the flat chants of the complacent, when we forget our sisters and brothers, flesh of our flesh, for whom Christianity is costly today. We may hope to join their chorus, but we have no part there if we have taken no part here. Align yourself with those who know that we praise God in our poverty, because in poverty we learn that God is the one thing that cannot be torn from us. Affirm the Church scattered throughout the world and its glorious vision of human oneness. Then the lamps of the Lamb's marriage supper will glow for you. Remember: the "fine linen, bright and pure" clothing the Church "is the righteous deeds of the saints"—which is what you are called to be.

The second joyous affirmation of Revelation is that the full course of history is in God's hands. Whatever the mystery of iniquity is, this book trumpets that it cannot step outside the traces God has laid out. As Martin Luther King Jr. said, "the arc of history is long, but it bends towards justice." That is the Christian vision; that is what this book affirms and what we also are called to affirm. God's unhesitating and persistent desire is to gather men and women "from every tribe, language, people, and nation" into a city whose "doors are always open," where "the glory and honor of all the nations" will be known. Our participation, located in our own time and place, can go forward confidently when we move along these sightlines and live by those principles of welcome and reconciliation and fearlessness,

recalling that the trees planted by the river of that heavenly city towards which we are headed bear fruit for the healing of the nations.

In the end, all, all, all is in God's hands, who sits on the throne with the Lamb slain yet alive, who inspires the church, his bride, to say, "Amen, come, Lord Jesus!" Therefore we praise God, joining our voices with angels and archangels, with apostles and martyrs, and with all the company of heaven, giving voice to every creature under heaven, who forever sing their hymn of praise to the One who made us and who calls us to the wedding supper of the Lamb: "Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to the Eternal Source, the Only-begotten Word, and the Life-giving Spirit, one God, now and forever!"