

**Easter 7C**

**Rev. 22: 12-14, 16,17, 20-22**

**May 16, 2010**

**A few weeks ago, someone on his way out of church stopped to shake my hand, and asked – “Why on earth is the Book of Revelation even IN the Bible? I don’t get it.”**

**He is not alone in his sentiments. This challenging, kaleidoscopic, surreal, symbolic, dense and confusing book of the Bible has confounded the faithful from the beginning. As the New Testament was being compiled in the third century, many people thought Revelation should not be included. In fact, the Eastern churches did leave it out for many years after the Western churches accepted it. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, some of the greatest Protestant reformers struggled with it as well. Calvin wouldn’t comment upon it. Luther relegated it to a secondary status. And Zwingli just insisted it shouldn’t be in the Bible at all.**

**In our own time, while evangelical Christians look to Revelation as a kind of magical code book that will tell them when the second coming is going to occur, the more liberal sorts of Christians like ... well, like us, for example ... we just tend to look away from the strange apocalyptic visions that close out the Holy Bible. We know enough to know that there is no magic code that will tell us when Jesus is coming again. We know that what is important is the quality of our lives today, not when or how the world will end tomorrow.**

**And yet ... there it is. Smack at the end of the Bible. The Book of Revelation. There it is ... smack in our faces, its strange and gory images infused into our culture ... in all those “Left Behind” books, or the movies like “2012” or “The Book of Eli.” There it is ... singing to us through some of the most beautiful music in Christendom. Without the Book of Revelation, we would never have the Hallelujah Chorus, did you know that? Every single word of that great chorus comes out of this last book of the Bible.**

**So what are we to make of the Book of Revelation? What is it doing in our Bibles? In our liturgy? In our hymns? As faithful Christians -- but also as thinking Christians -- what are we to make of a narrative that sounds like someone's very long, very bad, acid trip? How can we hear these words ... not just the very beautiful words of our lectionary selection today ... but all the words of this book, as the Word of the Lord, a Word that can stake its claim upon us, a Word that can teach us, a Word that has the power to reveal something to us of God and God's intentions?**

**The first thing we have to do in order to approach this book is to let go of our preconceptions. Most of the ideas that most of us have floating around in our heads – in fact most of the ideas about this book that are floating around in the culture at large – come out of the mind of one John Nelson Darby, an English preacher who, in the year 1840, preached a series of sermons that gave us most of the ideas we now apply to the concept of the “end times” – the rapture of the faithful, the necessity of the nation of Israel, the time of tribulation. Thanks, John Darby.**

**All those concepts arose in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them aren't even found in the book of Revelation, but in other parts of the Bible ... in Daniel and Ezekiel, in the letters of Paul and the apocalyptic speeches of Jesus. Then, in 1917, Cyrus Scofield published the Scofield Reference Bible, a King James Bible with notes that allowed you to link all these end-time ideas across the entire Bible. To this day, those fire and brimstone, end-time preachers rely on the cues from the Scofield Reference Bible, and if you hear a really good preacher rocking and rolling on the second coming, invariably he will jump from Daniel to Ezekiel to Paul to Revelation and back again, knitting completely unrelated Bible verses into a nice, neat scarf that will wrap up the whole business of the second coming and scare you into submission in the process. Thanks, Cyrus Scofield**

**So take Hal Lindsey and “The Late Great Planet Earth,” and take Tim LaHaye and the “Left Behind” books and erase them from your minds. Revelation was not written to be used in that way. Well then, why was it written at all, you may ask?**

**It was written – as much apocalyptic literature was, including Daniel and Ezekiel, and non-canonical books like Enoch and the Apocalypse of Peter – to encourage a community suffering under persecution. It was written in a deeply symbolic language, so that those on the inside would understand the allegories and the metaphors and discover in their symbolism that God was working to save them.**

**In the case of this particular book, it was probably written during the persecution authorized by the Roman Emperor Domitian. Earlier, Nero had blamed Christians for Rome’s burning, and Christians had been hung in his garden and set ablaze to act as living torches during an imperial garden party. Under Domitian things were worse. People who would not worship the Emperor, burn incense to his image and bow before it, were subject to death. The author of Revelation had already been exiled from his churches, and he wrote to them to encourage them not to give up, not to give in, that God was already winning the battle.**

**The word “apocalypse” means “unveiling”. It refers to an unveiling of God’s intentions and God’s actions. The trouble is, the unveiling comes cloaked in this high symbolism, with beasts and bowls and seals and lakes of fire and dragons and cups and whores. What exactly is being unveiled here? Well, some parts of Revelation clearly refer to situations at the end of the first century. Almost all Biblical scholars believe the number 666 is a numerically transliterated version of the name Nero Caesar. One can find in Revelation allusions to the destruction of Jerusalem by Romans in the year 70 AD. The symbol of the Whore of Babylon then would be Rome. It is a vision anchored in a particular historical moment.**

**But there is also a sense that the story is bigger than just simple encouragement to first century Christians. Otherwise, how could it have been seen as scripture two hundred years later, when it finally made it into the Bible, if it only referred to a bad time for the faithful under oppressive Roman rule?**

**Revelation speaks of something larger and more lasting than immediate history. It speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, of the end of everything that is evil and corrupt and cruel and wrong. It tells ... no not only tells ... it sings! of the final victory of the Lamb that was slain, the Lamb who lives at the very heart of this book, the Lamb whose death and resurrection is already rewriting history all around us ... rewriting our history into a narrative that has a guaranteed happy ending.**

**Revelation acknowledges the complexities and brutalities of this world. Anyone who survived the Rwandan genocide will know what it is like to live in a world where the Dragon takes charge. Anyone who marched out of a Nazi concentration camp with a number tattooed on their arm knows what it means to be marked with the number of the Beast. Any Argentine mother who watched in horror as soldiers snatched her son away in the middle of the night, some 30 years ago, and who still does not know what happened to him – the people who live in this kind of world understand the chaos that is layered throughout Revelation. They hear these words as a call to persevere, not to capitulate to the demands of the state, to resist, knowing that a better day is coming, if they can hold on in prayer and in faith.**

**For us, living in comfort and security in the First World, this message has less power. We don't feel the need of divine deliverance. We don't feel like we are living through a bloody war, where all hell has been unleashed upon the world. Until our own personal apocalypses pile up upon us. The lost job, the failed business. The cancer diagnosis. The dying parent. The impending divorce. The sick child. The defiant teenager. In those moments it does feel like the Four Horsemen have been loosed upon us, like we are headed for a lake of fire, like the dragon is chasing us into the wilderness.**

**And that is why, most of all, we need this curious book called the Revelation to John. We need to hear again the singing that is at the heart of it, the voice of the gathered throngs who have survived the great ordeal and who stand at the foot of the throne, singing "Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto the one who sits upon the Throne and unto the Lamb."**

**We need to know that living – reigning – in heaven is One who suffered. Who suffered physically, mentally, and spiritually. Who suffered unjustly. And who through that suffering won the victory. Who guaranteed that all these trials, all these battles, can only end in one result. In God’s hand. In God’s control. In God’s peace.**

**We need to hold that hope, that there will be a transformation of all our sorrows, that the murders and wars and thievery and hate that we see in the world around us does not get the final word.**

**They do not. Do not get the final word. No, the final word – the Word -- the last Word is God’s, and it goes like this:**

*The Spirit and the Bride say “come.” And let everyone who hears say “come.” And let everyone who is thirsty, come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.*

**That is our happy ending. That is the end of our amazing story. Everyone who is thirsty can come. Anyone who wishes can take the water of life as a gift.**

**Maranatha. Come, Lord Jesus. Let it be so. Amen.**