



Revelation 7.9-17
Matthew 5.1-12
1st November 2020

Th God who wipes away our tears

INTRODUCTION TO TODAY'S THEME

As autumn extends into early winter I'm reminded of those dark, frosty mornings when, as a teenager eager for some pocket money, I got on my bike at 6am to do a paper round before school. I still remember the smell of newsprint on my hands or the fear of posting the Daily Mirror through a customer's letterbox instead of The Daily Telegraph. Ringing the doorbell at 6.30 and asking for the paper back did away with any Christmas tip that year!

What I liked most was Thursdays because that was the day the comics were delivered. I managed to get through most of The Beano before having to pop it through one of the last doors on the round.

Books like Revelation seem strange to us, but they were really a bit like comics to their first readers. Their apocalyptic imagery and odd language today leads to all sorts of fanciful theories, often propounded by people who read them more like a textbook than a novel. Because, in a way, Revelation – and all Apocalyptic books written in those far off days, were rather like a comic. People loved this kind of writing, they could not get enough of strange beasts, mysterious prophecies, and dream like visions. Yet, unlike now, they knew exactly how to read this type of literature. Never to read it literally or take it scientifically, but always to enjoy it as myth, poetry, and symbolic narrative.

So, our task today is to look at one of the richest visions in Revelation. There's a vast throng in heaven, there's worship and there's blessing. God seems to be honouring those who have gone through the fire of struggle. And if it seems set in the future, it has a

message for the present. Never thought you'd read a comic in a service? Well, this is a very grown up one and behind the imagery of broken seals, a Lamb on the throne and a crowd of a 144,000 there's a profound message of hope and encouragement.

THE GOD WHO WIPES AWAY EVERY TEAR

Recently my wife, who is a Junior School teacher, during an RE lesson, asked her class to draw a picture which might symbolise faith and then write a sentence or two about it. She brought some of the pictures home to show me and we were struck by just how many children had decided, unprompted, to draw their interpretation of heaven. Talk about religion and faith and these youngsters seemed to instinctively equate it with an idea of heaven.

We often think the last book of the Bible, Revelation is primarily about heaven. Why wouldn't we when we have scenes in it like the one from today's reading?

Yet, most commentators today think it was written not so much as a prophesy about tomorrow but as a way to sustain the faithfulness of the early Church Christians in their today.

Mid twentieth century writers like C.S. Lewis or Tolkien would, I think, have made good writers of Apocalypse literature. They both created alternative worlds in Narnia and Middle Earth in which adventures, journeys, struggles, and victories occurred. No one believes in the real world they'll ever meet a talking beaver or a murderous Orc, yet the lessons about companionship, faithfulness and courage that come from both these writers have inspired the lives of millions who have read these fables.

The first readers of Revelation were early Christians and belonged to a Church with growing pains. Inside the Church some members were being drawn into pagan worship and outside Emperor Domitian was setting up shrines in cities like Ephesus at which the people, including Christians, were asked to burn incense to him; fuelling the idea that the one who sat on the Roman throne was indeed a Son of God.

So, both from within and without, it felt as if this new movement, The Church, was under attack and struggling.

John, writing in exile from the isle of Patmos, tells a story to encourage and in today's reading there's a celebration going on.

A huge crowd gathers around the throne waving Palm branches, which in the ancient world usually symbolised victory. This crowd has gone through the fire of suffering, yet they have survived. They are dressed in robes washed in blood – of course that sounds grizzly to us – but probably not to them. Just as Jesus shed his blood by living a life of love and service, so to wear robes washed in blood is to say they have lived that way also; their life has, in some small way, been reminiscent of that of Jesus.

Many of the children in Rachel's class wrote little comments on their paintings saying faith and religion gave them a sense of happiness.

I guess that's a universal hope. A belief and faith in something bigger than ourselves bringing us peace and joy.

However, Jesus talked of cross carrying and walking narrow and difficult pathways. He never promised to remove us from the challenges of life but rather offered us his companionship and strength as we go through these tough calls.

John, I think, wanted his readers to wear these stained robes with the steadfast conviction that the way of Jesus, even if it leads to suffering, is THE WAY of faith and discipleship.

Yet, in this mysterious vision of his, before the seventh seal is broken, he talks of the protection of God offered to those who have gone through such an ordeal.

He says, and remember this is the language of picture and poetry, that the Lamb who sits on the throne will be our guide and take us to springs of living water.

Imagine if you had been imprisoned in Ephesus because your conscience did not permit you to burn incense to an Emperor who thought he was God, imagine if you had seemingly lost everything and everyone because of such integrity and bravery and then you remember that day when your house church community read John's letter, and this slightly ironic image of a Lamb who was also a Shepherd, of the one who would lead you to springs of living water. This was, indeed, a message of hope during days of despair.

Three promises are to be found here, each one, in its own way, beautiful and profound.

The message from the throne is never again will those who have gone through this ordeal have to face hunger or thirst. Surely words of hope to people who were probably subsistence farmers, barely able to live all year off the land they tended.

The message from the throne is never again will the sun beat on them or any scorching heat exhaust them. These first century people never went out sun bathing. Life was at the mercy of the climate, it was tough and harsh. That's why shade and running water were so highly prized. Life with God is pictured in terms of a cool, refreshing oasis.

And the third promise from the throne is that God will wipe away all their tears. Surely a promise that resonated with hope during these anxious days of persecution.

In terms of a time-line I think this message from Revelation describes more the 'Direction of Travel' than a specific moment. For some of its original readers these words from the throne spoke to them of heaven, even as they knew their life on earth was drawing to an untimely end. For others these were words to give them courage for the present moment as they pressed on seeking to live with integrity.

Today is All Saints Sunday; a day for us to remember with thanksgiving those who've gone before and as we do so to also recall these three promises spoken in that vision from the throne.

That in God's nearer presence there is no hunger, no harm and no tears. Perhaps that last promise means the most. In the mystery of faith and death we hold on to the idea that God will wipe away every tear.

And, in seeking to read Revelation not only as a book about the future but one that speaks of our present, we here on earth – the Church Militant – also seek to live as people who are both inspired and strengthened by God day by day.

On this All Saints Sunday let us once more place both ourselves, and those who have gone before, into the hands of God who gives us *strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow*.

May it be so, in the name of the one who wipes away every tear.
Amen

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