

Marquand Chapel
Tuesday, October 25, 2005

Behold, The Lamb of God

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Revelation 4.1–5.14

This lectionary reading for today from the Book of Revelation is bristling with imaginative language that can just as easily be abused as used fruitfully in the life of the church. As I try to make some sense of this passage, I suggest we bear in mind the following preliminary points:

1. The Book is written in that sort of imaginative language scholars call ‘apocalyptic’ in which the impending future is the time of God’s great reckoning with the destiny of the world.
2. While the text itself does not claim to be written by John the disciple, the author does assert that he has received a “revelation of Jesus Christ” sent to him by an angel, and he considers himself among those in the early church who prophesy in the name of Jesus.
3. The text is addressed primarily to seven churches in what was called Asia Minor, who were under severe persecution by Roman authorities, and the text aims to give the churches hope for the final triumph of Jesus Christ in the coming future, even if during the present times many have been persecuted and many more will be persecuted for their commitment to Jesus Christ.
4. The text itself had a difficult time being accepted into the New Testament canon and was one of the later texts finally deemed apostolic in faith and character, if not in authorship.
5. In our time this text has become the normative blue print of the ‘End Times’ for the folk on the right wing of the church, in which Jesus will return in judgment in the near future, at which time those who have not affirmed Jesus as Lord and Savior will be consumed by fire, even cast into lakes of fire.

For those of us in the middle or in the left wing of the church, this book seems to have a distinctly sour taste and foul odor, and we might wish the early church had left it among the non-canonical books and thereby relieved us of the unhappy burden of trying to interpret or even to preach from the text.

Everyone agrees that the Book intends to give consolation and hope to the churches being persecuted by the Roman Empire. Lest we think that persecution is similar to that social prejudice today in which persons of faith are thought to be irrational and obscurantist by their secular neighbors, hear what was written by a Roman provincial governor named Pliny to the Roman Emperor named Trajan in the early decades of the second century. Referring to the Christians that were being brought before him, Pliny writes:

I have handled those who have been denounced as Christians as follows: I asked them whether they were Christians. Those who responded affirmatively I have asked a second and third time, under threat of the death penalty. If they persisted in their confession, I had them executed. For whatever it is that they are actually advocating, it seems to me that obstinacy and stubbornness must be punished in any case.

Those who denied being Christians now or in the past, I thought necessary to release, since they invoked our gods according to the formula I gave them and since they offered sacrifices of wine and incense before your image which I had brought in for that purpose along with the statues of our gods. I also had them curse Christ. It is said that real Christians cannot be forced to do any of these things.

Others charged by this accusation at first admitted that they had once been Christians, but had already renounced it; they had in fact been Christians, but had given it up, some as long as twenty-five years ago.

So, these Christians were considered criminals by the empire, unwilling to be obedient to those practices in which the empire and its gods and its Caesar were worshiped and honored as the real powers that give order and meaning to the lives of its citizens. At least the Romans recognized that the Christians, in refusing to renounce Jesus Christ as Lord and pay honors to the empire, were committing a treasonable political act punishable by execution. Perhaps Christians are just too radical and subversive of empire to be allowed to roam freely among the people.

How then might one build up hope among the beleaguered Christians facing such definite and drastic persecution, that sort of persecution that takes away one's life, not merely one's dignity and pride. It is not uncommon in human history that persons who have been unjustly treated exhibit uncommon courage and hold out against their oppressors in the hope that justice will finally be done and their oppressors will receive the just reckoning they deserve: the oppressors will ultimately get it in the neck.

At stake here is who we think God is and upon whom we base our hope for deliverance. In the Book of Revelation there are some competing images and themes about God, Jesus, hope, the future and who finally reigns and who is finally saved.

One set of images goes something like this: The Lord Jesus Christ, the Lion of Judah and the root of David, will come soon and rescue the true believers who have remained faithful in good works and uncorrupted by the Roman empire and its ways of life. But not only will Jesus the Lion rescue and redeem the faithful, he will also slay the evildoers, the unfaithful, the fornicators, the liars, the cowards, the sorcerers, the polluted, the murderers, and the idolaters, casting them into a deservedly loathsome lake of fire and sulphur. [21.8] Justice will finally be meted out when Jesus comes, displaying that fearsome and violent power—that sheer coercive force—that will administer just deserts to the living and the dead.

Something close to this has been an attractive picture that has echoed down through the centuries in the church as the defining outline of that ultimate judgment and consummation that awaits all humans: a dual destiny in which the Christians will be saved and the non-Christians will be damned.

To be sure it seems good and fitting that those being persecuted for their faithful lives should take comfort and strength in remembering the power and strength of Jesus Christ. Remain faithful, we can say, because the power of Rome and all the empires, all the cities that human beings might construct are not the powers that can confer blessing and hope ultimately. They shall all, in their administering of their empires, finally wither and fall into corruption from lies and idolatry. Empires might protect the strong and mighty and destroy their enemies, but they cannot bestow everlasting redemption. Do not trust them to do so and therefore do not give them the power to confer final meaning and truth on your lives.

But then, in what do we Christians trust, to whom do we take comfort even when our lives are at stake? Is it the Lion Jesus who will finally avenge the death-dealing the evildoers have visited upon the faithful?

But listen there is another strand in Revelation that gets lost in this popular picture. Can we hear it, can we see it, can we imagine it?

In those heavenly realms in which ultimate matters are decided and justice meted out, there is a throne and through an open door John can see the throne. There is One seated on the throne, surrounded by a rainbow and by wise elders and dancing spirits, and lightning and thunder echo throughout the chamber of the throne. Many are the creatures gathered around the throne, and day and night without ceasing they sing about the One sitting on the throne:

Holy, Holy, Holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come. [4.8]

You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created. [4.11]

The Creator of all things is the One on the throne!

But there is a scroll in the right hand of the Creator, and an angel asks:

“Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” And no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth has been able to open the scroll and read what the future holds.[5.2-3]

The scroll of the future has been sealed up and unreadable. And John the prophetic seer begins to weep bitterly. Are we not lost in the midst of the travail of tears of this life of persecution and death if we cannot see into the future and know that upon which we can hope? The future is so dark and death so near at hand. Who can assure us about the future?

Then a wise elder says to John: “Do not weep. See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.”[5.5]

Ah, the Lion of Judah, the strongest among the creatures, who devours all challengers? Surely we can trust in his knowledge and strength.

And just as we are ready to heed the Lion and clutch his mighty mane and praise his ferocious jaws and teeth, John sees a extraordinarily strange sight: “A Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered.”[5.6] A slaughtered Lamb close to the throne of the Almighty?

But all those who surrounded the throne, upon seeing the Lamb, burst into song saying to the Lamb:

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; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God and they will reign on earth.[5.9-10]

The One on the throne and the slaughtered Lamb are worthy of glory and honor, power and wealth, wisdom and might, as they reign forever and forever! The slaughtered Lamb is the one who unlocks and reads and is the scroll that is the key to the future and the ground of our hope.

There is much here for us to ponder. But consider carefully the image of the slaughtered Lamb, which of course the persecuted Christians know is the crucified Jesus. It is in him, precisely as one proclaiming an impending peaceable kingdom of non-retaliation who was killed by the empire. Jesus the sacrificial Lamb, slain by and for the sins of the world!

Are we finally to trust in Jesus as the One who will bring real retaliatory justice in the approaching future? Is the slaughtered Lamb finally to become the avenging Lion? Is that the vision of the future and the triumph of God over the empires? Or is the avenging Lion to become the sacrificial Lamb?

But, listen as we hasten on to a later passage in John's text and ask ourselves whether an avenging Lion could bestow this vision on John?

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...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;
He will wipe away 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."
..."See, I am making all things new." [21.1-5]

So, John the prophetic seer, receiving a revelation of Jesus Christ from an angel, envisions a future in which the persecuted and slain will be healed and the God known in the crucified Jesus will be the Alpha and the Omega of all things and will be God over all the creation. God will make all things new and overcome all the great enmities and injustices that have reigned in human history. A new Jerusalem!

Is this, then, the One in whom the persecuted are to have hope and precisely this sort of transformative hope?

Surely the tension in the texts is palpable. What is the true map of the future and who is the One in whom the persecuted are to hope and trust? It seems so intuitive, given what we are inclined to think about justice, that the persecuted and executed will hope in their own restoration and in the final punishment of their persecutors.

But is this what it means to hope and trust in the slaughtered Lamb, the crucified Jesus? The Lamb that refused to take up arms against his crucifying butchers—is he now the avenging Lion commanding the final blood bath to begin and casting the evildoers into the just deserts of a lake of everlasting fire? Will the New Jerusalem have as its backside the stench of violent retribution?

No, no, no! Do not convert the slaughtered Lamb into the avenging Lion! Is it really so counter-intuitive for Christians—even Christians under duress and suffering—to say with another John as we do regularly in our celebration of Holy Communion: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” [John 1.29]

All this dear friends, I have dared to preach in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, One God, Mother of us all. Amen.

YDS 10/25/05

[The quotation from Pliny is taken from M. Eugene Boring and Fred B. Craddock, *The Peoples New Testament Commentary* [2004], p. 761. This is an excellent commentary quite accessible to clergy and laity alike. See also M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation* [1988].]