

The Book of Revelation

Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41

Psalm 30

Revelation 5:11-14

John 21:1-14

During the Season of Easter, many of our Scripture readings come from the Book of Revelation. The reason for this is because the Easter Season celebrates the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's glory, new life, and a future full of hope, and these are the very things that the Book of Revelation celebrates. The Season of Easter, therefore, gives us an opportunity to explore the most widely misunderstood book in the Bible.

The Book of Revelation is misunderstood by many people because it is saturated in unusual symbolism and allegories. This was common of apocalyptic writing and was popular within Judaism and Christianity from around 200 B.C. to 200 A.D. Many fundamentalist Christian communities today try to interpret the Book of Revelation literally, as though it was a code to be deciphered in order to know the future. Reading Revelation in that way is very dangerous and distracts us from the true beauty of the book. This week, we are going to look at some important things to consider when reading the Book of Revelation.

First, it is the "Book of Revelation," not the Book of Revelations. I had a Scripture professor in seminary whose #1 pet peeve was hearing Christians refer to the last book of the Bible as the Book of Revelations. The word is NOT plural, it is singular. It is ultimately referring to the one, final, perfect Revelation—Jesus Christ. The word "Revelation" is an English translation of the Greek, New Testament word *apokalypsis*, which literally means an uncovering or unveiling. When people try to make the title of this book plural, it can lead to the mistaken belief that the book contains a bunch of secrets that must be revealed. Here is the truth—what God needed to reveal He revealed in His Son, Jesus Christ. The Book of Revelation, then, tells us about Christ using mysterious imagery and symbols.

There are several important characteristics in apocalyptic writing, and knowing these can help us understand the Book of Revelation. Usually, such writing expresses universality. In other words, it doesn't focus just on one nation or one issue, but expresses ideas that are universal and affect all people and even all creation. Apocalyptic writing also contains numerous dualisms. There are the dualisms of heaven and earth, spiritual and material, heavenly beings and human beings, and evil and good. This type of literature also contains a limited theology. It is not meant to show us a broad picture of who God is, but rather, a limited picture of God, usually seated upon a throne, ruling over His people in rigid, often violent ways. As I mentioned earlier, apocalyptic writing is also saturated in symbolic language. Most apocalyptic writing was done during periods of crisis and the authors purposefully made their language symbolic and obscure in order to veil its meaning from those who were not part of the community. In the case of the Book of Revelation, the author purposefully wanted to keep the true meaning of the Book from the Roman government, symbolized by Babylon and the dragon, so as to avoid persecution.

The first three chapters of Revelation are described as "Letters to the Churches of Asia." The author of the Book of Revelation has Jesus instructing him to write letters to seven particular communities located in Asia Minor. After Jesus identifies Himself as the one sending the letters, all the letters follow roughly the same pattern—there is the formula "I know..." where Jesus explains what He knows about each individual community and about their spiritual welfare, then using the formula, "but I have it against you..." Jesus explains each community's weaknesses. Included in each of the letters is also a challenge to repent, listen, and be people of integrity, and promises of Christ's imminent return and final victory.

After these seven letters, in chapters four and five, the author of the Book of Revelation writes about another vision,¹ one that takes him to the throne of heaven and unveils events that are about to happen. What the author is hoping to accomplish in this section of his book is not appear to be some sort of spiritual fortune-teller, predicting the future, but rather, to unveil real spiritual realities to otherwise earthly, material events. By doing so, he hopes to show his readers that God is in complete control of everything, everywhere. Our second reading today from chapter five of the Book of Revelation is the end of this particular section and describes the angels and other creatures worshipping around the throne of God.

Interestingly, chapter four and chapter five have the same basic structure; one is focused on God the Father and the other on His Son, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God. The structure of both chapters includes 1) revealing God and the Lamb's glory (4:2b-8a and 5:5-7), 2) worshipping God and the Lamb (4:8b-11 and 5:8-12), 3) the first hymn (4:8b and 5:9-10), 4) a narrative (4:9-10 and 5:11-12a), and 5) a second hymn (4:11 and 5:12b). The purpose of these two chapters is to reassure and encourage Christians before the time of tribulation starts. John wants to make sure that Christians know that through the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lamb of God, we have a future full of hope. The somewhat pitiful view of the Church on earth given to us in the first three chapters of the Book of Revelation gives way to a glorious view of the Church gathered around the throne in eternal worship.

As we continue to hear stories of the brokenness of our Church here on earth, the Book of Revelation gives us encouragement that God is in charge of all things. And, He is leading His Bride, the Church, to Himself in mercy and love. In our sins, we can only say, "God, forgive us." In His mercy, we can say, "To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor, glory and might, forever and ever" (Revelation 5:13b).

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read one or more of the "Letters to the Church of Asia" in the Book of Revelation (found in chapters 1-3). Then, write a letter from Christ to you. Follow the same pattern that John used in chapters 1-3 (that pattern is mentioned above in my homily). What would Jesus' "I know..." sound like as He wrote it to *you*? What would His "but I have it against you..." sound like? What would Jesus' challenge to repent, listen, and be a person of integrity sound like as He wrote specifically to you? What would His promises of an imminent return and final victory sound like?

¹ The first vision he writes about is in chapter one and sets the context for the book.