

## Apocalypse Now: Our Passport for Life

The Books of Acts and Revelation (Apocalypse) do not so much compete for our attention in the weeks after Easter as complement one another. Acts tells of how the first followers of Jesus remembered him and tried to live out his teaching and nonviolent lifestyle in a violent world at the edge of the Roman Empire. Apocalypse is the text of hope reminding us of the triumph of Easter - life over death. It is no accident that it is the last book in the Bible - placed there as our guarantee of victory over the forces of evil and destruction. In it John tells us that because of the Resurrection, we can now cope with the suffering, the violence and everything else we endure in life. But as we pray for His Kingdom of peace and justice to come in the future, we do so in the knowledge that we are also called to live it out in the here and now. To be a disciple implies that one is poor and powerless before the world. And that's the way most of us feel when confronted by today's world poor and powerless. But the challenge of Christian witness is that we confront the world and its problems with the hope and confidence born of Easter. And what keeps us going is what the New Testament calls Grace, best translated as an inner peace and courage. Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it all memorably when he said that because of the Resurrection, we are living out the consequences of a victory that has already been achieved. The Apocalypse is our guarantee that, in Julian of Norwich's words, all will be well. In short, it is our passport to a new life, a life with-out end.

## Follow me, and witness to peace, forgiveness and reconciliation

In today's First Reading Peter's defence before the High Priest is that; *'Obedience to God comes before obedience to men'*. These words echo through the centuries. We might think of St Thomas More's words at his trial; *'I die the King's good servant but God's first'*. Or St Oscar Romero's call to the El Salvador military the day before his assassination; *'When you hear a man telling you to kill, remember God's words, 'Thou shalt not kill'. No soldier is obliged to obey a law contrary to the law of God. In the name of God, in the name of our tormented people, I beseech you, I implore you; in the name of God I command you to stop the repression'*. The Gospel Reading - John 21 - is an epilogue to the Fourth Gospel and is equally relevant to us today as it was to the early Christian community. It is filled with symbolic language concerning the mission and ministry of the Church - the people of God. The *'153 fish'* (a triangular number, a perfect number, meaning all are included) and the unbroken net represents the mission call of Luke's Jesus to become; *'fishers of men'*. The commission to; *'Feed my sheep'* represents the Good Shepherd's pastoral ministry which should be continued by those who choose to follow Jesus. To be a missionary and to minister is not possible with-out Jesus. Alone, the disciples toil through the night, in vain. Indeed, Peter and the disciples remind the High Priest that they are not alone when they preach the Gospel but that God's Holy Spirit is with them. *'Follow me'*. Let us pray for the strength of the Holy Spirit, and as the people of God to follow Jesus' mission to proclaim the joy of the Good News and to minister his love, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation.

## Religious lives beyond exclusion.

The psalm today holds our readings together. It calls the whole of creation to joyful service of the God who Moses encountered in the burning bush. The God beyond naming, beyond idols, beyond manipulation. It calls us to remembrance of the shepherd God who would still today call a liberated people to full life. As such we are to be a sign of where full life is to be found; where the nobodies are at the centre sharing new life with God's people. Israel and Church are to model the universal, creative and liberating will of God as they joyfully live out of the divine freedom in confidence and gratitude. The psalm sings of opening access to this living God to the wider world. By John's Gospel the break between Synagogue and young Church was acrimonious. Yet Jesus renews the vision of the Shepherd God who gathers all the disciples and protects them. This is a renewal of the prophetic vision of Moses but has often been interpreted in an exclusive, anti-Semitic way. But the Apocalypse blows away all exclusivism with John the Seer's vision of the peoples from every nation, race, tribe and language worshiping in freedom before the throne of God. This is all the more remarkable for being written, in a time of persecution, under an oppressive Roman imperial power. Our readings coming from real worlds of power politics, political compromise, and religious accommodation, still provoke us to enter the original prophetic imagination of liberation and promise. There nobodies become the People of God. There a gracious space is opened into which we are to invite others freely to join us, regardless of their past, their status, or their race or colour. Our communities and parishes are challenged to be sacraments of just such a space. May it be so.

## Braced to take the strain

Two dark moments in John's Gospel frame today's text: the departure of Judas and Simon and Peter's over-confident assertion of his steadfast faith. This is the point at which John decides to have Jesus begin his 'Farewell Discourses'. The reader of the text has to contemplate the all too understandable actions of the disciples and the baffling, yet consoling, messages of the Discourse. There are three parts to the declaration: glory, separation, love. The glory spoken of here is the result of what Jesus has been doing and will go on to do. God's cause, and how it works, will be brought into focus. And the first move in the process has to be made by Jesus himself. Only later will the endorsement be made: 'God will in turn glorify him'. The separation spoken of is real - akin to the loss of a parent: 'My little children, I shall not be with you much longer'. And with the separation a bewilderment, a disorientation, a fruitless search for what is beyond reach, in a place to which we are denied access for now: 'Where I am going you cannot come'. (This has been cut from the lectionary version.) But now, time is short. Jesus is about to hand over the task to his disciples, although they are still, to all appearances, too young for it. The remedy is in them sticking together, loving one another. But they must, absolutely, take this course, otherwise the Good News will not be heard, will not even be perceived by those who need to hear it. This is why Jesus has to present it as a Commandment. It has to be understood as absolutely essential: 'By this, everyone will know'. And crucially this love that is spoken about must follow the example Jesus has been living out with them in the few months they have spent together. traipsing along behind him, not choosing the direction or grasping what Jesus was about. From now on they need to understand. Time is up. They must brace themselves. Now they must take the strain.

## Focus on the simple laws: be nonviolent, welcome the stranger

John has a vision of the heavenly city being lowered out of the sky. It has twelve gates, open to all the directions of the compass. Inside this city, there's no temple. Instead the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb, they are the temple. It is their light that lights up the city. So being nonviolent, unburdened by worry, and all our gates open to strangers, we can feel God's face shining on us. The Holy Spirit as the Gospel says, 'will teach you everything'. Both readings have a message for the early Christians. Instead of accepting difficult laws around circumcision, they should focus on the simple ones: be nonviolent and welcome the stranger. These words are messages for us, a post Easter people. We are called to be nonviolent to ourselves and others. We are called to keep our gates open and share a meal with Christ the stranger. Instead of a temple we have Jesus whose Peace will always be with us. And the Holy Spirit who will tell us what to do next. Like Paul and the brothers in the first reading, we can endeavour to solve conflict through nonviolence, without the worry of carrying a knife, or the threat of a nuclear deterrent. In the meantime all we have to do is keep ourselves alive, waiting in the Peace of Christ for the Holy Spirit to tell us what to do, how-ever long that takes. We are called to give up the burdens and violence of immigration policies that prevent people working, accessing healthcare, living in peace. We are called to give up the rigid conventions of hospitality, the fear mongering by the media that makes it hard for us to open our doors to Christ the Stranger. Instead, as Easter people, we see a city whose gates are always open.

## To be won over by Christ's Gospel of peace

*'The witnesses put down their clothes at the feet of a young man called Saul.'* Thus, with a little stroke of the pen, Luke sets up the whole of what is to follow in the life of St. Paul (the major theme of the second half of the Acts of the Apostles). It's a shame the lectionary misses out the next chilling verse - *'Saul approved of the killing'* - because that line completes the sketch of the character of the unconverted Saul: so sure God was on his side, that he was doing God's work and that violence in pursuit of his cause was justified ... Stoning to death is fortunately not part of our experience. However, has Saul's mind-set really gone away? Governments regularly assert their right to destroy people and property in the name of peace. The weapons change (guns and bombs replacing rocks). But 'Saul' - meaning mainstream culture, popular media and, perhaps, ourselves, too, as individuals - still *'approves of the killing'* (rather than mourning each death). Questions of war and peace are always complex, but it's at least time to register the disconnect between complacent acceptance of the 'inevitability' of violence and this Sunday's Scriptures. Like Jesus, Stephen dies actively praying for his persecutors. At the end of the Book of Revelation the invitation to feed on the tree of life and enter the Holy City is extended to those who have *'washed their robes white'* (in the blood of the Lamb) - i.e. the victims of violence, rather than its perpetrators. And, finally, on the night before he dies the Lord prays for such a unity among his followers *'that the world may believe'*. May we so live that even 'Saul' (the unconverted parts of our culture and, indeed, of ourselves) may be won over to Christ's Gospel of peace.

## Feeling a presence that disturbs

Gifts are often unexpected and surprising. On Pentecost day, the birthday of the church, the gift of the Holy Spirit is given to the followers of Jesus gathered in the upper room. The Spirit comes as wind and fire: powerful elements that bring the curse of Babel to an end. Language is no longer a marker of identity, or a source of division. Instead it becomes a unifying force revealed to 'people living in Jerusalem from every nation under heaven' (Acts 2:5). The outpouring of the Spirit as 'tongues of fire' was the risen Christ's gift to his church. Given to those he had called to journey with him; preaching, healing, sharing meals with 'sinners', and speaking truth to power. These men and women knew the cost of discipleship, as they witnessed Jesus arrested, tortured and sentenced to the most violent of deaths. Yet just three days later they hear arguably the most significant words in history, 'He is Risen'. This Pentecost as we hear Jesus say, 'As the Father sent me, so I am sending you' (John 20:21), and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, how do we feel? Joyful, anxious, excited, empowered, peaceful, ambivalent? Anthony J. Gittins CSSp, in his book, *A Presence that Disturbs*, argues that the mark of authentic discipleship is to have 'felt a presence that disturbs...that both stabilizes and destabilizes, comforts and discomferts'. It is human nature to resist disturbance, especially if our own lives are comfortable and secure. To be open to the disturbance of the Spirit we must risk hearing the cries of the crucified of today, the groaning of our crucified earth. Trusting the Pentecost promise can be made real through our prayers and actions for peace and justice, we acclaim: 'Send forth your Spirit, O Lord, and renew the face of the earth.' (Psalm 103)