



Easter 7, Year C – May 16, 2010

Acts 16.16-34; Revelation 22.12-14, 6-17,20-21; John 17.20-26

A Homily preached by the Rev'd James Popham

Let me make an audacious claim. The three readings specified by the lectionary for today are the most important readings we will hear all year. In fact, if we were relegated to one set of readings for the entire year, these three readings, from Acts, Revelation – yes, Revelation –, and John would be the ones I would hope to hear.

These readings tell us what God is all about. They tell us who we are. And they provide a powerful example of how one acts when one truly comes to grip with God's plan and how we fit in to those plans. Taken together today's readings from John, Acts, and Revelation reveal the core of Christian theology, Christian anthropology, and Christian ethics.

Now I engage Revelation with some trepidation. It is no easy read. It is a symbologist's delight and nightmare. It is a literary puzzle that continues to puzzle and mystify the most seasoned interpreters of scripture. And it has been subject to spectacular misinterpretation.

Some may be familiar with the popular interpretation that developed in the nineteenth century and continues to gain traction with – I am a bit embarrassed to say – a substantial segment of the population in the U.S. This so-called dispensationalist interpretation sees Revelation as a prediction of future events, including, for example:

- The rebirth of the political nation of Israel.
- The rapture of born-again Christians off the earth. They will be "transported" up to another planet or location in the heavens, where they will become spectators of Armageddon back here on earth.
- The Anti-Christ and a one-world currency will emerge, likely from Europe.
- The Anti-Christ will make and break a seven-year treaty with Israel. A consequence will be the resumption of animal sacrifices in the restored temple in Jerusalem.
- After seven years of tribulation, Jesus will touch down on the Mount of Olives, which will be split in two, after which he will win the battle of Armageddon and reign over converted Jews and un-raptured people for a thousand years.ⁱ

In fairness to those who embrace this interpretation of Revelation, I would admit that at least we can agree that Christ will come again and that God's plan of creation will be victorious. . But it is misguided. It proclaims a theology of destruction and despair that must be considered anathema. To me, the dispensationalist interpretation is a delight for the voyeurs of violence that drive so much of what we see in our theatres, on our television screens, from our Gameboys and Play Stations, and, on an internet that offers access to all that we might imagine in our worst moments – and then some. Barbara Rossing, in her book, *The Rapture Exposed*, describes this interpretation as "God so loved the world that he sent World War III."ⁱⁱ I would call it an interpretation that has been more political and profitable than prophetic.

Let me suggest another interpretation. What Revelation reveals is proclaimed once and for all in today's reading. God's purpose in creation is not its destruction. God's

"victory" will not be a military triumph over the forces of evil. God's victory will come in humanity's understanding that, despite the tragedies of sin and death, God and Godliness and goodness will prevail. Thus, Revelation is not a prediction of future events, but a proclamation of hope. God did not create the world to destroy it, but to love it. And in the person of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, God has loved us and reconciled us to Godself. This is what Christ, the Lamb of God has done for us. He has achieved atonement or "at-one-ment" between God and humanity, between God and creation.

In John's Gospel, this reconciliation of God and creation meshes readily with the message of hope in Revelation. Jesus proclaims a unity not only between himself and God, but also between himself and his disciples, "I in them and you in me." And, again, the catalyst of this unity is love – a love which preceded the foundation of the world, a love of God for us that reflects God's love of Christ. Out of the immensity of this love springs the hope of eternal life and the victory of God over all the trials and tribulations and tragedies that evil engenders. Indeed, if God is eternal, and Christ is eternal, and they are in us, then certainly, our lives are eternal, too.

The conduct of Paul and Silas epitomizes a behavior rooted in the hope spawned by God's great love of creation. They could have escaped so easily. Their chains were unfastened, and all the doors were opened. But confident of God's love and the hope of eternal life, they act with a commensurate love. Rather than escape, as they easily might have, they love their enemy. They stay incarcerated. They refuse to resort to violence. They protect the jailer's position and his life. And the jailer saw that Paul and Silas bore witness to love of a dimension that surpassed human understanding and to a hope that defied any consequence that worldly powers might impose. And after all, the jailer would have had reason to fear dismissal from his position and possible persecution – if not execution – by his Roman superiors as a result of his conversion. But still, in their testifying in their actions to this love and hope, Paul and Silas drew the jailer into oneness with them and the faith community.

None of this is necessarily new. But I would reiterate that these three readings come as close as possible to saying all that need be said. And this should come as no surprise. In John, we hear Jesus' farewell discourse, the last words of wisdom he imparts to his disciples. So he is direct, succinct, and to the point. He goes to the heart of the matter and provides an incarnational lens through which his life and work and words may be seen and interpreted.

The same is true of the reading from Revelation. These are the final words of the Bible. They, too, provide a timeless theological framework for assessing and understanding all that has been told in scripture.

And, of course, Paul and Silas define the Christian ethic as one of love, regardless of risk or consequence. As an ordained minister, I have affirmed my belief that Scripture contains all things necessary for salvation. And, again, I would go so far as to say, the heart of what we need to know is right there in our three readings this morning.

How might we appropriate or re-appropriate these seminal scriptural passages in our lives?

First, when we read and interpret scripture, we should not lose sight of the forest for the trees. Our interpretations must make sense in light of our understanding of the theology of the incarnation, the reality of God's ultimate victory over evil, and the Christian ethic of love. Interpretations that deny our goodness and connection with

God, or justify violence, or engender self-righteousness, for example, must be seen as out of synch and bogus vis-à-vis the love of God and hope of eternal life.

Second, we should nourish our connection with God. That means coming to church next week, too. That means appreciating the liturgy as transcendental and transformational, connecting us with God in a palpable and often powerful way, and inspiring us to love with abandon. Maybe a word of scripture will resonate. Maybe beautiful music will transport us into divine realms. Maybe the grace of divine presence in the Eucharist will jar us out of our myopic earthy perspective. Maybe the energy of the community around us will empower us to go in peace to love and serve God and neighbour.

Third, we should pray. That may open our connection with God in ways beyond our imagination. Studies of the brain activity of monks who have devoted their lives to meditation reveal that the hard-wiring of their brains changes in ways that causes them to live with a more peaceful countenance.ⁱⁱⁱ Imagine that. In our connecting with God, we open up the possibility of physiological change that might just enable us to live the life of love so strikingly exemplified by Paul and Silas.

When we see the world as one reconciled to God in Jesus Christ and driven by God's love to the sure hope of eternal life, we will understand what is revealed in just these three brief readings from among thousands of pages of scripture. Let us rejoice that we were here today to hear them and embrace that we are sent out to live them in love and the certain hope of eternal life.

Amen.

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ⁱ Rossing, Barbara, *The Rapture Exposed*, Basic Books (New York, 2004) 55-56.

ⁱⁱ Id. 42.

ⁱⁱⁱ McTaggart, Lynne, *The Intention Experiment*, Free Press (New York, 2007) 57.