

**Sermon: 2020/11/01 (Feast of All Saints, Year A) -
*Revelation 7:9-17; Psalm 34:1-10,22; 1 John 3:1-3;
Matthew 5:1-12_BTR***

[Ask for children to come forward. ???]

Kids Talk: Sermon on the Mount

Ok, it's time for a *physics* lesson;

a lesson about science -

Look at this jet-plane.

Pretend its real.

Did you know that the faster it goes the more *resistance* it faces?

Air, you see, isn't nothing, its *stuff*.

And the more you push into it, the more it "pushes" back.

Now, you and I can't travel fast enough to really feel it "pushing" (back) against us, but a jet-plane... well a jet-plane goes *hundreds* of miles-an-hour, and as it speeds up, getting faster and faster, the force of the air *resisting* it gets greater and greater.

It's called *friction*.

It is a law of reality;

a force of nature.

And Jesus describes something similar happening to holiness in the "Sermon on the Mount:"

When we become more and more like *Him*;

when we get better and better at being His disciples - living lives the way the Bible says we should - we find that something like *friction* grows between us and those who don't share our beliefs; between us and those who don't share our commitment to Christ.

This is why Jesus says that those who are persecuted and ridiculed for being truly Christian are 'blessed'.

They are 'blessed' because they must be doing something *right*.

Let's pray:

Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to return to their places.]

Revealing *Revelation*

Have you ever desired something to be true that you never *actually* expected?

Well, I have a confession to make:

In the 2016 United Kingdom European Union membership referendum I voted for "*Brexit*."

Yup!

I'm "one of those."

A smug member of the silent majority who chose to defy the "pollsters," and elected to rescue my homeland from a *deeply* undemocratic, unaccountable Belgian bureaucracy.

And I'd do it again.

(I'm really quite unrepentant.)

But did I ever *imagine* that most of my countrymen thought the same?

Did I ever imagine that Britain really would chose to "get out" of the "E.U."?

Not once; *never*.

Not even by a slim margin.

It seemed like an *impossible* dream.

A fool's hope.

And even when I heard the results being announced on television - the media people looking dismayed and confused - I *still* struggled to believe what I was hearing.

A counting error, perhaps.

Someone must've forgotten to "carry the one."

A grandiose practical joke.

But, *no*, it was true.

So, why do I mention this?

Why ask if *you've* ever wished something would be true that you also found hard to accept.

Well, today in (the Book of) *Revelation*, we hear from John, its author - almost *certainly* the same "John" who was Jesus' Apostle: the "beloved disciple."

(The youngest of the group.)

And, toward the end of his life (in Western Asia Minor), *full* of the Holy Spirit, John was granted a series of visions of the future.

Visions pertaining in particular to the fate and fortunes of the Church - the people of the New Covenant.

Now, these visions have proved *extremely* contentious ever since they were committed to the Canon:

For *literally* centuries theologians and scholars - and now, more recently, "bloggers" - have debated and argued as to their meaning.

Indeed, it is no exaggeration, I think, to say about *Revelation* that it is probably the

hardest book in the Bible to interpret.

Though there's some really stiff competition!

Crikey:

Just think on some of (the Book of) *Daniel*, for example; or recall moments from *Ezekiel*.

That pair *also* has its riddles and rhymes; terrifying monsters and alien angels. Yes, you might say that these three books form "a scary Halloween trinity," which is especially daunting to the "average" Christian.

"The average Christian" who only probably haphazardly picks up the Scriptures for an occasional glance in their spare-time, but otherwise relies principally on a preacher to "shed some light" on the murkier "corners" of God's Word.

So let me do that, if I can.

Allow me to attempt some *revealing* remarks about *Revelation* chapter seven.

And the first thing I want to say, which brings us back to my opening question, is that what John was allowed to see in Heaven, in *this* vision - the first of *four* (visions) - was not *necessarily* of *our* future.

I'll say that again: what John was shown in Heaven in the vision we heard from *today* "was not *necessarily* of *our* future."

Let that "sink in."

We *assume*, of course, that *everything* John has to say - *everything* that he wrote - is about *us* - about *our* political madness,

and about *our* pandemics;

about *our* tomorrow,

and *our* "End Times."

But this is just narcissism.

Egotism.

You and I live our lives like we're the "center of the universe" and we read the Bible the same way - like this moment in time - the 2nd millennium - is the "center of the universe."

The "tipping point."

We read it like this year and this decade and my lifetime and its events are *deeply* consequential and *deeply* meaningful "in the grand scheme of things," because that's how we see ourselves and our choices:

as being *deeply* consequential and *deeply* meaningful.

And that's just not altogether true.

It certainly isn't true because we think it.

And many wiser "heads" than my own approach *Revelation* as an extraordinary, *miraculous* predictive timetable of the future - *because that's what it is*, but notice too that John lived in the *first* millennium - and *right* at its start, so *his* future could very well already be, in *very* large part from our perspective, the past.

Indeed, two *thousand* years stand between his day and this - that's "*a lot* of water under the bridge"!

And that's a *lot* of time in which very significant events of concern and importance to God's people in prior generations could have occurred.

"Events" that God might want to have warned them about so as to prepare them.

Violent, savage "events" that now languish in history, praise the Lord.

And isn't that a proposition you wish were true but find hard to believe? - that a sizeable fraction of the scary, perplexing material in *Revelation* might have already come and gone?

Well, I think it can be reasonably argued that this morning's verses - the verses of Vision Number One - concern something which has, now, *already* happened *from our point-of-view*, but hadn't yet happened *for John* and the men and women he ministered to:

and that's the 'great ordeal': [Rev. 7:14].

The 'great ordeal' is an ambiguous term for a mysterious episode mentioned to John by his heavenly "tour-guide" just after the midway point in the paragraph in question.

(Line ten if you're looking at the insert.)

Of course, *many* are in the habit of thinking that this refers to one of the scenarios described *later* in *Revelation* - scenarios such as the "War of Angels" in chapter twelve, between Michael and Satan - Satan who, we're told, having lost, is 'thrown down...thrown down to the earth': [v.9].

(That's a quotation.)

And this is likely a mistake, one which we must be wary of, to conflate and confuse the various episodes outlined by John.

Indeed, about the "War of Angels" it seems to me that this might not even be a prophecy at all(!) - of things to come, but rather *a memory* - a "memory" of something *primeval*; something *pre-historic*:

consider - Jesus Himself speaks of having seen something *exactly* like what John describes during His *pre-incarnational* existence at the side of God the Father at the beginning of the universe:

In *Luke*(s gospel), Jesus says to '[t]he seventy' who had just returned from exorcising demons in His name around Galilee:

"I watched Satan fall from Heaven like a flash of lightning."

- That's chapter 10, verse eighteen.

And it explains why Christ meets him - Satan; the devil - wandering the Judean wilderness after His baptism.

It explains why Peter warns us to 'keep alert. Like a roaring lion', he says, 'your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.' [1 Pet. 5:8]

(He's already down here with us, causing mischief.)

No, the 'great ordeal' isn't a War of Angels.

It isn't obviously the Fall of Babylon in chapter 18 of *Revelation* either.

Rather, "the good money" is that the 'great ordeal' was the Jewish Revolt, which began in 66 A.D.: [n.1].

This was a *disastrous* rebellion - a "David and Goliath" debacle that saw Palestinian peasants taking on Roman legionaries - the best army in the world.

And it was a slaughter.

It lasted almost ten years, and ended, very famously, with a mass-suicide at Masada: [n.2].

And the Jews were punished with the Temple being burnt down and their dispersal around the Empire.

These things were, observes one historian, 'a nightmare from which they struggled to waken.' [n.3]

A "nightmare" that embroiled the Early Church - *and threatened its destruction.*

Remember, most Jesus-followers were, at that stage, *ethnically* Jewish and resident in "the Holy Land."

And the cathedral - if I can call it that - "the H.Q." for the Faith was in Jerusalem, under the governance of James "the Just," the Lord's brother.

All this was smashed and brought to ruin.

James himself - portrayed in (the Book of) *Acts* as *the* leader of the Church - as the first "bishop" - was dragged to the top of the Temple - before it was set on fire, you understand - and pushed off its roof.

He fell (through the air) about 150 feet onto the paved ground of the courtyard below.

And survived!

Though he was unable to crawl away from his persecutors because of the grotesque injuries he'd sustained.

So they gathered around and "finished him off" with clubs and stones: [n.4].

- Just think how the Church must have been rocked by this crime!

How the Christians under his pastoral care must have been left reeling and traumatised by the murder of someone biologically related to the Messiah.

Caught up in the rebellion.

Killed in the streets.

Which is precisely why John and his friends needed reassuring;

they needed reassuring by the news in a Heaven-sent vision that those Jews who were killed by the Romans but had had their sins expunged by accepting the gift of Jesus' redeeming death on the Cross had gone to a 'better' place [Phil. 1:23] where they 'hunger[ed] no more, and thirst[ed] no more', where 'every tear' was being "wiped" 'from their eyes': [Rev. 7:16-17].

This is such a tremendous relief (to hear)!

Because if James was there, and the other martyrs of the Jewish Revolt, it means that *our* loved ones might be there too.

- that they have joined with them - with the great saints of old, and stand with them - an army robed in white.

And this is who we celebrate today.

These Christians, then, that John saw - in Vision Number One, are not the citizens of the New Jerusalem in the new earth *in their entirety*.

Rather, they are a temporary subset (of that reverend "body");

they are those who *wait* to 'go marching in'.

And I don't need to tell you, of course, that that wonderful, *dreadful* day is (clearly) still ahead of us.

But what an inspiration they are!

Those who stand around the Throne as I speak this very second.

I urge you to make time to discover their stories.

Many are apocryphal, yes.

Some have surely been embellished.

But there's enough truth in enough of them to "swell the breast."

To challenge and charm you.

So, buy a book - about the heroes of our religion.

Maybe make a plan today to read about a saint of the Church every day of Advent - to build that into a spiritual discipline "to ground you" in what really matters" so that you aren't carried away with the busyness and the stresses of Christmas and Covid.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, amen.

Footnotes:

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/First_Jewish-Roman_War
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Masada#Josephus'_narrative
3. Aberbach, David (2019), *Nationalism, War and Jewish Education: From the Roman Empire to Modern Times (Routledge Jewish Studies Series)*, London; New York, N. Y.: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), 83.
4. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James,_brother_of_Jesus#Death