

Paul's Ponderings Chapel Chimes, June Edition

During the Easter Season liturgical churches like ours hear passages read from the Revelation of John...a most difficult book. The genre is that of apocalyptic literature, a form of biblical narrative based on mystical visions that most often address issues of divine justice. To the great amusement of Jewish scholars who understood apocalyptic literature and realized that it was not to be read as predicting future events, many Christian thinkers whipped up a frenzy around the possibility that we might be raptured any minute. Needless to say, that this false understanding was magnified in our lifetimes by Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth* as well as the monumentally misguided *Left Behind* series.

Before all that, theologians and Christian scholars had already come to understand that Revelation had nothing to do with predicting how the world would end. Instead, John's apocalypse was to function as a comforting text for a persecuted church. This book revealed the evils of the Roman Empire and assured Christians that a just and triumphant God would overcome all their pain and suffering. Revelation was, essentially, an extended metaphor of Christ's victory over a sinful world and was never meant to be taken literally.

The Book of Revelation is built around one key metaphor that the Roman Empire is a murderous Beast. The empire was born of violence and all it knows is war. So, don't collaborate with the empire...resist...do not surrender...keep the faith. Revelation depicts the Roman earthly empire at war with the heavenly empire and the violence of divine retribution. Revelation describes God's empire with a throne room and an Emperor Christ leading an imperial, angelic army bent on revenge. God is said to defend the faithful in the exact same way that Caesar defends his empire, and this is where the metaphor breaks down.

One of my favorite theologians, John Dominic Crossan writes, "John's vision is repeated in ever differing images, but with this underlying and reciprocal logic: in the imminent future Christ will slaughter Romans because in the immediate past Rome slaughtered Christians."

Church historian, Diana Butler-Bass says, "This imperial Christ was then interpreted to be literal, and Christians responded with crusades and colonization, so the misinterpretation of the Book of Revelation has been the source of enormous violence, suffering, and injustice. Sadly, taking Revelation literally has proved one thing; all empires - including Christian ones - are empires of grief, awash in blood and tears."

Yet, a further reading into John's Revelation shows that the author at some point begins to have misgivings about extending the imperial metaphor to Christ and tries to soften the message with a couple of alternative metaphors. Suddenly, this violent "Christ-Caesar" is depicted as a vulnerable lamb who welcomes all and provides shelter for the persecuted. And, the conquering warrior Christ is now nowhere to be found and is replaced by the new Jerusalem, said to be "prepared as a bride adorned for her husband." This is a bridal procession and a powerful image of love, joy, and new life. Revelation is a tale of cosmic slaughter that oddly ends with a wedding celebration.

The last chapters of Revelation are some of the most beautiful in all of scripture...the wedding, the garden, and the river of life. But, extending the metaphor of empire to Jesus as a retaliatory warrior and reading that literally and future oriented was one of the worst theological missteps of all time.

My advice...read all the way to the end. Suffering is replaced by joy and love overcomes violence...and that is something to be celebrated.