

Easter 6, Year C  
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Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5  
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I have never preached on a passage from the Revelation to St. John the Divine, largely on the grounds that it is so violent, anti government, and hopelessly outdated in its predictions. The violence is obvious to anyone who gives it even the most cursory glance, but its' anti-government posture is more subtle. In the book Babylon is a thinly disguised figure of Rome, and the beast - with its infamous 666 identifying mark - is almost certainly Nero. This of course puts the book squarely at odds with, among other people St. Paul, whose view of government was that its' power is instituted by God. Most important however is that despite the immense success of Hal Lindsey and his best seller "The Late Great Planet Earth" the predictions made in the Revelation have not come true, and Lindsey's interpretation of those predictions, targeting the late '80s as the decisive moment for their fulfillment, has been refuted by more than twenty years of continued historical development which included the end, not the triumph of communist ideology, the persistence, rather than the end of separate European states, and the growth, rather than the diminution of the importance of the United States. Indeed every attempt to turn the Revelation to John into some set of soon-to-be-fulfilled predictions – and there have been many - has foundered in the

same way. In consideration of all these things my thought has long been “what do you have here?” and my answer has always been “not much.” Yet, perhaps oddly, on this Mother’s Day weekend it has at last occurred to me that the Revelation to St. John tells us two things that are true, both of which are very important in understanding our lives before God and how to discern the path we must follow. One comes from the overall context of the book, and the other from the passage we just heard. I want to spend a moment on each of these ideas.

The idea that emerges from the context of the Revelation is that genuine evil – though quite often very difficult to discern at first – ultimately exposes itself by becoming systemically and gratuitously violent. Well meaning people often make mistakes which sometimes even do some harm. But these mistakes can hardly be identified as evil if, when at last exposed, they are abandoned by those who made them. But when people turn to gratuitous violence in defense of their perspectives, no matter what history reveals, then, says the Revelation to John, and its companion book from the Old Testament, Daniel, we can know we are in the presence of evil.

Think of our own past as an example. Lots of well meaning and intelligent people disagreed about the value and validity both of fascism and communism during the early and mid twentieth centuries. What exposed the National Socialist version of Fascism, and the Stalinist and Maoist versions of

communism as evil was not the mistaken assumptions each made about the motivations of people – those were refuted simply by the march of history - but the aggressive, systemic, and institutionalized violence each unleashed upon the world. Over time each of them began to identify what Hannah Arendt termed “objective enemies;” people whose very existence was considered unacceptable to the state even though the people so identified were law abiding, and programs of extermination were begun. It was at that point in the short lived history of these movements that the world could see that these movements had revealed themselves as evil, not because of what they believed, mistaken though it was, but because of what they did in order to attempt to fulfill their vision of the perfect world.

What the overall trajectory of the Revelation to John, with its lurid depictions of terrible violence, tells us is that when people and nations move into systemic, institutionalized, gratuitous violence in pursuit of their aims the movement has been made from remediable error into genuine evil. What the Revelation further declares is that, St. Paul notwithstanding, governments are able to do this no less than individual people. The world is sadly full of examples of just this movement on scales large and small. That is the first truth that the Revelation to John offers us. Because of this book and those like it in scripture we know what to look for in the effort to identify that which is

truly evil, and to distinguish it from that which is merely mistaken, or that with which we simply disagree.

The second truth the Revelation offers us comes from the particular passage we read today, and it is the truth about what a world truly and fully redeemed looks like, for that is the image we have before us, the image of the redeemed community gathered together. What we see from it is that redemption is what happens when the world is converted to the reign and realm of God. It is what happens when the light by which the world sees itself is the light of God's love. In such a world hatred, and the violence that inevitably emerges from hatred, will never arise not because of a lurking threat of destruction for those who behave this way, but rather because hatred is something that would never occur to those transformed by the grace of God.

Such a world of course does not now exist, but we do see glimmers of it. Mothers, and this is where pondering Mother's Day got me thinking about this whole thing, who love their children may reasonably disagree with other mothers about how to raise their children, but they will agree completely with each other all the time that no harm should ever be done to their children. Mothers who truly and completely love their children need no laws to restrain their hand, and no commands to force them to care. They just love, and in love seek what is best for their children. Such mothers, as we know, at times make mistakes, though in my experience of nearly twenty-nine years of

parenthood they make them less often than fathers. But mistakes made in love, while at times damaging, are remediable.

I think about my experience with my own mother - and not to get maudlin, easy to do at a time like this - the one thing that really stands out is that she is the one person in the world whose love for me was most obviously unreserved, unconditional, as I was growing up doing all the confused and foolish things that children do. She of course at times acted foolish and confused as well, we all do, but the context she gave to my life was love, acceptance, forbearance, forgiveness, and that made all the difference.

The picture we have today before us in the Revelation to John is that of a whole creation redeemed not by righteous wrath, but by divine love. As I read this passage, and I admit to reading it perhaps idiosyncratically, the unclean things that are not to enter, the accursed things that are banned, are what arises from the hatred and violence that characterizes evil as it reveals itself in the world. The nations that walk by the light of God and kings of the earth that bring their glory are those converted to the realm of God and who therefore become guided by the light of God's love. A world redeemed does not have to think alike; it does not have to see everything in exactly the same way, any more than a mother and child who love each other have to think alike or see everything the same way. A world redeemed will therefore not be characterized by complete uniformity of thought. That, frankly, is a totalitarian

vision best abandoned sooner, rather than later. But a world redeemed will be characterized by the grace, mercy and love of God. And I dare say this, a person redeemed will be characterized by the same thing. The experience of personal redemption begins when we discover the capacity to love ourselves as we have been loved, and so to abandon whatever sense of we have that we ourselves are not enough. Then it moves gracefully into the same capacity to love others in that same fashion.

The perfection of the world under the reign of God remains a vision unfulfilled. My strong suspicion is that we will never see such a world in the finite and bounded realm of time and space, but in that I may be mistaken. But in considering the value of the Revelation to John such a consideration is unimportant. For the book is important not because it predicts events in the temporal future no matter how near or far away they may be, for it doesn't do that. It is important because it tells us two things that are true, and that are vital for us to know. It shows us what evil looks like, and thus how to avoid it either when it creeps up in the world around us or within the recesses of our own souls, and it describes the essential characteristic of true redemption, and in this way shows us where to look in this world for the signs of God's mighty presence, power, and reign.