

Apocalypse – Not!

2 Samuel 23: 1-7 & Revelation 1: 4b-8

Reign of Christ Sunday/ 26th November 2006

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty. “I am the beginning and the end.” “I am the One who was at the beginning and I will be there at the end. I am the One who is both your beginning and your end. I am the totality of all there is – and all nations and peoples will find their fulfillment and purpose in me, says the Lord, the Lamb, even Jesus Christ, “the ruler of the kings of earth.” All time and space, our movements through the dimensions of space-time, history itself are caught up ultimately in this grand narrative, in the grand, cosmic story of God’s redeeming work through him, who is and who was and who is to come.

So begins this majestic and mysterious Revelation to John of Patmos. Not the revelation *of* John of Patmos, but the Revelation *of* Jesus Christ. It belongs to him, not to John, and not to us. This vision, this enigma, came to John during a time of considerable persecution at the hands of Imperial Rome because of his commitment to Jesus as Lord instead of Caesar. What stands behind the word “revelation” is the Greek word, “apocalypse;” it is more correct so say John received an apocalypse of Jesus Christ. And by apocalypse we mean this – and only this: *it is the lifting of a veil. It means to disclose, to uncover, to expose.* It is like being in a dark room full of shadows where the content of the room is veiled, but when the curtain is pulled back and the light comes pouring through and shadows are vanished, the truth about the room is unveiled and you can see the difference between *illusion* and *reality*, that’s an apocalypse.¹

So then an apocalypse of *Jesus Christ* is his act of unveiling, uncovering, exposing lies, in that moment of insight or insights truth is revealed for us to see, when the light of his presence separates illusion and reality. In many ways, the last book of the Bible, although written in code and metaphor so that the persecutors could not figure it out, is John’s way of saying to persecuted Christians, *that one’s commitment to Jesus Christ is the way we know the difference between illusion and reality.* The illusion is the strength of Imperial Rome. Its power is really powerless before God’s redemptive love in Jesus

¹ This illusion/reality distinction in speaking of apocalypse is helpfully offered by Barbara R. Rossing in a recent interview, “End game: living joyfully in an apocalyptic time,” cited in *Christian Century*, November 14, 2006, 22-25.

Christ – *this* is reality, the reality that no earthly power can bear to see. The world as it is and its disordered values of what is important, as defined by Imperial Rome, are all illusion. Indeed, it's the world and the disordered values of any age, any empire, and any competing power at odds with what God dreams for the world and is working toward, are all illusions.

If apocalypse has anything to do with an ending, it is the ending of the world's destructive power over humanity, which is also against God. That power is coming to an end because Jesus Christ is exposing it for what it is, so that we can embrace the new life he offers, which is the life of his kingdom. Jesus' view is reality because he is that totality of all that is, the Alpha and the Omega. When we encounter Jesus, what we thought was reality we soon learn is really illusion. They think they have free-reign, but they don't. They have no power, for they are in fact, anti-God, anti-Christ. Their age is slowly coming to an end, because something else is emerging, someone else has ascended the throne before whom every Caesar, emperor, and dictator, every king, queen, prime minister and president must kneel, for their power is disclosed for what it is. This is reality – this is the reality that gives incredible hope. John writes to the persecuted Christians with hope and offers hope to the world.

The purpose of apocalypse is to lead toward greater truth, light, and insight, not destruction, violence, and annihilation. It's this latter understanding of the word that is so troubling and problematic, not only for the church, but potentially for the world. When we hear the word we think of end-of-the-world scenarios, we think of cataclysmic destruction and chaos. The word seemed to enter our vocabulary after the 1979 release of Francis Ford Coppola's, "Apocalypse Now," set in Vietnam, with a script guided by Joseph Conrad's (1857-1924) *The Heart of Darkness* and T. S. Eliot's (1888-1975) epic poem, "The Hollow Men." It was common throughout the 1980's to hear of apocalyptic scenarios. There was a fascination with the predictions of Nostradamus (1503-1566). Everyone seemed transfixed by Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* and fearful the Soviet Union was really going to attack Western Europe and level New York. Jonathan's Schell's book *The Fate of the Earth* in 1982 painted a harrowing description of what an atomic attack would do to New York City and its suburbs, giving vivid depictions of what would happen to the town and communities I grew up in and know in New Jersey. The 1990's were a relatively optimistic time, with walls coming down in Berlin and across Europe, the collapse of the Soviet Union. But while the West celebrated, the anger within Islamic Fundamentalism just seemed to fester. With a new millennium came new Doomsday scenarios. The devastation on 9-11-2001 was described in apocalyptic terms, as so horrifying it could only come from the Bible. The devastation along the Gulf Coast after Katrina was often described by news commentators as an "apocalypse" or "apocalyptic," again, meaning desolation

and waste of “biblical” proportions. It doesn’t help that Mel Gibson is about to release one more film that confuses the religious imagination with the movie *Apocalypto*, about the Spanish conquest of Mexico and Central America. We seem to be fascinated with the end of all things. Cormac McCarthy’s new book *The Road* is a tour through America post-cataclysm. And the new television series *Jericho* on CBS give us “doomsday as soap opera.”² A recent *Time* magazine essay by James Poniewozik, states, “*Jericho* is trying to do something serious: to ask what apocalypse would do to the humanity of us who survive.” Hear how the word “apocalypse” is being used? Our associations with this word are mostly negative – because it’s all rooted in fear and playing off our fears.

Today we have the popularity of the *Left Behind* novels by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, who claim that they’re actually offering a truthful rendering of Revelation. It’s their take on end-times that is perhaps most troubling and problematic for us. LaHaye and Jenkins are actually *premillennial dispensationalists* and come out of a long history of Biblical interpretation that had its roots in the United Kingdom, but really seemed to flourish in the United States in the 19th century.³ Through a false reading of scripture, both testaments, these folks divide up history into different epochs or dispensations. We are currently in the age of the church, they believe. The final age comes when Christ will return and reign for 1,000 years. But before then there must first come a time of tribulation. Believing Christians will be raptured away from the trial. Those who are not will be left behind to encounter the destruction of the world. This worldview and way of looking at scripture is associated with D. L. Moody (1837-1899), preacher and founder of the Moody Bible Institute, which still exists today in Chicago, as well as Charles Ryrie (b. 1925) and C. I. Scofield (1843-1921) – the Ryrie and Scofield study Bibles are still in print and quite popular within fundamentalist Christianity. In the footnotes, you can see their particular slant. They equate salvation with an escape from the earth. God doesn’t care about the earth because it’s all going to be destroyed before Jesus comes again. Before Jesus returns there must be destruction and war, such as on the plains of Armageddon. We might wish to poke fun at some of these views, but there are a lot of people who take all this as gospel truth – although I don’t see any good news in any of it. And there are a lot of people with extraordinary power about forty miles south of here who devise foreign policy and are advised on foreign policy by people outside the beltway who subscribe to these views. There are some who actually want to speed up the violence and destruction they think will come at the end of time so that Jesus will come all the sooner.⁴

² *Time*, October 23, 2006, p. 94.

³ For some background on this way of interpreting scripture, see:
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dispensationalism>

⁴ See Dan Froomkin’s column in the *Washington Post*, August 4, 2006.

Can you see how all of this is far from the vision of apocalypse we have in Revelation, indeed throughout the New Testament? This is apocalypse – NOT. Apocalypse – Yes is something else, it is what John points us toward, what this Sunday, the Reign of Christ or Christ the King Sunday, the last year in the liturgical calendar, points us toward by offering a very different sense of the direction of history. Christ enthroned is God’s great Yes to the world. Are there endings in scripture? Absolutely. But as Barbara R. Rossing explains in her recent book, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Westview, 2004), the question for us is, “what is it that is coming to an end?”⁵ Revelation is actually writing against the oppression of the Roman Empire. That imperial world, or more correctly that imperial age, not the world, that is coming to an end in Jesus Christ, because a different way of exerting power is emerging through the church of Christ. Something might be coming to an end, in order to make room for something new and different and better. A new age is dawning in Christ. This apocalypse, this revelation is the light of Christ pouring into the world as the curtains are pulled back and reality is distinguished from illusion. John sets before us an alternate reality.

Holding on to that reality is difficult, when there’s so much at work that wants us to hold on to the illusion. Revelation is offered in hope, but it’s so much easier to give into despair, so that the entire Christian vision seems more fantasy than Harry Potter. How can we with all honesty make such claims when three billion people live on less than \$2 a day? Thirty-one thousand people die daily, mostly from diseases that cost very little to treat. Iraq spirals into civil war and chaos. We’re been seduced by many things that we think make for life, but take us very far from the kingdom. Our values are skewed when people are trampled and beaten in the mad – and it is mad – rush to get the best deal on Black Friday. The ice caps are melting, entire ecosystems are being destroyed. Domsday scenarios are easier to entertain.

But that is not our story. That is not our script – and we will not be defined by it. That is not how we, in Christ, see the world. You and I are called to offer a different vision, a vision that brings life and not death!

The alternate vision of reality that we believe true is that we follow a *Risen* Lord who sits with the Father and the Spirit, who reigns the cosmos in love and mercy, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” The Resurrected One is in charge, and “all shall be well and all shall be well and every manner of thing shall be well,” as Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) reminded us. “I will wipe the tear from every eye and sin and death will

⁵ Rossing, 22.

be no more,” says the Lord of the Apocalypse (Rev. 21: 4). This is reality. The Resurrected One directs us toward resurrection, the transformation of all things and people.

The arch of history is moving toward restoration and healing, “where all sufferings are drowned in the mercy that will fill the whole world.”⁶ This is how the Apocalypse ends: “See the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away (21: 3-4).” “See, I am making all things new (Rev. 21: 5).” We find at the end of Revelation what we found at the beginning, the Lord saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega.” The purpose of the cosmos finds its fulfillment in its creator. Despite how the world might seem, this is the goal and purpose of the cosmos – *Jesus Christ*. “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for very and ever (Rev. 1: 5b-6).” And so we join the chorus of the saints above who stand before that throne and sing with them, “*Alleluia! Alleluia!*”

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⁶ From the quotation in the worship bulletin: “We shall hear the angels, we shall see the whole sky all diamonds. We shall see how all earthly evil, all our sufferings are drowned in the mercy that will fill the whole world. And our life will grow peaceful, tender, sweet as a caress.” Anton Chekhov (1860-1904)