

Tomorrow in Jerusalem

Revelation 21:1-10, 22-22:5

The Sixth Sunday of Easter\ Year C

May 9, 2010

O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.

Among the numerous chores that we do on a daily basis, “getting the mail” takes either the least amount of energy or the most. If you happen to be anticipating a letter say from a cherished friend then the journey down the driveway takes little or no effort. The opposite, of course, is true if the only thing you are expecting is a credit card bill. However, one thing about our trip to the mailbox never changes- the junk mail. By the end of most weeks, there’s usual a pile of it. Included among all the glossy postcards and ample advertisements is usually a stack of catalogs. Open any one of them up, and frequently you will find scrawled across the product in question, the letters N, E, W-NEW. Often printed in red. The advertising ploy is very simple. Something deemed “new” will attract customers. Some people simply are obsessed when it comes to keeping up with the Joneses. Whatever happens to be the latest gimmick, there are those who will have to have it. Buying computers on payment plans that allow trade-ins is perhaps the perfect example of this “have to have the latest” mentality. In fact, the computer industry is rather fond of telling us that our brand new computer is really obsolete by the time we get it home and out of the box. So how long does “new” last? This Sunday’s readings tell us that some new things last forever.

Of all the numerous writings which make up the Bible, perhaps the most confusing and strange of all is the famous or infamous Book of Revelation. Twenty-two chapters so bizarre that they make not only your head hurt but your soul too. All manner of images have taken up residence within the book’s pages. There are heavenly throngs and white robed martyrs, plagues and judgments, beasts and angels, even strange numbers of which 666 is perhaps the most notorious. With its confusing kaleidoscope of images, we shouldn’t find it surprising that most preachers won’t touch the Book of Revelation with a ten foot pole. Those historical giants of the faith, Martin Luther and John Calvin, didn’t even know what to make of the book. They contemplated removing it from the Bible altogether. Sadly, if most preachers don’t want to touch it, where does that leave the average lay person? Usually mystified or horrified, but rarely comforted or encouraged. And it is precisely comfort and encouragement which Revelation desires to give us.

Rarely does one hear a person say that their life is a bed of roses. For most of us, life is usually one part comedy, one part tragedy and two parts something else. Hope maybe. The exception to this rule being Saint John the Seer. In the course of his life, he appears to have witnessed more than his fair share of tragedy and struggle. As a young man, he undoubtedly bore witness to one of the greatest horrors of his day- the fall of Jerusalem. The destruction of Jerusalem, however, did not occur over night. The roots of the city’s tragedy lie enmeshed within a misguided revolt undertaken by her citizens against the Roman authorities. Their admirable attempt to wrestle control from

the Emperor backfired spectacularly. Roman armies, not known for their mercy or kind temperament, surrounded the city and simply waited for Jerusalem to self-destruct. Which she obligingly did. You see, when the good people of Jerusalem realized that their food and water supplies had been cut off, they turned on each other. They engaged in acts of barbarity that even the ten commandments would blanch to describe. The image of mothers, literally eating their children is not an image that one soon forgets. When the siege finally ended, the Roman armies tore the city apart brick by brick. They assaulted the Virgin Daughter of Zion, in more ways than one, and left Mother Jerusalem for dead. The Holy City of the Jews was rendered non-existent.

What John witnessed during those traumatic days, we can only imagine. His life of troubles, however, was just getting started. In twenty years time, John finds himself exiled to a rather quaint little island known as Patmos. Apparently, his activities as an itinerant prophet among the churches of Asia, have slightly miffed the Roman authorities. Fortunately, the Romans exactly what to do with troublesome Christian leaders. For John, life on Patmos is not nearly as atrocious as we may think. The island is far from barren. From his residence, he can see the rather extensive Temple complex near the harbor not to mention a small school. Patmos is not a place to punish someone necessarily, just a place to get them out of the way. An ideal place, at least according to Roman reasoning, in which, to sideline the prophet John. After all, what trouble could he possibly get into on a remote island? Well, apparently quite a bit and none of it of his own making. One Sunday morning, as John kneels down and begins to pray, God's voice booms the word: "Write". What's a fellow to do? He knows full well that when God says something, worlds can hang in the balance. So John responds by doing exactly what God asks. As the morning progresses, Christ takes the prophet on a visionary roller coaster ride through the heavens and the earth. Flying through past, present and eternity, John can do little but hold onto the handle bars. There's no getting off, until the Revelation is complete

A casual glance through John's Apocalypse will tell us that he is much more at home with its contents than we are. The ever changing scenery and the strange language doesn't seem to phase him. John is infinitely more familiar and certainly more comfortable with the idea of having visions than would be the average modern person walking down the street. For us, visions are an odd phenomena best relegated to the realms of entertainment or left to the occasional crackpot who sees the Virgin Mary appearing in his mashed potatoes. After all, when was the last time you saw someone running around claiming to have had a vision. That said, for John and the people of John's day, visions were nothing at which to sneeze. They were just one of the many ways by which God communicated with us. John also seems to have a clearer understanding of Hebrew prophecy than we do. For example, he's able to hear the angels going on and on about "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great" and can immediately point his finger at the Babylon in question and say "Look everybody, that's actually Rome". And he's right. Rome being Babylon makes perfect sense. Didn't Rome destroy Jerusalem in much the same way that Babylon destroyed Jerusalem centuries earlier. Doesn't Rome hold God's people, Christ's people, captive along the banks of the Tiber in similar fashion to how Babylon held them captive along the banks of the

Tigris. The Babylon of the Book of Revelation is Rome. And the news that the Babylon known as Rome is falling is certainly good news for a people who have been persecuted by her. Rome can do her worst, but Rome does not get the final say. Christ does. Rome may appear to be the center of the world, but it is another city which is the center of everything- past, present and future. The New Jerusalem.

For the persecuted and down-trodden Christians of Asia, John's vision of newness, of the kingdom coming, is an answer to their prayers. Though, I wonder if we can honestly say it's an answer to our own. Most people, today, express very little interest in a new heaven and a new earth. Such a lack of interest betrays us as a people living lives which look more to Babylon, to Rome, or to our own national interests than to God Almighty. We see our national prosperity, our success, our power, our having what we want when we want it as signs of God's blessing. We see ourselves as a city on a hill, secure with the status quo. Who needs a new heaven and a new earth? We don't want our positions of power and privilege to pass away? Who cares about other people in our world and in our society who look at us and, with some justice, accuse us of gaining our fortunes and exercising our power at their expense. Who cares if they see us as Babylon? Who cares if we act like Babylon? God cares and we better care too. Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great. Fallen, fallen is Rome. Fallen, fallen are we under our own excesses, under God's judgment.

And here's where the good news comes in. We don't have to live our lives as citizens of Babylon, of Rome, or even of American culture. We can live as citizens of the New Jerusalem which is presently arriving in our midst. Today the world is experiencing the post-Easter birth pangs of the new creation. Christ is with us and is even now calling us to a new way of life, a life in which we are to love one another. To love another person is not some easy task. Love is more than an emotion, it is taking a fragment of someone's destiny as your own. You can't just say "I love you," then refuse to get down in the mess and the muck of the other person's life. To love is to witness the first glimmer of the new heaven and earth that John saw coming. A new world in which ultimately tears, death, mourning, crying, pain, the former things in general, even the sea are no more. He saw a world in which God makes his home among mortals and in which we make our home with God. A home to which we are all invited as long as we're willing to shed our old ways and come out of Babylon. As long as we are willing to embrace the new life in us and among us. The Book of Revelation calls us to start living as if the kingdom is being born this instant, as if the New Jerusalem is descending out of the clouds. Which of course it is. It's coming. Why wouldn't it? We ask for the kingdom to come every week when we pray the Lord's prayer.

By reading and living into the Book of Revelation, we will come to know that our world is in constant labor, that our lives are in constant labor. Rather appropriate for Mother's day. Mothers know all about giving birth- the pain, the harshness, the hope, the love all tied up in one exquisite experience. The Church knows about giving birth too. She does it every time someone steps into the water of baptism. Though we don't get to see her labor pains, they are there. Birth, new life happens all around us. And those new lives in Christ, they may still have one part tragedy and one part comedy. But

they have more hope and passion than can be counted. Passion enough to say even now, this instant, when all the world may seem a mess and out of control: “I see a new heaven and a new Earth