

Homily for the Second Sunday of Easter, 2016

(Year B: Rev. 1:9-19, shortened)

Would you like to know what's going on in the world as God sees it? Would you like to make sense of the wars, the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere, even the apparent everyday craziness of getting and spending, buying and selling? Would you like some guidance on how to live in this crazy world? For today and the next six weeks we're going to get just that in the second reading at Mass. But it's going to take some work to understand it.

Background, first. The Book of Revelation (today's second reading, which we'll continue to hear from through the Easter season) is often misunderstood as being about the future; that's wrong. The "revelation" of the title means "the unveiling" – taking down the curtain so we can see what's really going on (think of the way Frank Baum used the idea in *The Wizard of Oz*, when Toto rips down the curtain and Dorothy, the Tin Man, and the Cowardly Lion discover that the Great Oz is just a little man at the controls of a carnival show.) The readings we're hearing want to "take down the curtain" so the people John addresses can see what's really going on behind the smoke and mirrors someone's using to distract them.

Now the cast of characters: the writer calls himself "John": but this is not the Gospel-writer, nor the Beloved Disciple: all we know of him besides his name is that two generations after Jesus he was responsible for some church communities in the Roman province of Asia (modern Turkey, more or less), and that he was writing from a small island to which he had been exiled because he was a Christian. (Scholars believe the Emperor Domitian was the one responsible, and the year about AD 96.) As he tells it, "I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island of Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus."

So the Roman Empire which is persecuting him is the second "character" in the story John is about to tell. The Empire will appear in many disguises, since John wants to keep his story just obscure enough to make it both safe and intriguing – but any Christian who heard the story as it was read in the churches would know who's behind the curtain John was pulling down.

The final main character, suitable of course for these post-Easter Sundays, is the Risen Christ; named here, again, symbolically both for safety and to weave this story into the whole of the Jewish Scriptures which, John believes along with us, Jesus has fulfilled.

Why does John write to tear away the curtain to show what's really going on in history? Because, like Dorothy and her companions before the Great Oz, John's people are afraid; they're being persecuted, forced from their homes and livelihoods, arrested and imprisoned and exiled, and some of them killed, by what appeared to be the greatest power anyone had ever seen – the Roman Empire with its legions, its commercial reach, its legislation, its majestic ceremonies – and its godlike emperor. John, as the leader of these Christians under pressure, wanted both to encourage and reassure them, and also to instruct them so that they could understand what they were seeing and suffering. He could do both things by inviting them to discover, with him, what was really going on in history, behind the smoke and mirrors.

I plan to spend the next six weeks of homilies looking at John's story and what he has to say to us today. I'll post my homilies on the parish website since I'll be preaching at different hours of Mass each week – you can follow them there, if you like, if you don't hear me at Mass. But let's start, today, with how John tells his story, and then think for a bit about why the Church still reads John's story to us, even though the Roman Empire and its persecution has been gone for centuries and is no longer a threat to anyone.

So let's go back to the text: John identifies himself and mentions his persecution and exile, but then he's right into the story: "I was caught up in Spirit on the Lord's day" (probably during the Eucharist, but of course he can't mention that and stay safe if outsiders discover what he's writing), and he meets – someone, who says, "I once was dead but now I am alive forever and ever." We know who that is. And you-know-who tells John what to do with what he's about to be shown. "Write down what you have seen, and what is happening, and what will happen afterwards." John is about to see what history looks like to the Risen Jesus himself, and Jesus is about to tell him how history will all come out in the end for His faithful people.

I'll say more about John and his tearing down the curtain that covers the true shape of history next week. Today we can appreciate why the Church still reads Revelation if we focus on where John has his vision: at the Eucharist on "the Lord's day." The heart of every Eucharist in every century is what we celebrated last Sunday at Easter – God is in the business of making new life come out of what looks only like dying. John trusts that God did it in Jesus, and is doing it for John in his exile, and is and will continue doing that same thing for the people of the churches to which John writes. There's lots of pretty exotic detail to come in John's story: but at its heart is the key to his and our hope: that, whatever happens along the way, the message that another John, the Gospel-writer, says today will come true in every generation: "These [things] are written so that through them you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name."