

Homily for the Third Sunday of Easter, 2016

(Year B: Rev. 5:11-14)

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth
and under the earth and in the sea,
everything in the universe, cry out:
“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor, glory and might,
forever and ever.”

Last week I introduced John the Seer and his message to first-century churches suffering persecution. I described how John would tell us a story that, in terms veiled for the sake of safety, “tore down the curtain” that the Roman Empire was creating to mystify people and so enhance its own power and wealth. We’ve skipped over a few chapters in which John has described the spiritual state of the churches for which he has oversight: praising, correcting, warning, or advising each according to how it was managing itself. John thus showed that he “had his ear to the ground” and knew what was happening locally; and he also showed that his story would be part of his concern for the churches, not simply a nice but distracting amusement.

Now John is in earnest: His vision (which, remember, he experienced “on the Lord’s Day” and most likely at the Eucharist) has taken him to God’s presence, where he can look at history from God’s own viewpoint. Today John is setting the stage for what he’s about to discover. And the characters on stage in God’s presence, note well, include – absolutely everything: “Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe”! They are all God’s creatures and give praise to God.

We need to pay particular attention to this because so many of us grew up with a very narrow perspective on Christ’s mission and on God’s plan. That’s not to say that what was emphasized to us was unimportant: After all, how can our eternal salvation not matter more than anything else? God created us, in the words of the Catechism, “to know, love, and serve Him in this life and so to be happy with Him in the next.” True, and vitally important. And Christ came to redeem us from sin, to “open the gates of heaven” that were closed to us through His offer of forgiveness. That’s all true.

But it’s still too narrow. After all, if that were all there were to God’s plan, it seems that His creation of a cosmos that contains (by some estimates) 70 billion trillion stars is a little excessive. And a cosmic time-scale that runs to about 13.8 billion years seems to have a lot of extra time when the call of Abraham (the start of our “salvation history” in the Bible) is thought by scholars to date no further back than 2100BC. God could have saved all of humankind on a much smaller stage.

It seems that John, although he didn’t know the age and scope of the universe with the accuracy that science has now shown us, still had the right idea: God thinks big! Individual salvation is too small, because it’s ... well, individual. And if we think only of

individual salvation we'll get what's going on in history wrong because what happens before and after our personal time on stage won't seem to matter much. But John knows better: He knows that he can't give proper encouragement to his people in the face of their persecution if they think only of their individual lives. He has to present to them the entire sweep of history so that – here's the point – they understand and appreciate their place and role in it. Those first-century Christians aren't only in the business of saving their souls by standing up to Roman persecution: They're actors in a cosmic drama, and their resistance feeds into the eventual triumph of God's plan not just for them, but for all creation.

One of the places this too-narrow understanding of God's plan for us comes into play in our time is, interestingly, at funerals. It's natural, at a funeral, to be concerned with the eternal destiny of the person who has died. But how God saves that person is very often misunderstood. If we imagine that God lifts people, individual by individual, into "heaven" we've got it all wrong. Our true belief is that, in Christ, death itself – not individual deaths – has been overcome. The resurrection of Aunt Matilda is because of Christ's love for her, yes – but that love is expressed by Christ's renewal of the entire cosmos so that death is no more. Aunt Matilda will be raised because she will be swept up in the restoration of all things when Christ comes in glory.

Another thing we can get wrong if our idea of God's plan and Christ's salvation is too individualized is our relationship to the nonhuman world. If it's just meaningless "stuff" that can be used and abused for our convenience, that's one thing. But if God is, in Christ, also invested in the eventual redemption of grasshoppers and butterflies, minerals and clouds, and (yes) all of the 70 billion trillion stars and whatever planets may circle them and whatever may live on those planets, we have another sort of relationship to the world around us. (The Holy Father's Encyclical *Laudato si'* is a meditation on just this point with regard to the natural world on our own planet.)

John showed all of creation praising God because he knew, just as we know, that even heroic faith in Christ would not save people from the all-too-common disasters of living. Some of his people would be executed by Rome, and John held out no fanciful hope to them that their faith would save them from that fate. We see that same drama playing out today in areas of Christian persecution, and we know closer to home the ravages of poverty, illness, and finally physical death that overtake believers. John's faith was rooted in the big picture: That the great gift Christ had given to believers was to understand what God was truly doing in the world: God was drawing it all into a transformed creation, and that, whatever setbacks and even disasters in the meantime, when some of God's creations went off the rails and did unspeakable damage to Christians (like the Roman soldiers then, or today the economic system we live under, or in every time the viruses that kill us), still in the long run God's plan was going to win, and there was no doubt about that.

John's story was to enlighten and encourage his people to be steadfast in the face of suffering. Their courage was to be built on a single foundation: All has been created by God and redeemed in Christ; and God will lose nothing of what He has loved into existence and has redeemed by the blood of His Son.