

19th Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

25 September 2016

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Revelation 19:11 – 20:15

We are back in Revelation this Sunday, and will have one more Sunday as we cover the last two chapters, John's vision of a new heaven and a new earth. But since we took a few weeks off, I want to quickly remind us of some background information on how we're approaching the book.

To begin with, this letter is by an author named John who had been exiled by the Roman authorities to

the island of Patmos, which sits in the Mediterranean Sea between Greece and Turkey. It is addressed to seven church communities in Asia Minor, and in writing it, John employs some pretty incredible cosmic images and metaphors to depict the struggle between the kingdom of God and the empire of Rome.

As I have mentioned before, I do not think Revelation is some kind of blueprint for the

future ending of the world. Jesus himself even says, "No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son." So why would John get a blueprint that Jesus himself was not even privy to? And why would the early church carefully preserve a book not written for them? What good does such a blueprint do when, we are told, God's coming will be like a thief in the night?

Jesus was crucified by the Romans, we all know that. He was a threat to the Empire's "system." Just like so many of Israel's prophets before him, Jesus was a critic of the

unjust economic and religious and social systems that marginalized some and privileged others. So he suffered the fate of the underclass, whenever they challenged Rome – he was crucified. We know that happened to some of his followers, as well. The early church was counter-cultural in many ways, and suffered for it.

But as we know, it's hard to maintain that counter-cultural stance. It's hard to be always on the outside. The wealth and privilege of Empire is always seductively beckoning. When we talk about Christianity resisting "empire," by the way, that is just a shorthand

way of talking about any large-scale government that is able to wield a lot of influence. Of course we had the Roman Empire, which for much of its history claimed Christianity as its official religion, but we could just as easily be talking about any power, political or otherwise, that will go to extremes to silence dissenting voices or opposition.

The very Christianity that began with Jesus inaugurating a kingdom that stood apart from the values of the empire was later coopted by that same

Roman empire under Constantine and used to justify the large scale massacre of Muslims in attempts to reclaim the Middle East. It's hard not to be co-opted by the Empire. If, by slim chance, a movement isn't coopted by the Empire, it instead becomes the new Empire. As 16th century inventor John Harington write, "Treason doth never prosper, what's the reason? If it prosper, none dare call it treason."¹

Even today, think about the people and groups that so quickly allow their protests

¹ *Epigrams*, Book iv, Epistle 5. Compare: "Prosperum ac

felix scelus/ Virtus vocatur", Seneca, *Herc. Furens*, ii. 250.

against empire to succumb to that same empire.

Environmentalists drive cars and fly in planes to their protests and conferences, many of them leaving a huge carbon footprint in their wake. Or people who try to jump off the consumer bandwagon and simplify their lives – and now there’s a whole industry (including a glossy magazine full of consumer ads) dedicated to the “simplicity” movement. It’s hard not to be co-opted by the Empire, by the System.

The Letter of John’s Revelation is a cry to the church to avoid this seduction, to avoid

being absorbed into the Empire, into what Paul calls the “powers and principalities” in Ephesians. It’s a call to the church to *stay counter-cultural*, to resist becoming just another Imperial religion. Inasmuch as our church can be in bed with a political party (ANY political party), inasmuch as the success of our churches can be judged on the same terms as any business, inasmuch as our leadership models and structural models are uncritically patterned on political and business norms, this call is probably one we need to hear today.

John, our writer, was exiled to Patmos. Because he was exiled rather than crucified, he was probably an upper-class character – so he probably knew about accommodation to the Empire! He knew Empire from all sides – its seduction and its benefits, as one of its elites, and as an exile, he knew about the mean side of Empire as well.

What John has penned is a fantastic, apocalyptic, dream-language exposé of Empire. Revelation is like looking at the Roman world – or any Empire, really – through a garish pair of glasses that makes clear the seduction, the

injustice, and the violence of Empire. It attempts, in its language and its descriptions, to show Empire for the horror that it is.

By the time we reach Revelation 19, much has happened. We've heard the direct call to the churches to maintain the faith and avoid the seductions of Empire. We've seen the Empire depicted in lurid, violent terms as seductress and beast – seductress to those who are weak or inattentive, and as a violent beast to any who resist. Economic and geopolitical issues have been spun into fantastic stories of

divine warfare, and judgment.

Chapters 19 and 20 are in some ways the climax of the story – in other ways, a huge anti-climax. The final battles are really no battles at all. There's nothing here for Hollywood to turn into a blockbuster. In the first of the battles, the "king of kings and lord of lords," the "Word of God," on his white horse, simply and uncomplicatedly wipes out the beast and his armies with this sword sticking out of his mouth.

The implications seem fairly clear: in the end, there is really no contest at all between God and Empire. God is

stronger. And the instrument of the defeat of Empire and evil is the Word of God – truth, gospel, the gospel of Jesus Christ, the love of God, the story of welcome and forgiveness and good news for the poor.

It's an anticlimax. No Hollywood big battles or suspense. But it falls like a thunderclap on our church and our world. The injustice and violence of Empire is defeated by truth, by love, by the gospel and teaching of Jesus Christ. Not more walls, or weapons, or prisons. And perhaps most notably, God does all this **without** any defense or violence on

the part of the people of God.

Chapters 19 and 20 take us from the horror of Empire to the New Jerusalem. They do this, they conquer evil and restore order, through the Word of God, through truth and gospel, and by enlisting martyrs to rebuild a peaceful society.

When I read Revelation, I find that for me, John speaks a very sobering word. Because far from living in a paradise, I think we are living in the midst of an empire that is aging, cracking, showing its violent, oppressive, even its mean side. Election rhetoric has been frankly appalling from

both sides, dividing Americans from Americans and promoting mistrust and divisions among races, classes, and ideologies. Instead of living out a gospel of love and compassion, we are arming ourselves against one another, and concentrating wealth and power in fewer and fewer hands.

But we are also embedded in the Empire. We are also tempted by its wealth and its benefits. Pointing the finger squarely at myself, we've grown comfortable with clergy salaries, and tax deductible donations,

and church buildings,
and public approval.

But can you see the
rider on the white
horse, armed with the
Gospel? Can you hear
the cries of the
martyrs? Can you see
the price of Empire, in
the prisons and the
slums and the
scorching sun?

How different are
we called to be?