

Things are not what they seem
Glimpses from Revelation

The Lamb among the Nations (b)

Revelation 6:1 – 8:1

Overview

Now comes the action flowing from the throne of God and the Lamb. Consistent with the vision so far, the central character in the action of these chapters is the Lamb. It is he who is worthy and who breaks all the seals of the book in God's hand. It is his wrath the nations dread (6:16). Saints stand and give thanks before the throne and the Lamb (7:9-10). The blood of the Lamb has cleansed them (7:14), and he is their shepherd (7:17). None of this is the way things seem to be, but this is a revelation of what we need to know.

The first four broken seals are a unit because the four horsemen that emerge are summoned by one of the living creatures when they are opened. The fifth opening tells a very different story – the personal story of saints during the preceding events. The sixth is the day of Christ's wrath. The seventh opening up of God's plan is not a new event on earth but a preparation for a further level of revelation.

The horsemen

'The four horsemen of the apocalypse' have been the subject of art, literature and film and have entered into our common vocabulary. We use the term, appropriately, to describe various cataclysms that come upon the earth. What may be overlooked, however, is that these horsemen are not natural phenomena but are summoned, and summoned because the Lamb is worthy to unravel the plan of the Father.

The vision begins with a rider on a white horse. We may think this is Christ because of a later reference (19:11), but the series belongs together – and all the other riders indicate trouble for the earth. Rather, it refers to would be conquerors who regard their cause as righteous.

Well may we be wary of conquerors with a cause – those who believe their view of the world is good for everyone. It has been observed that Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, a 16th century book portraying a supposedly ideal way to live, in fact, spawned a series of bloody revolutions. The failure of these experiments does not diminish the desire of leaders to impose their ideology on their societies, to be the one with the break-through and to be the new saviour. Paul Hollander (American political scientist) observes:

'The seeking after political Utopia, indeed, has been for some centuries a major activity of Western intellectuals, whose hopes have been pinned now on this, now on that revolutionary movement or personality. These hopes, needless to say, have been repeatedly dashed – revolution turns to orthodoxy of another and sometimes more brutal kind, idealists are transformed into dogmatic functionaries or unprincipled opportunists; theory and practice part company. Yet the hopes themselves persist, and soon enough attach themselves to a new cause. Utopianism has become the surrogate faith of Western intellectuals, a faith that is not falsifiable by actual experience.

'It is not too much to say, indeed, that the concept of Utopia represents a kind of bridge between the religious and the secular spheres in this regard. Both the statements and actions of contemporary revolutionaries have shown that when traditional avenues to salvation become closed, or abandoned, the arena of politics acquires the kind of emotional and ideological intensity that in the past was the preserve of religion' (in a review of the book *The Collective Dream* by Melvin J. Lesky).

The horsemen that are summoned with each breaking of a seal portray a progression from the will to conquer, to war itself, then to famine, and finally, death—not just dying but the bleakness of having no hope. The sequence can be seen in many places, past and present. Utopia leads steadily to dystopia, or, we may say, illusion to disillusion.

The horsemen describe the cycle of history we pass through when we will not submit to the One on the throne and to the Lamb. Remember, it is the Lamb who is opening these seals and telling us what will happen. We may hear him say to the whole earth as he said to Jerusalem: 'How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling' (Luke 13:34). For all its bleakness, we are being told that Christ is fulfilling his purposes through these catastrophes.

Believers are deeply affected by all these events. They must live through them as others do, but then, they may be targeted as being part of the problem. This was the case as Rome blamed early Christians for disturbing the peace. Many lost their lives. They are easy to blame because they hold to a truth higher than that of the state and constitute a threat to the absolutism necessary to mere human authority.

These martyrs, now with God—'underneath the altar'—ask how long before they will be avenged. In the presence of the Lamb, it is hardly likely that they are peeved! Rather, they are zealous for God's glory and the fulfillment of the promises of a new heaven and earth where there is only righteousness (2 Pet. 3:12-14). Jesus expects us to have a faith that includes this kind of justice (Luke 18:18)!

For the moment, martyrs must wait until the sufferings of Christ, in his church, are complete (Col. 1:24). Christ and the apostles are clear about the importance of endurance under trial. It would be dangerous to say we understood why this or that is needed. Not even the saints in heaven seem to be clear about that. What we do know is that Christ is breaking open the seals, and that he is worthy to do so. Our endurance is not mere grit; it is love.

Then comes what can only be the end of time—the day of Christ's wrath (6:16), when stars fall from heaven (linked in Matthew 24:29-30 with the coming of Christ), the sky vanishes (like shaking the heavens in Hebrews 12:26-27—the end of anything that can be shaken). This will be a day of great joy for believers, but here, the vision describes the significance of Christ's coming for all who make this world their trust. Their fear of God and the Lamb (6:16) is in stark contrast to the joy of those who are redeemed (7:10).

As things will be at the end, so are they now—if only we knew it. Can the ungodly truly be indifferent about eternal things? Christians must not lose their confidence in the things revealed. Paul says unbelievers are convicted by the confidence we manifest (Phil. 1:28).

'Sealed' by God

The opening of the seventh seal (8:1) is held over while something else is settled. Further 'harm' (v. 3) is coming on the earth, but this time, in a way that will not affect those who are 'sealed'. In Biblical terms, to be sealed means to be owned, protected and certified for

service, and for Christians, this happens by the coming of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13). We need to know we are sealed because, if we are so marked as belonging to God, the things that are described in the next section will not apply (9:4).

Redeemed by God

John *hears* the number of people who are sealed, and then *sees* a great company of redeemed people praising God (cf. 1:10-12). They appear to be the same company because the 144000 are also the redeemed (14:1-4).

Describing God's servants as an even number from every tribe of Israel does not need to indicate they are converted Jews. The church, including converted Jews, has already been nominated as the true or completed Israel (Gal. 6:16) and there is no indication of a separate place for Jews in the completed people of God. What is important is the completeness of the people of God.

With John, we also need to see God's people giving exuberant praise to God for their redemption (7:9-10). They come from all nations but sing one song, they are before God and the Lamb whom they love, they wear white robes (cf. 6:11) and are ready to herald their King. This is heaven!

They now lead the worship (cf. 5:8-14) and, an angelic company says 'Amen' (7:11-12). The earlier scene where those who suffered ask for vengeance may suggest there is a qualification in regard to God's goodness. Not so here. The nature of God has been fully disclosed by the blood of the Lamb and by their being freed from slavery—to sin and wrath, the world, the flesh and the devil, and from death. From this freedom comes true humanity and true praise. This is eternal life!

An elder checks to see if John understands what he is seeing, and John ducks the question! He, and we, need to know that people who have come out of great tribulation can sing this song. This is what people think of God when they have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb! They can think of seven gifts worthy for the Lamb: power, wealth, wisdom might, honour, glory and blessing.

Stories coming to us from countries where Christians are persecuted bear witness to the truth that joy in the Holy Spirit comes because of the truth of Christ and his forgiveness, not from circumstances. This vision does not just tell us what will be but what can be now.

There is much to come by way of exposing, opposing and destroying evil, but already, we are given a taste of the age to come. We will serve God, God will shelter us, the rigors of life still infused with sin will be gone, the Lamb will shepherd us to springs of living water and God will wipe all tears away. Given the sadness of this world and the view of this world given in Revelation, to wipe away all tears is the final testament that the Lamb has won an eternal victory over all evil. Heaven will have no lament, no regrets and no damaged memories. We do not have to wait until the end of the book to know that it has a good ending!