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Lectio Divina on
the Book of the
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'There was silence in heaven for about half an hour'
(Revelation 8:1)

The last book of the Bible is an unusual choice for contemplative reading, however, the times we are in prompted my choice this Lent. One thing one can never say about this book is that it is boring! It is probably one of those books of the Bible which St Benedict in his Rule would have advised *not* to read in the late evening as it would kindle the imagination and 'fears of the night.' 'Such books,' he says, however, 'should be read at other times' (Rule 42:3-4). Still, I went at it with a study guide for, especially with a book like this with a kaleidoscope of imagery, it is easy to mis-read and look for fulfilment of prophecies when we hardly know what they are referring to. So before Lectio I had to do some background reading. Jean-Pierre Prévost's excellent book *How to Read the Apocalypse* (NY: Crossroad, 1993) addresses the question: What time of history is 'Revelation' relevant to?

The consensus of Biblical scholarship nowadays shows that there are *three* strands woven together in the Book of Revelation: the *pastoral*, the *liturgical* and the *historio-prophetic*. These themes or motifs cross over at many times in the text. The pastoral is central in the 'letters to the Churches' in the opening chapters. The author John of Patmos is an elder of those communities but he is in exile, imprisoned on the isle of Patmos. Literary differences make identity of the authorship of Revelation and the Fourth Gospel (i.e., John) questionable, though there are some similarities in theology and literary style. Nevertheless it is likely that Revelation is rightly to be associated with the larger Johannine tradition (i.e., the community to which the Fourth Gospel and the three canonical Letters of John were written). At the very least, the Book

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of Revelation seems to have been significantly influenced by the tradition of John the Evangelist, since it contains some significant vocabulary found also in the Gospel of John (e.g. the Lamb (Rev. 1:29, 5:12), living water (7:17), manna (2:17), Word (19:13) etc.). It is possible, then, that the Book of Revelation was written by an admirer of John the Evangelist and thus, named for him.

Moreover, like the author of the Forth Gospel this elder is also a contemplative and a mystic. The book starts by saying he was “in the spirit on the Lord’s day” (1:10). Later, he is invited into heaven and is again “in the spirit” (4:2). There he participates in a heavenly liturgy. This is the *second* major theme of the book. It is a book which has more liturgical refrains than any other in the Bible. It has been seen as a window into the early Christian liturgy. Throughout the Book of Revelation adoration and contemplation is woven between the historio-prophetic drama. This is the *third* major theme. The historical setting for the book is the persecution of Christians by the Roman Emperor Domitian in the mid 90’s of the first century. This is when the book was written. The book’s main object is to strengthen the faith of those who were being persecuted or going through hard times in any way. It says, don’t lose faith or lose heart if things seem to go wrong.

The Greek word ‘apokalupsis’ means ‘unveiling’ and the author seems to feel that what he sees is relevant for all times. The book makes clear what has recently happened and unveils the future. There are allusions to the major persecution at the time of Nero twenty-five years before. The infamous ‘number of the beast’ is a Jewish numerical code for ‘Nero Caesar’. The book also takes history forward foretelling the destruction of the Roman Empire. Babylon is the code for Rome – the former being the ancient enemy of Israel. So the prophesies are tied in to what *had happened* in the Old Testament. The seven heads of the dragon and of the beast are the seven hills on which Rome was built. John of Patmos disguises the criticism of the Empire so as to not aggravate the persecution.

LECTIO

These *three themes* have to be somewhere at the back of our mind if we use this complex book for Lectio. If we read the book slowly and prayerfully for ourselves, we may see (like I did) that the *fruits* also came in three forms.

Firstly, the book carries both a challenge and a consolation. This is the pastoral side. The challenge is to refocus our attention on Christ as the Lord of history. Even in times of crisis, when the future seems fearful or unknown, what is unveiled is within God’s providence. What lies hidden behind events is not so much

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conspiracy theories of some malevolent intent but God's sovereign care. The challenge is to give more attention to the *good* that comes out of evil and to recognise that goodness is greater than any evil. Sometimes when all seems awry the inherent goodness of people comes to the fore. The unveiling that the Book of Apocalypse shows is that, despite all the suffering and appearances of disorder, goodness is always stronger.

The *second* fruit for Lectio is the rich Christological language in the text which can help focus our prayer and devotion (as it has enriched the liturgy). The opening line makes clear that John's Apocalypse is about 'A revelation of Jesus Christ ...; Despite many attempts by Christian preachers over the centuries to make the Book of Revelation about the 'Beast' and about identifying the 'End Times,' the book is ultimately about neither but rather about 'the First and the Last', 'the Alpha and the Omega'. From start to finish *Jesus* remains the core, centre and focus of the book. John's Apocalypse identifies more Christological titles than any other book of the New Testament, each of them a spring-board to contemplation. As well as those just mentioned we have: The Faithful Witness, The Lamb that was Slain, The True One, Son of Man, He who Holds the Seven Stars, King of kings, Lord of lords, The One who walks among the Seven Golden Lamps, The One who is Alive and yet was Dead, Word of God, He who Opens, The Amen, The Lion of the Tribe of Judah, The Root of David, Rider of the White Horse, First Born from the Dead, The Bright Morning Star. Just to take one of these at a time is enough to enrich a whole period of meditation.

Thirdly, if part of our prayer life is to hold the situation of the world in our hearts, and intercede, then the Book of Revelation helps us focus on *concrete* situations. Like the gospels this book refuses to give a precise date of the End Times, and thus encourages the reader to focus on the present moment, not on what could happen if... but on the real needs of people now. We are not called to prophesy the future but to *discern* the sign of the times. That is what we are going through now. Such a stance helps keep compassion for what is, rather than theories about what might be, central to our prayer. This helps to lead prayer from the mind (trying to work out what will happen) to the heart (living with God's action – and as God's action - in concrete situations).

Being vigilant for the Master's coming doesn't mean being preoccupied with the date of the 'End', as some Christians have insisted on doing despite Jesus' warning that 'No one knows the day or hour...; (Mk 13:32; Mt 24:36). In fact, nowhere in Revelation does Jesus tell us who will be responsible for the End. The end is not left in human hands, but in the hands of a loving, faithful

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God. Praying with this book can help us to see that this situation of Pandemic is 'the end of the world as we know it,' but such an end that we can hope and pray, and believer, will bring about a new beginning.

The Book of Revelation does not shrink from confronting all that oppresses humanity, all that is death-dealing, all that is 'anti-Christ.' Rather, like the birth pangs of labour, the suffering we endure now is not a punishment but the promise of a newness. It points to 'the New Jerusalem', 'the salvation of the Lamb' renewal of life, never to 'The End.'

THE NUMBER SEVEN

On this theme, I was drawn in my Lectio to meditate on the number seven in the Book. The monsters that have seven heads (as we have seen, a coded reference to the centre of the persecuting Empire). However, more often seven is used to express completeness. Six is a symbol of falling short of the mark and of worldliness. Symbolically, the world was created in seven days. To miss the Sabbath, the day of rest, was to stay within secular time, to refer to things only in terms of *this* world. Seven opens us to *sacred* time. The trials recorded in Revelation are of seven seals, seven trumpets and then seven vials. These trials symbolise the un-making of things, the 'undoing' of the seven days of creation. The lights of heaven are extinguished, the seas roll back, animals and humans are purged. The accounts are frightening. It depicts creation in reverse, the unravelling of order. However, the message of consolation is that this destruction paves the way for a greater goodness. It made me look in hope for what may come out of crisis.

The seventh of each of these trials represents the recapitulation, where, like in Genesis, God stops the show, to show all is well. In Revelation, unlike Genesis, however, it is not the making but the breaking apart of things that is happening. Yet destruction is also part of God's creativity for it allows *new birth*. 'Behold,' the book concludes, 'I make all things new!' (21:5).

SILENCE

The breaking of the seventh seal particularly drew my attention. It shows that the final response to any crisis is silence. '*There was silence in heaven for about half an hour*' (8:1). It reminded me of my meditation practice, and of something John Main OSB once wrote:

'As we are unformed Christ is formed in us. As we enter the silence within us we are entering a void in which we are unmade.'

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We cannot remain the person we were or thought we were. But we are in fact not being destroyed but awakened to the eternally fresh source of our being. We become aware that we are being created. We are springing from the Creator's hand and returning to him in love.'

The curious thing is the specificity about the time of silence in the last unveiling. This is a breaking in of sacred time, of Kairos, into history which is measured chronologically. This time 'of about half an hour' comes as a conclusion to an account of the heavenly liturgy in Ch.7. This may reflect how the early Christian community had a period of silence ('of about half an hour') at the end of their liturgy which, unlike its heavenly prototype, was performed within the confines of time. A period of silence that brought home to those participating the completion of God's action, a taste of God's Sabbath rest. In the Book of Revelation history, liturgy and spiritual injunction are woven together. What happens in *time* shares in what it *eternal*.

The message I seemed to get from reading the book slowly during the time of lockdown was, 'Do not fear'. Before the opening of the seventh seal it is announced that it will be on earth as it is in heaven:

The lamb at the centre of the heavenly throne will be the shepherd, and he will bring us to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from our eyes (7:17).

The silence 'for about half an hour' is a response to the realization that God is in control. What seems like destruction is part of creation. We will be shown 'a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth has passed away' (21:1). The unmaking of the old and worn world order leads to something better: "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (12:4).

CONCLUSION

At this time of pandemic I was, therefore, curiously reassured by meditating on the Book of Apocalypse; i) nothing happens without God's providence, ii) despite all appearances the powers of evil in the world never have the upper hand, iii) what seems like destruction is a breaking open so that something new may be born, iv) the ragged events of time are tearings in the veil that shrouds the mystery of God's plan. What is revealed, in glimpses, is *love*. The tree of life and the holy city are seen by John of Patmos 'coming

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down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband' (21:2). At this time of pandemic it is the healing of love that we are waiting for. Revelation ends with an invitation to "the Tree of Life, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations." (22:2)

A time of silence 'for about half an hour' during the day, preferably morning and evening, helps us dip into the completion of God's plan. Liturgy - in the opening of the last seal - finds its fulfilment in silence. A seal is not broken as an end in itself but to open a scroll. The breaking described in the Book of Revelation announces a story of new life. John of Patmos begins his Revelation by being 'in the spirit.' That is what we do in meditation. We find our own spirit, 'our lifeline to the Spirit of God,' as John Main puts it. "The Spirit bears witness to our spirit," St Paul writes (Rom 8:16). John of Patmos says that the prayer of the Spirit and the liturgy of heaven is but one word: 'The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come'.' A prayer-word echoed in every prayer here on earth that what is in heaven may be here below. 'Let everyone who hears say, 'Come'.' The lamb who is on the heavenly throne and yet is shepherd here below reassures us, at the very end of the book, 'Surely I am coming soon. Amen, *Maranatha!*' (22:20).

Inner Change. Societal changes occur when we change on the inside. Just as happiness is an inside job, so also is societal change an inside job. In one of his morning homilies, Pope Francis remarked that the 'peace of the people is sown in the heart'. What he meant was that what's on the inside spills over to the outside.

– Jim Maher, SJ, *Pathways to a Decision*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 53.