

Runnymede United Church

May 16, 2010

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-2; John 17: 20-26

“One Day”

I remember a ditty I once learned for a church play:

‘God’s plan made a helpful beginning
But we spoiled our chances by sinning
We trust that the story
Will end in God’s glory,
But at present the other side’s winning.....’

Please pardon a light-hearted segue into today’s tough texts. Yet perhaps it is not as light as it might seem. ‘We trust that the story will end in God’s glory’: that’s what theologians call ‘eschatology’ - thinking about the ‘end times’.

And: ‘But at present the other side’s winning’: that’s about apocalyptic thought, the state of turmoil in which we live. A limerick can put in five lines what a preacher uses a sermon to express! Oh, well...

I once saw a carpenter’s contribution to interpreting scripture through a shelf on which stood 66 blocks of wood, each painted as one book of the Bible. Above them, a title: ‘The Bible: The Library of God’s Word’ to illustrate that the Bible is not so much a book as a library of books. That may seem obvious, but it’s worth emphasizing, on a day when we encounter ‘apocalyptic discourse’.

Scripture contains many forms of literature: history, poetry, letters and laws; myth, parable, story, narrative; hymns, sermons, prayers – the list goes on. ‘Apocalyptic’ is its own complex form of biblical literature. The word comes from ‘apocalypse’, meaning revelation: unveiling, uncovering. The term is perhaps most familiar as the name of the New Testament’s final book: ‘The Apocalypse’ or ‘The Revelation to John’.

Apocalyptic writing interprets history theologically. Its writers move beyond prophets who proclaimed God’s judgment and mercy to the events of their times. Apocalyptic writers saw history as a kind of curtain behind which a greater drama was being played out. In carefully crafted literature, they tried to lift the curtain, to unveil the true meaning of things. To them, in short, there is what **is** going on – and what is **really** going on. Apocalypse is about what is

really going on, really at stake, in the events of our times, especially in a context of turmoil, persecution, and oppression.

Jesus, in John's account, offers both an ending and a beginning. His words mark the end of his farewell discourse at the Last Supper, in which he prays for all who will follow him, even when he is no longer among them, when they face the turmoil about which apocalypse warns.

The church quickly came to understand how crucial was this prayer for unity – that they may all be one – as they began to struggle to bring together into one community people who were so different – Jew, Gentile, slave, free, male, female – all one, for in unity is the witness of love: that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them...”

The point of apocalyptic discourses, including Jesus' last words, is not the 'end of the world' in the sense of finality, but 'end' in the sense of goal, meaning, purpose. The question in regard to the 'end' is not so much 'when' as 'what'? To what end? For what purpose? For what meaning?

Apocalyptic literature, like Jesus' words, may ring true for us not because of its power to forecast the future, but its capacity to reveal the present.

Change is implicit in Easter's hope. Change is Easter's grace: On this last Sunday of the season of Easter, we remember that resurrection is the greatest change of all. But change often brings conflict!

It was a world of faith in the midst of great change, conflict, oppression that produced *The Book of Revelation*. With its visionary language and its history of being exploited by numerologists and doomsayers predicting the end of the world, it is unfamiliar territory for many in the United Church of Canada, including its ministers. But it is worth examining.

When times are hard, people try to imagine a better time. That's a key to understanding apocalyptic writing. Wounded persons long for a different future. Those in distress, seek relief: less tumult, fewer worries, better health, loyal friends. You and I want to feel less sad, betrayed, fearful, angry; we want to feel forgiven, trusted, affirmed. Part of the healing journey is growing into a different future. Perhaps it is on this level that *Revelation* can have meaning and power in our spiritual practices, our lives.

The 21st and 22nd chapters of *Revelation*, preceding what we've just heard, describe remarkable pictures of God's future realm. Hear the promises: *God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more...*

In today's passages, we hear promises: "*Your love may be in them, and I in them...and 'I am coming soon'*". And we hear what became a great prayer of the church: "*Come, Lord Jesus, come.*" That prayer reminds us, reminded the earliest followers and those throughout the ages that God comes to each person, in different ways. How do you respond to the new life God gives in Christ? How do I?

"*Come, Lord Jesus, come.*" Imagine recapturing that fantastic, extravagant, hope in God's way: Imagine those early followers affirming that the world's future belongs NOT to Caesar but to God, peering beyond the present's dim prospects to glimpse the incredible, to claim the promised peace of Christ. "*Come, Lord Jesus, come.*" Extravagant hope strengthened those early believers. But for many, today, such hope seems a refuge for sects who go into the mountains to await the second coming. How does *Revelation's* hope speak to you and me? Theologian Frederick Buechner captures our dilemma this way:

For people like us, reasonably thoughtful, reasonable, realistic people like us, the apocalyptic hope for more than the possible is too hopeful... a kind of madness... (and so) we try to fill the empty place with smaller, saner hopes: that the worst possibilities will never happen and that a few of the better possibilities may happen yet. All these hopes twisted together do make hope enough to live by, hope enough to see a little way into the darkness by. But the empty place where the great hope used to be is mostly empty still, and the darkness hungers still for the great light that has gone out, the crazy dream of holiness coming down out of heaven.¹

Deep down, I think many yearn for the extravagant hope of *Revelation*, the hope of early Christians who died with a song on their lips, in touch with a power greater than Caesar's. But I'm not sure I agree with Buechner that we have filled the empty place with smaller, saner hopes. *Revelation's* remarkable images, sustaining those early Christians, can touch you with Buechner's '*crazy dream*'; a dream for a world made anew. *Revelation's* hope!

"Come", says Jesus.

You and I can step into the water of life, in faith that God meets us there, with hope, with courage to face the present without denial, without hopelessness, with love, sustained by *Revelation's* hope, strengthened by the peace of Christ who prays to God that we may all be one:

Martin Luther King wrote a poem called, 'One Day'. King lived hope, knew about the power of a dream to create a new reality. His dream:

One day, youngsters will learn words they will not understand.

Children from India will ask: "What is hunger?"

Children from Alabama will ask: "What is racial segregation?"

Children from Hiroshima will ask: "What is the atomic bomb?"

Children at school will ask: "What is war?"

You will answer them:

"Those words are not used any more: like stage coaches, galleys, or slavery - words no longer meaningful -

That is why they have been removed from the dictionaries."

King's words still resound. What words would you or I choose to add today?
'**One day** we hope never to hear this word: poverty / climate change/ terror?

One day - that day is the end: the purpose, meaning, goal of God's world. One day. Let us live into hope... Amen. Lillian Perigoe

i. Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, (New York: Seabury, 1969), 121-22.