

THE LAMB WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD

Revelation 7.9-17

Introduction

“...the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd.” (17)

Today is often spoken of as Good Shepherd Sunday because of the readings. I think that this should be the easiest Sunday of the year to preach on: The good shepherd of John 10 and Psalm 23. Put the brain in auto and the mouth in cruise control and all should be well. It's kind of comforting and sentimental and in tough times is a theological 'teddy bear' or 'comfort food.'

But then you have the Apocalypse, the Book of Revelation. And a rather more disturbing image assaults our imagination.

The task this morning; is to engage our imaginations and see what changes. Why? Well let's start with a vision, a moving picture.

The vision

The scene is the throne room of God and the Lamb is at its centre.

The Lamb is bloodied and bruised yet seated in the midst of God's throne:

A human being, a battered and broken human being shares the throne of God. The one who was a troublemaker and whom the great and powerful executed, cried out to God in his God forsakenness now stands vindicated in the middle of the throne. The experience of human life and brutal death at the whim of human political and economic power is in the midst of the throne: The battered human victim rules the cosmos.

And the words of the Gospel of John hit home: "The Father and I are one." This is not the unity of some speculative numeracy or some proof text of the Trinity. These words caused great offence because Jesus' interrogators read them as words of power; and they are. But they are the power of the shared intimacy of suffering fellowship.

And now in John's vision we see it in the Lamb in the throne room.

The shepherd, the broken Lamb and the Father are one in suffering fellowship that is now the authority to rule.

Everything in the cosmos has changed.

How is that so?

First, salvation is open to all. There is no favoured race here, no favoured colour, no favoured social status, no favoured economic status, no favoured religious status and no favoured culture or language. All eyes are on the Lamb. That is what binds the imagination here.

Secondly, and equally true, the Lamb judges the world of coercion, injustice, and violence. The very battering that is in the midst of the throne is its judgment. Its destructive power will not survive.

And what is opened to us in the Apocalypse is that the competing empires have slaughter and war and greed and exploitation and political mismanagement and death and persecution on their agenda.

It's the world we know; the world we know this week here as our politicians go about their business of posturing, bluster and spin,

driven by ideologies of power and face saving, and continued mismanagement to the detriment of us all.

It is the world of Sri Lanka and Christchurch. It is the world of USA and China or Iran. It is the world of a million lost species. It is a world of smashed river systems.

John lives between these two worlds: the throne room and our world of dysfunction and so do we. John does not think of that throne room as a long way off in time or space. The two worlds exist together, a hair's breadth apart.

And we living in this dysfunctional chaos need to grapple with how we will live in the light of God's coming kingdom and the renewal of creation.

Where do we start?

Worship binds the throne room and world

Worship links the two worlds. Worship ties the victory of God with the destructiveness of much of the world in which we live.

Worship celebrates the victory of God. We celebrate the victory of God in the presence of the cosmos, the universe, all created beings. Our fumbling attempts at worship are taken up into the great multitude before the throne and transformed into great beauty and power.

That multitude is the people committed to the victory of the Lamb not through the sword but through justice, and peace; not through death but through the giving of life. This Lamb that was slain now sends the fullness of God's Spirit, God's life, into the world. That is his victory.

Here is the true victory of God, at the very centre of the universe: the universal salvation of the Lamb (10). Here is where true power lies.

God is victorious not through war or revenge, not through might and violence, but by salvation through the Lamb who was slain. The response of the heavenly host is to worship God (11-12). God's great victory in the salvation of the multitude is the great praise of the heavenly host. The cosmos stands in awe of God's wisdom, God's honour and God's might.

That sounds very grand. Then we read the little story of Tabitha Acts telling us how the Lamb goes about the business of his rule in this front of house.

Widows were the bottom of the social, economic and political scale and highly vulnerable. We have a story of a widow who takes a lead in the ministry of the Lamb following her Shepherd, caring for the bottom of the pile. She dies and the devastation can be felt even today when we read the story.

But death cannot have the final say. The power of the Lamb who is one with the Father breaks the recalcitrant sway of death. Suddenly widows, those who have no power, proclaim that our history is not closed, and that there is someone, some subversive reality that is a shepherd for the widows. All structures, all arrangements are changed from death into life. The social system of paralysis and death is rendered null and void.

We need to imagine Tabitha in that great fellowship before the throne because she gives us a clue about this mob before the throne.

Who are they?

These folk have come through the trials and have resisted the pressure to conform to the values and allure of the opponents of the Lamb.

They have resisted the glamour of power, deceit, violence and hatred, self-interest and idolatry. They have remained faithful as witnesses to the Lamb and his salvation. They are those who follow the way of the Lamb, who have chosen his path with no guarantees of safety or security.

The great ordeal is not a particular trouble but the ordeal caused when, for the sake of their integrity forgoing all self-interest, they witness to their trust in the Lamb and the way of the Lamb. That creates the ordeal because it upsets the balance of the world's powers just as it did in Jesus' day. They were prepared to face discrimination and death for the sake of their commitment. They will not take up the violence, the greed, and the deceit of the beasts of the book of Revelation.

This multitude is any people persevering in faithfulness, witnessing to all that the Lamb stands for; justice and peace for the victims he represents, the victims of overweening power and deceit.

They have washed their robes and whitened them in the blood of the Lamb. This striking juxtaposition of contradictory ideas brings us up short. They have followed the way of the broken slaughtered Lamb on the throne. They have not picked up the sword, because their only weapon is faithful witness. They are prepared to bear the wrath of the imperial power.

How will they survive? They have a Shepherd.

The vision of the Shepherd

The vision of the throne and the great worshipping crowd ends with the vision of the shepherd. Once again we are faced with a confronting contradiction; the slaughtered Lamb who rules is the shepherd.

The worshippers live their lives in the presence of God and in the presence of God they find what it means for the Lamb to be their

Shepherd: no hunger, no thirst, and no homelessness, oppressive labour or famine. Instead they find the Lamb leads them to life itself.

The difference is that now the Lamb, the shattered figure on the throne, is the Shepherd. This is God down and dirty having mixed with the powers of the world and lost. This is God's victory because having lost the Lamb is vindicated and now conquers the world with life.

Conclusion

Like John we live in two worlds. Both are real and both affect each other. But the real story is that the vision of the throne helps us see what is really going on and to live faithfully.

That is why Revelation is such a dangerous book. It invites us to a radical posture in worship that says YES to God's justice and God's kingdom and God's renewal of creation and NO to the self-interested power of the imperial elites.

Our worship must be conducted in the presence of the Lamb on the throne. Worship is a gateway into seeing the reality behind the perception. We live in a world where perception is everything because

truth is nothing. In the worship of the Lamb who is the Shepherd truth is everything and perception is exposed as idolatry.

The vision of the Lamb who is the Shepherd will not let us demythologize human evil. It will read it as the concerted desire of the dazzlingly powerful to rule the world in violence , for their own ends and interests, whether those ends be economic, political or ecological exploitation. The vision will not let us believe in the power of the evil present to generate the longed for tomorrow.

We will face the temptation to be less than faithful, to be comfortable, to soak up the destructive tendencies of our society and politics, and to give way to the idolatry of the consumer.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wanted the church "...to be a community that hears the Apocalypse...to testify to its (the church's) alien nature and to resist the false principle of inner worldliness" and so to be at the service of those "who suffer violence and injustice."

"...the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd."