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The Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 12, 2019

Lectionary Year C:  
Acts 9:36-43  
Revelation 7:9-17  
John 10:22-30  
Psalm 23

### **Celebrating with the angels**

The last book of the Bible is what we call the book of Revelation. It is the story of an out-of-this-world experience that a particular first-century John, whom we sometimes call “John the Divine,” had while exiled on the island of Patmos, in the Aegean Sea. This was in the days of the earliest church, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, as the apostles have begun to fan out into the surrounding area and then beyond. There, otherwise alone on Patmos, John sees Jesus, and talks to him, and then Jesus takes John up into heaven to show him everything that is going on there and will go on there. These things are “revealed” to John, which is why we call it the “Revelation of John.”

In today’s reading, from the seventh chapter, John sees in heaven a multitude of people, more than anyone could ever count—“from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages”—along with angels and what he calls “elders,” all standing before the throne of God and before the Lamb (that is, before Christ) and singing their hearts out with songs of praise. Why are they singing God’s praise? Because, they say, “salvation belongs to our God,” and through his salvific, saving grace he has brought into his family all the people of the troubled earth. They are there, in the realm of eternal harmony and peace, so they raise their voices to sing Alleluia. John gets this preview of what it looks like when harmony comes to all of God’s various people, from every nation, tribe, people, and language. In the Lord’s Prayer we say, “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” John is shown what it looks like in that place where God’s will is done, and one of the things you notice right away is that there is a lot of singing.

But leave John on Patmos for a minute, and fast-forward 1,400 years and 2,000 miles to the northwest, to the study desk of Sir Thomas More, an English councilor to Henry VIII, an accomplished attorney, and a man for all seasons. It is Thomas More who gives us the English word “utopia,” from his book by the same name. In the book, Utopia is an island, which operates under the principles of reason and good order, perfectly maintaining the peace through perfect social relationships. The law is simple; the people are good; from each is taken, according to his ability; to each is given, according to his need. Things go well in Utopia. There is harmony, there is peace, justice, and equality.

Utopian thinking didn’t begin with Thomas More, but it didn’t end with him either. Various utopian schemes have been developed and are sometimes effected, in contexts large and small, throughout the ages. The French Revolution was one attempt, as was the Russian Revolution it inspired. But the desire for paradise on earth isn’t limited to the large-scale actions of nation-states or even just to politics. Periodically we hear about groups that have tried to set themselves up this way; usually if we hear about them it’s because something has gone horribly wrong: one thinks of David Koresh or Jim Jones. Dystopia is literally utopia gone wrong.

What is sometimes missed by our utopian thinkers\* is that the word “utopia” literally means “no-place.” *Topia*, from *topos*, meaning place; the prefix *u-*, Greek for “not.” Utopia is “no-place.” No place, that is, on earth.

On the other hand, the writers of the Hebrew Bible, the prophets, the gospel evangelists, Paul and the other apostles: the people who contributed to the Scriptures were all diehard realists, without a utopian among them. They all knew that, as the Lenten collect has it, “We have no power in ourselves to help ourselves,” and help is what we desperately need. So all of them—Old and New Testaments alike—testify to the loving-kindness of God and reiterate the promises that God makes about the ultimate redemption of the world. What the Revelation to John shows is that even if we have no power in ourselves, there is a power that can and does: God the Father who is seated on the throne and the Lamb that has brought us victory.

The ones who have needed this salvation, the power that comes not from themselves, are the ones who are praising God in the seventh chapter of Revelation. The elder describes them as those “who have come out of the great ordeal.”

What is this great ordeal, or, as other translations have it, “the great tribulation”? We don’t have to posit that it’s some dramatic apocalyptic future event, though it may be. For some people, life itself is the great ordeal; life itself is the great tribulation. You may know people for whom life is an ordeal, a tribulation. You may be one. This fact is acknowledged by a clear-eyed Scriptural perspective, and all of our readings today make that point: the reading from Acts has to do with Tabitha, a prominent woman of the community, who has died, and those who mourn her. In Psalm 23, the valley of the shadow of death is what the writer has to walk through. In the Gospel of John, Jesus describes how there are those who will try to snatch his sheep out of his hand and do them harm.

There is no utopia here. But, for those who experience life as an ordeal, as tribulation, Revelation makes a promise, a beautiful promise. The elder says of them that “the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;  
the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;  
for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,  
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,  
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

It isn’t only Revelation. The other readings make this very same point about God’s loving-kindness in the midst of the ordeal: in Acts, Peter raises Tabitha from the dead through the power of the Spirit. In the Psalm, the writer affirms that God is present and protective even in the valley of the shadow of death. In the gospel, Jesus assures his followers that they will never perish as long as they are with him; as long as they have Jesus, no one will be able to snatch them away.

Utopia means no-place, but we live in this place. If there is hope for this place, and for us, it is in Christ. If there is peace, it is through the risen Christ. If there is harmony, it is because the God who created the world is the God who loves the world and is redeeming the world through his risen Son, even now, during the ordeal.

This is a cause for celebration, and celebrating is exactly what the multitudes are doing in Revelation, and what we imagine the angels in heaven are doing right now. Indeed, it is what we are doing right now: the person presiding at a Eucharist is termed the “principal celebrant,” and we say that we are together “celebrating a Mass.” There is a lot to celebrate, particularly at Easter, in the light of the Resurrection of Christ: we can celebrate that, no matter what happens in the world, no

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\* It’s not clear that More was one. It is widely believed that *Utopia* is a work of satire.

matter what the difficulties of life bring us, in the fullness of his time, all will be made right by God. In the fullness of time, God will wipe away every tear.

Fear no evil, celebrate God's goodness, and give him glory. The Lord is our good shepherd and he will be forever.