

Poetry From Patmos: St. John as Pastor and Theologian

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The most famous last words spoken or written are the last book of the Bible, the Revelation. No others come close in the competition. But "most famous" does not mean "most admired" or "best understood." Many, confused by the bloody dragons and doomsday noise, are only bewildered. Others, associating them with frequently encountered vulgarities and inanities, hold them in contempt.

Still, there have always been some, never perhaps a majority, who stopped to look and read out of curiosity, but who stayed to understand and admire because they discovered here rich, convincingly presented truth. I am among these people. The words, for us, are famous not because they are sensationally bizarre or teasingly enigmatic. They are famous because they are so satisfyingly *true*, backed up by centuries of mature experience and tested usage. The famous last words of the Revelation are famous because they memorably summarize and conclude centuries of biblical insight, counsel, and experience in the persons to whom God chose to reveal himself, and who in their turn chose to live by faith in God.¹

The power of the Revelation to attract attention, and then, for those who attend, to make the reality of God and the life of faith coherent, develops out of a striking convergence of the ministries of theologian, poet, and pastor in the person of its author, St. John.² The three ministries are braided into a distinguished plait in his introductory words: "I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, 'Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches' Then I turned to see the voice . . ." (1.9-12).

St. John was on Patmos, a prison island, "because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." The word (*logos*) of God (*Theos*) put him where he was; it also made him *who* he was. He did not identify himself by his circumstances as a prisoner but by his vocation as a theologian. He did not analyze Roman politics in order to account for his predicament, but exercised his intelligence on the word and testimony of God and Jesus: the task of the theologian.

The word and witness that shaped his life were then written down by command and under inspiration. "In the Spirit," he was commanded, "Write what you see." The result is a book that recreates in us, his readers, that which he himself experienced: the work of the poet.

He did this in a conscious, double companionship with the Christians and

the Christ whom he knew — “your brother, who shares with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance.” Everything there was to share — the hard difficulties, the glorious blessings, the day-by-day discipleship — he shared: the life of a pastor.

A theologian takes God seriously as subject and not as object, and makes it a life's work to think and talk of God in order to develop knowledge and understanding of God in his being and work. A poet takes words seriously as images that connect the visible and invisible, and becomes custodian of their skillful and accurate usage. A pastor takes actual persons seriously as children of God and faithfully listens to and speaks with them in the conviction that their life of faith in God is the centrality to which all else is peripheral. The three ministries do not always converge in a single person; when they do the results are impressive. Because St. John so thoroughly integrated the work of theologian, poet, and pastor, we have this brilliantly conceived and endlessly useful document, the Revelation.

St. John, the theologian. A fourth century scribe, set the task of copying the Revelation, wrote the title, “A Revelation of John,” and then, in a moment of inspired doodling, scribbled in the margin, *tou theologou*, “the theologian.” The next copyist, struck with their appropriateness, moved the two words from the margin onto the center of the page. It has been St. John the Theologian ever since. (AV translation, “John the Divine.”)

St. John is a theologian whose entire mind is saturated with thoughts of God, his whole being staggered by a vision of God. The world-making, salvation-shaping word of God is heard and pondered and expressed. He is God-intoxicated, God-possessed, God-articulate. He insists that God is more than a blur of longing, and other than a monosyllabic curse (or blessing), but capable of *logos*, that is, of intelligent discourse. John is full of exclamations in relation to God, quite overwhelmed with the experience of God, but through it all there is *logos*: God revealed is God known. He is not so completely known that He can be predicted. He is not known so thoroughly that there is no more to be known, so that we can go on now to the next subject. Still, He is known and not unknown, rational and not irrational, orderly and not disorderly, hierarchical and not anarchic.

It is of great importance for Christian believers to have, from time to time, a reasonable, sane, mature person stand up in their midst and say “God is . . .” and go on to complete the sentence intelligently. There are tendencies within us and forces outside us that relentlessly reduce God to a checklist of explanations, or a handbook of moral precepts, or an economic arrangement, or a political expediency, or a pleasure boat. God is reduced to what can be measured, used, weighed, gathered, controlled, or felt. Insofar as we accept these reductionist explanations, our lives become bored, depressed, or mean. We live stunted like acorns in a terrarium. But oak trees need soil, sun, rain, and wind. Human life requires God. The theologian offers his mind in the service of saying “God” in such a way that God is not reduced or packaged or banalized, but known and contemplated and adored, with the consequence that our lives are not cramped into what we can explain but exalted by what we worship. The difficulties in such thinking and saying are formidable. The theologian is never

able to deliver a finished product. "Systematic theology" is an oxymoron. There are always loose ends. But even the crumbs from discourse around such a table are more satisfying than full-course offerings on lesser subjects.

St. John is a theologian of a particularly attractive type: all his thinking about God took place under fire: "I was on the isle, called Patmos," a prison isle. He was a man thinking on his feet, running, or on his knees, praying, the postures characteristic of our best theologians. There have been times in history when theologians were supposed to inhabit ivory towers and devote themselves to writing impenetrable and ponderous books. But the important theologians have done their thinking and writing about God in the middle of the world, in the thick of the action: Paul urgently dictating letters from his prison cell; Athanasius *contra mundum*, five times hounded into exile by three different emperors; Augustine, pastor to people experiencing the chaotic breakup of Roman order and *civitas*; Thomas, using his mind to battle errors and heresies that, unchallenged, would have turned Europe into a spiritual and mental jungle; Calvin, tireless in developing a community of God's people out of Geneva's revolutionary rabble; Barth arbitrating labor disputes and preaching to prisoners; Bonhoeffer leading a fugitive existence in Nazi Germany; and St. John, exiled on the hard rock of Patmos prison while his friends in Christ were besieged by the terrible engines of a pagan assault: *theologos*.

The task of these theologians is to demonstrate a gospel order in the chaos of evil, and arrange the elements of experience and reason so that they are perceived proportionately and coherently: sin, defeat, discouragement, prayer, suffering, persecution, praise, and politics are placed in relation to the realities of God and Christ, holiness and healing, heaven and hell, victory and judgment, beginning and ending. Their achievement is that the community of persons who live by faith in Christ continue to live with a reasonable hope and in intelligent love.

The Christian community needs theologians to keep us *thinking* about God and not just making random guesses. At the deepest levels of our lives we require a God whom we can worship with our whole mind and heart and strength. The taste for eternity can never be bred out of us by a secularizing genetics. Our existence is derived from God and destined for God. St. John stands in the front ranks of the great company of theologians who convince by their disciplined and vigorous thinking that *Theos* and *logos* belong together, that we live in a creation and not a madhouse.

St. John, the poet. The result of St. John's theological work is a poem, "the one great poem which the first Christian age produced."^a If the Revelation is not read as a poem, it is simply incomprehensible. The inability (or refusal) to deal with St. John, the poet, is responsible for most of the misreading, misinterpretation, and misuse of the book.

A poet uses words primarily not to explain something, and not to describe something, but to *make* something. Poet (*poetes*) means "maker". Poetry is not the language of objective explanation but the language of imagination. It makes an image of reality in such a way as to invite our participation in it. We do not have more information after we read a poem, we have more experience. It is not "an examination of what happens but an immersion in what

happens.”⁴ If the Revelation is written by a theologian who is also a poet, we must not read it as if it were an almanac in order to find out when things are going to occur, or a chronicle of what has occurred.

It is particularly appropriate that a poet has the last word in the Bible. By the time that we get to this last book we already have a complete revelation of God before us. Everything that has to do with our salvation, with accompanying instructions on how to live a life of faith, is here in full. There is no danger that we are inadequately informed. But there is danger that through familiarity and fatigue we will not pay attention to the splendors that surround us in Moses, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, Mark and Paul. St. John takes the familiar words and by arranging them in unexpected rhythms, wakes us up so that we see “the revelation of Jesus Christ” entire, as if for the first time.

Some, when God is the subject, become extremely cautious, qualifying every statement and defining every term. They attempt to say no more than can be verified in logic. They do not want to be found guilty of talking nonsense. Others, when God is the subject, knowing how easily we drift into pious fantasies, become excessively practical. They turn every truth about God into a moral precept. But poets are extravagant and bold, scorning both the caution of the religious philosopher and the earnestness of the ethical moralist. St. John is a poet, not using words to tell us about God, but to intensify our relationship with God. He is not trying to get us to think more accurately or to train us into better behavior, but to get us to believe more recklessly, behave more playfully — the faith-recklessness and hope-playfulness of children entering into the kingdom of God. He will jar us out of our lethargy, get us to live on the alert, open our eyes to the burning bush and fiery chariots, open our ears to the hard-steel promises and commands of Christ, banish boredom from the gospel, lift up our heads, enlarge our hearts.

Denise Levertov wrote, “Since almost all experience goes by too fast, too superficially for our apperception, what we most need is not to *re-taste* it (just as superficially) but really to taste *for the first time* the gratuitous, the autonomous identity of its essence. My 1865 Webster’s defines *translation* as ‘being conveyed from one place to another; removed to heaven without dying.’ We must have an art that translates, conveys us to heaven of that deepest reality which otherwise ‘we may die without ever having known’; that *transmits* us there, not in the sense of bringing the information to the receiver but of putting the receiver in the place of the event — alive.”⁵ This is St. John’s work: he takes the old, everyday things of creation and salvation, of Father, Son, and Spirit, of world and flesh and devil that we take for granted, and forces us to look at them and experience again (or maybe for the first time) their reality.

Not long before his death in 1973, W. H. Auden stated what it is we demand of a poem: “. . . two things: firstly, it must be a well-made verbal object that does honor to the language in which it is written; secondly, it must say something significant about a reality common to us all, but perceived from a unique perspective.”⁶ St. John’s theological poem meets both demands. It is well made: its complex structure is carefully crafted and commands the wonder and admiration of all who study it. And it takes “the reality common to us all,” the gospel of Jesus Christ, and presents it in the “unique perspective” of the

end, the fulfilled completion of all the details and parts of salvation.

St. John sings his songs, represents his visions, arranges the sounds and meanings of his words rhythmically and artistically. He juxtaposes images unexpectedly, and we see and hear what was there all the time if we had only *really* listened, *really* looked. He wakes up our minds, rouses our feelings, involves our senses.

St. John, the pastor. St. John's passion for thinking and talking about God, and his genius for subjecting us to the power of language so that the images are re-born in us, connecting us with a reality other and more than us, that is to say, his theology and his poetry — these are practiced in a particular context, the community of persons who live by faith in God. *What* he talks of and the *way* he talks of it take place among persons who dare to live by the great invisibles of grace, who accept forgiveness, who believe promises, who pray. These people daily and dangerously decide to live by faith and not by works, in hope and not in despair, by love and not hate. And they are daily tempted to quit. St. John is their pastor, or, as he says, "your brother, who shares . . ."

Persons who live by faith have a particularly acute sense of living "in the middle." We believe that God is at the beginning of all things, and we believe that God is at the conclusion of all life, in St. John's striking epigram: "the Alpha and the Omega" (1.8). It is routine among us to assume that the beginning was good ("and God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good"). It is agreed among us that the conclusion will be good ("And I saw a new heaven and a new earth"). That would seem to guarantee that everything between the good beginning and the good ending will also be good. But it doesn't turn out that way. Or at least it doesn't in the ways we expect. That always comes as a surprise. We expect uninterrupted goodness, and it is interrupted: I am rejected by a parent, coerced by a government, divorced by a spouse, discriminated against by a society, injured by another's carelessness. All of this in a life which at its creation was very good and at its conclusion will be completed according to God's design. Between the believed but unremembered beginning and the hoped for but unimaginable ending there are disappointments, contradictions, not-to-be-explained absurdities, bewildering paradoxes — each of them a reversal of expectation.

The pastor is the person who specializes in accompanying persons of faith "in the middle," facing the ugly details, the meaningless routines, the mocking wickedness, and all the time doggedly insisting that this unaccountably unlovely middle is connected to a splendid beginning and a glorious ending. Luther's acid test of the Christian pastor was: "Does he know of death and the Devil? Or is it all sweetness and light?"⁷

When we read a novel we have an analogous experience. We begin the first chapter knowing that there is a last chapter. One of the satisfying things about just picking up a book is the sure knowledge that it will end. In the course of reading we are often puzzled, sometimes in suspense, usually wrong in our expectations, frequently mistaken in our assessment of a character. But when we don't understand or agree or feel satisfied, we don't ordinarily quit. We *assume* meaning and connection and design even when we don't experience it. The last

chapter, we are confident, will demonstrate the meaning that was continuous through the novel. We believe that the story will satisfyingly *end*, not arbitrarily *stop*.

It is St. John's pastoral vocation to reinforce this sense of connection in the chaotic first century. In the buzzing, booming confusion of good and evil, blessing and cursing, rest and conflict, St. John discerns pattern and design. He hears rhythms. He discovers arrangement and proportion. He communicates an overpowering "sense of an ending."⁸ We are headed towards not merely a terminus but a goal, an end that is purposed and fulfilled. He spells out this sense of an ending in such a way that the people in the middle acquire an inner conviction of *meaning* something good in God.

St. John is not concerned with heaven and hell as things in themselves. He has no interest in judgment and blessing apart from the persons to whom he is pastor. He does not speculate or theorize. Every word, every number, every vision, every song is put to immediate use among those persons in the seven little congregations to which he is pastor. He is with them in their experiences of worship and apostasy, martyrdom and witness, love and vengeance, and develops the connections that maintain coherence between the beginning and the ending. These people, served by such a pastor, steadily acquire confidence that they are included in God's ways and are able, therefore, to persevere meaningfully even when they cannot see the meaning.

It is generally agreed that the Revelation has to do with eschatology, that is, with "last things." What is frequently missed is that all the eschatology is put to immediate pastoral use. Eschatology is the most pastoral of all the theological perspectives, showing how the ending impinges on the present in such ways that the truth of the gospel is verified in life "in the middle." It shows us that believers are not set "at the high noon of life, but at the dawn of a new day at the point where night and day, things passing and things to come, grapple with each other." (Moltmann).⁹

The Revelation is thick with meaning — there are layers and layers of truth here to be mined. There is a multiplicity of significance in nearly every image St. John uses. There is some of the many-sidedness of wild nature in this "great and vividly imagined poem, in which the whole world of that age's faith is bodied forth."¹⁰ Since no one person and no single generation can expect to take possession of more than a part of its complex truth, it is important at the outset that St. John's readers cultivate courtesy among each other, lest differences in discovery develop into antagonisms of dogma. A good place to begin is to be courteous to St. John himself by honoring the fundamental concerns that we discern in his life and that come to expression in the Revelation: that his subject is God (not cryptographic esoterica), and that his context is pastoral (not alarmist entertainment). When we accept St. John in the shape of these ministries of theologian, poet, and pastor, we can be wrong about specific details and still be correct in our total response to his work. Christians who honor these conditions will emphasize different aspects of the truth and uncover surprises not anticipated by previous readers, but still maintain a community of interpretation and response with all those who, in faith, read in order to run.

NOTES

¹. Northrup Frye, *The Great Code* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1982), p. 199.

². "St. John" can refer to the Apostle, the Elder in Ephesus, or to an otherwise unknown leader in the late first century church. Scholars argue for the various identifications. It matters little, so far as I can tell, to an accurate interpretation of the book. I do take the position, though, that the St. John who wrote the Revelation also wrote the Gospel and Letters.

³. Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949), p. 6.

⁴. Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions Publishing Corp., 1973), p. 239.

⁵. *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁶. W. H. Auden, "The Poems of Joseph Brodsky," *The New York Review of Books*, 20:5, (April 5, 1973), p. 10.

⁷. quoted by Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan Univ. Press, 1959), p. 209.

⁸. The title of a study of Frank Kermode which discusses the modern instances of apocalyptic literature and the evidence that they give for our human requirement to live towards a proposed conclusion and not simply at random. *The Sense of an Ending* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1967).

⁹. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (London: SCM Press, 1967).

¹⁰. Austin Farrer, op., cit., p. 6.