

Mission Accomplished; Mission Begun: Lent and the Book of Revelation

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The Book of Revelation depicts in elaborate form two different but related missions. The first is the mission of Christ, the work of redemption God has undertaken from the very beginning and brought to completion in the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. In fact, the writing is filled with many hymns that are songs of triumph because this mission has indeed been completed. It is no wonder that so many of the verses of Revelation have been set to music—more than any other book of the Bible except Psalms. The exalted Christ who appears to John at the beginning of the vision speaks as he does because his work has been completed. He is the beginning and the end.

At the same time, the Book of Revelation also points to the mission that is in the hands of the church, the people of God. Their mission has definitely not been completed. The final chapters of Revelation show the future when that mission is complete. It has not happened yet. In fact, the church is only now becoming so organized that the world around can take notice and begin to oppose it. The constant call to the church in this writing is to be faithful: not to give in to the social and economic forces that are arrayed against the church. In fact, precisely such opposition is to be expected if the mission of the people of God is carried on faithfully.

There is an absolutely necessary connection between these two missions: the mission of the church could not begin until the mission of Christ was accomplished. Granted, there was an earlier mission of God's people before the incarnation—the mission of Israel. There is a parallel and a continuity between Israel and the church. But there was a new stage, a definitive mission of the incarnate one that, though showing the continuity, was decisive.

What was the mission of Christ that Revelation celebrates as accomplished? It was the conquest of the demonic powers of sin. These were dealt a death-blow in his death and resurrection. What is the mission of the church? To announce the gospel of Christ's victory, not only by its words, but by living as individuals and as a community on the basis that this gospel is true. That would be a simple matter if the demonic powers had totally capitulated. However, though they have lost the decisive battle, they still go on. In fact, Revelation puts it more starkly: though they have been conquered in the heavenly spheres, their strength on earth is undiminished. What the faithful are called to do is to live on the basis of the victory that does not seem to have had much effect in this world. That is where the temptation to faithlessness is understandable and strong.

There are several problems in preaching from Revelation. Above all, the poetic imagery builds from one chapter to another, the symbolism is so dense, that the preacher who breaks into the middle of such a passage in order to use only one chapter or so must do a great deal of explaining in order to have the context at all clear. There are exceptions to this, generally the brief passages or hymns about the victory of Christ,

and the concluding passages describing the heavenly Jerusalem. These are the only passages used in the lectionary, all in the Sundays of the Easter Season—which indicates the strong emphasis on the completed mission of Christ. Obviously, none of these would be appropriate for the Lenten Season. What is needed during Lent is the emphasis on our mission, the mission of the Church. The easiest passages to deal with are the letters to the seven churches in chapters two and three. These alone, however, do not directly show the conflict between the Christian and the Empire, unless the preacher brings it in. Therefore, they can be used to show needed faithfulness but without a sense of the overall mission of the church. In other words, it is relatively easy to jump directly from one of the seven letters—one that we think applies to our congregation—directly to the twentieth century. But if we do not understand the letter to the first century church as calling for faithfulness in the context of the situation of the Roman Empire, then we will not see the call to faithfulness in the context of our own social and political situation. For instance, the letter to the church in Laodicea [3:14ff] is a favorite if we feel the present congregation is “lukewarm.” But without some understanding of what the situation was in the first century about which they were lukewarm we will also miss the parallel situation in our own time. It is easy to speak only about the life of the congregation and not about its relationship to the wider world.

Revelation is a difficult book for preaching, with strange beasts and apocalyptic signs. The temptation for the preacher is to avoid all such strange passages and deal only with the less peculiar. But it is possible to take a few of the strange passages that are not very familiar and use them as a starting point for a major theme in the book. Let us look at two examples.

I. The distinction and the continuity between the two missions is encapsulated in chapter 12:7-12, which would be a very interesting selection for the Lenten Season. In this strange passage, the defeat of all of the powers of evil—the devil and his angels—is accomplished. It is accomplished only in heaven, however. The powers of evil are now even greater on earth, and the devil fights with even greater fury here, “because he knows his time is short.” The Lamb has conquered. Those who are faithful will conquer. Their mission, above all, is to bear witness to the ultimate victory that has already been won. They are not only to testify verbally but also to live as those who indeed believe that the Lamb has conquered and the forces of evil have been defeated.

Their testimony will not be made easy, for the powers of evil are even stronger on earth than they were in the time of Jesus. They are stronger because they are like a cornered animal, fighting for their lives. That is what chapter 12 is about. The dragon has begun to make war on all those “who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus” [12:17].

It is in the light of this accomplished victory of Jesus and the still to be accomplished mission of the church that we need to read the rest of the book of Revelation. The two missions interact constantly throughout the book, so hymns of victory in heaven are alternated with the fury of the battle on earth. The familiar letters to the seven churches in chapters two and three are words of the victorious Christ to churches in Asia Minor whose mission is just beginning. In each there is a call to faithfulness and a promise of victory to those who complete their mission. Each letter begins with a description of the One who speaks, cast in tones of cosmic victory and

power. His mission has been accomplished. Theirs is just beginning. The letters point to the particular points at which each church is tempted or shows signs of unfaithfulness. The call is for steadfastness.

It might seem an easy matter to remain faithful to the testimony of Jesus. It might be fairly easy if all that was meant was a verbal statement of belief, though in the situations of persecution that the early church faced, even this was not easy. But what was required for faithfulness was far more than verbal statements of belief: what was demanded was life lived on the basis of that belief. The ultimate question was who was Lord: Christ or Caesar; Christ or the power of the Empire; Christ or the powers of this world?

In the persecution of the church that took place from the first to the fourth centuries, the charges against the church changed and were clarified. The final and the ultimate one was treason against the Roman Empire. Some have viewed such a charge against the church as due to a misunderstanding on the part of the Empire. There was a belief that the church and the Empire could comfortably co-exist. Others agreed with John of Patmos, that Christians must choose whether to live under the Lordship of Christ or live under the demonic powers of this world symbolized by the Empire. The Constantinian arrangement was the result of the first view: that the church's mission could be faithfully lived out under the umbrella of the powers of this world. Such an arrangement lasted in the west for a millenium and a half.

For John of Patmos, the Roman Empire was right to view the Church as dangerous. A Church faithful to John of Patmos's vision would have been a serious problem for the Empire. But John's view did not prevail for almost the next two thousand years, although the monastic movement often stood as a protest. As the questions we face in the western world at the end of the Constantinian era become sharper, the book of Revelation is more and more a helpful resource for preaching.

II. The second passage needs considerable introduction. It deals with the specific question: What is the mission of the Church? The answer of the whole book is that the church is called to be a faithful witness to the victory of Christ and to live on the basis that Christ, and not the powers of this world, is the guide of our life, both as individual Christians and as the church, the community of faith. Why is this witness difficult? Because the world is organized on principles that differ absolutely from the gospel of Christ. All of the trade and commerce is geared to provide luxury for those who can afford it, not to provide food for the hungry. It would be interesting to take chapter 18, verses 9-24, and do a dramatic reading, with different groups speaking the parts of kings, merchants, and shipmasters. What is at stake in this passage is the character of the economic system of the Roman Empire, which is not all that different from the system under which we live in terms of its values. It is not only the wealthy who are involved: the whole system of commerce is tied to bringing goods to the wealthy. Even the poorest sailor is tied into this system. The question then is how Christians can live faithfully in an economic system that does not have as its goal the values of the gospel in terms of loving the neighbor. How does the Christian live under a political system that supports such an economic structure? Granted, the role of the citizen is different today from what it was in the first century Roman Empire, but the question remains for us just as it did for the Christians in John's day. John does not readily answer the question of how to live, but he does point to the conflict.

Once chapter 18 is discussed, then the passages about the mark of the beast would be easier to understand, passages such as 13:11-17. If we say that Christians obviously have to be involved in the economic and political structures under which they live and there is no real conflict, then Revelation will have little or no meaning. If we recognize that we also have serious decisions of faithfulness to make, then this ancient writing will come alive, though it will not give us ready-made answers. Furthermore, for Revelation, it is not only a matter of how individual Christians lead their lives, but how the church as a community organizes its life. Is it an alternative model of how human beings can live together or does it in its own life parallel the economic and political life of the society around it?

How do we combine these themes from the book of Revelation with the Lenten Season in terms of our preaching? Though the lectionary does not do it, such a combination is possible, using passages such as those already mentioned. Our current Lent originated in the season of final preparation for baptism of candidates who had been catechumens for two or three years. The whole church was involved in this final preparation in the sense that the lessons and sermons had to do with being faithful disciples, following the way of the cross. All of this preparation culminated on Easter Eve with the baptism of these new members of the Body of Christ. Therefore, Lent is an appropriate time to discuss the meaning of discipleship. Discipleship means taking up our cross, following Jesus. If this world remains under the power of evil, then true discipleship will not be easy. Just as Jesus created dissension in his society, so Christians will also be in conflict with elements of their own society. The songs of victory belong to Easter. The times of conflict belong to Lent. The two seasons cannot be separated. Lent is possible only because the first Easter has occurred. But Easter cannot really be celebrated by those who do not understand their own mission as the church of the Risen Christ, a mission not yet accomplished. Lent is a time to discuss in study groups as well as in sermons the specifics of what conflict there is between our values as Christians and the values involved in the social, political, and economic systems in which we live. What ought to be our attitude? What witness do we make to the community? How do we govern our life as a congregation to give witness to the values we hold?

We live in a highly pragmatic culture. We do not see the value of any action that does not change the situation. "Will it work?" is our first critique of any proposed plan. Therefore, if we do not see any way to change the economic and political structures, then we decide there is nothing to do but settle down and forget the conflict. But the book of Revelation does not expect that Christians will alter the Roman Empire. They are to bear witness even though they cannot alter the situation. Such a witness is not futile, but is in its own fashion the proclamation of the gospel that Christ has overcome all the powers that seem so strong in our world. We are called to the same kind of faithful witness, though our options as citizens may be very different from those of the Roman Empire. Revelation is not a book about pragmatic solutions. In fact, it rather assumes there are no immediate solutions. The ultimate solution has been accomplished. We must live in the time before everyone—including the powers of evil—must acknowledge that victory.

Our tendency to pragmatism is challenged on another level in this book. Our actions will not necessarily directly counteract evil—though we are still called upon to be faithful—and our proclamation of the gospel will not be sufficient either. In

chapter 14, verse 6, we are told that as part of the end times, an angel will appear in mid-heaven and proclaim “an eternal gospel” to all on the earth. The angel calls upon all on the earth to worship God only, who is the creator of all things. Judgment is about to occur. The judgment has to do with whom we really do worship—the true God or the powers of this world. An angel will have to finish the task of proclamation.

Though our actions and even our words may not be the causal events that transform this world into the heavenly Jerusalem, we are still to be faithful. That may be the most difficult character of discipleship for a church in the midst of a pragmatic culture. There is no better time than Lent for such a consideration.