

## LITURGICAL DIALOGUE

**<sup>4</sup>John to the seven churches that are in Asia:**

**Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne,**

**<sup>5</sup>and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness**

In the symbolic framework of the Apocalypse, numbers have a qualitative and not a quantitative function. The number seven occurs here for the first time. We are familiar with its use in sacred literature in the narrative of the seven days of creation, in the seven-branched candlestick kept in the temple sanctuary, in the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, and, in Christian theology, in the seven sacraments. It is based on the four seven-day phases of the moon and stands for completeness, fullness, perfection. The seven churches will be named shortly: they are representative of all the churches in Asia Minor and indeed of the universal church.

John greets the churches from ‘him who is’. The reference is to God who revealed himself in this way to Moses.<sup>1</sup> By adding ‘who was and who is to come’<sup>2</sup>, he focuses attention on the action of God throughout the whole of history, past and future as well as present.

The ‘seven spirits’ refers to the Holy Spirit in whom the fullness of God’s creative power is manifest<sup>3</sup> – the Spirit who will shortly be identified with the Spirit of the glorified Christ.<sup>4</sup> The ‘throne’, here and throughout the Apocalypse, symbolises the stable centre of God’s dynamic influence in history. God’s commands issue from the throne, and it is from the throne that his will is carried out.

The Trinitarian reference is complete with mention of Jesus Christ ‘the faithful witness’. ‘Faithful’ translates the Greek *pistos*,<sup>5</sup> which, besides the idea of being faithful, encompasses also the notion of believing (Jesus puts his faith in God) and being trustworthy (we can rely on him because he is a faithful mediator of divine revelation). The Christians of Asia Minor were being accused of being unfaithful to the values that supported the Roman Empire. John is calling them to true fidelity.

<sup>1</sup>See Exodus 3:14.   <sup>2</sup>See also Apocalypse 1:8; 4:8.

<sup>3</sup>For the sevenfold Spirit, see Isaiah 11:2.

<sup>4</sup>Apocalypse 5:6.

<sup>5</sup>Behind the Greek *pistos* is the Hebrew *’emet*, the basic meaning of which is ‘real’. The Hebrew *’emet*, begins with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet [’ = Aleph], and ends with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet [t = Tau]. God who is *’emet*, is the ‘first and the last’, the ‘Alpha and the Omega’(1:8). The Rabbis loved to play with words, the better to reveal their hidden meanings. The first two consonants of *’emet*, aleph [’] and mem [m], form the word ‘mother’: the beginning of life. The last two consonants, mem [m] and tau [t] form the word ‘death’, the end of life: the beginning and the end.

The risen Christ is ‘the firstborn of the dead’<sup>1</sup> – a reference to his resurrection along with an assurance that others will follow him. He is ‘the ruler of the kings of the earth’. The expression ‘kings of the earth’ always has negative connotations in the Apocalypse. It refers to the centres of political power which attempt to determine the lives of others in ways contrary to the will of God as revealed in Christ. Because of the importance of this theme throughout the Apocalypse, we quote here the whole of Psalm 2:

Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain?  
 The kings of the earth set themselves,  
 and the rulers take counsel together,  
 against the Lord and his anointed, saying,  
 ‘Let us burst their bonds asunder,  
 and cast their cords from us.’  
 He who sits in the heavens laughs;  
 the Lord has them in derision.  
 Then he will speak to them in his wrath,  
 and terrify them in his fury, saying,  
 ‘I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.’  
 I will tell of the decree of the Lord:  
 He said to me, ‘You are my son;  
 today I have begotten you.  
 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
 and the ends of the earth your possession.  
 You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
 and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.’  
 Now therefore, O kings, be wise;  
 be warned, O rulers of the earth.

Foremost among ‘the kings of the earth’ for John and his contemporaries is the Roman Emperor. Included also are those local puppets who have welcomed Roman rule for the advantages which it offers them. From the outset John makes the point that the reign of the risen Christ transcends any power these earthly kings might wield. Because of his glorification, Christ is empowered to maintain his saving influence in history.

The Christian assembly responds to John’s greeting with a liturgical hymn of praise to the risen Christ. The ‘you’ of verse four becomes the ‘us’ of verse five. It is a hymn exulting in the love which Christ continues to pour out upon them and how Jesus gave his life to liberate them from all the ways in which they had been under the dominion of sin. This same Jesus is still loving them, and so will assuredly liberate them also from the evils which now oppress them.

<sup>1</sup>See 1 Corinthians 15:20; Colossians 1:18. Compare: ‘I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth’ (Psalm 89:27).

**<sup>5</sup>[Jesus Christ]  
 the firstborn of  
 the dead, and  
 the ruler of the  
 kings of the  
 earth.**

**To him who  
 loves us and  
 freed us from  
 our sins by his  
 blood**

**‘and made us  
 to be a king-  
 dom, priests  
 serving his  
 God and Fa-  
 ther,**

**to him be glory  
 and dominion  
 unto the ages.**

**Amen.**

## A kingdom of priests

Echoing Exodus 19:6, John says that the glorified Jesus makes the Christian assembly 'a kingdom, priests to his God and Father'.<sup>1</sup> The kingdom of God is brought about by the redemption effected by the blood of Christ, that is to say, by his life-giving on the cross. The assembly recognises that it is in the Christian community that Christ reigns as Lord, and so it renews its commitment to live his life, and to carry on his mission of bringing about God's reign on earth.

In continuing Jesus' mission, Christians are continuing his priesthood. John gives expression here to one of his central themes. Priesthood is about mediating the sacred. The Old Testament priest carried out his functions in the sanctuary. There he brought God to the people by mediating to them God's word, God's will and God's blessing expressed in the Torah. He brought the people into communion with God by offering to God the sacrifices through which their lives were sanctified. The priest of the imperial cult claimed to mediate the 'blessings' of the Roman way of life to the populace.

For Christians there is only one priest, one mediator,<sup>2</sup> the exalted Christ. From the sanctuary of heaven, Jesus speaks God's word and draws everyone to himself that we might make of our lives, as he did of his, a self-offering to God. His priesthood fulfils the functions of the Levitical priesthood, and transcends them, for his is the priesthood of the king: a royal priesthood 'according to the order of Melchizedek' (Hebrews 5:10). His priestly role is to mediate the sacred to the whole of creation, bringing about the will of God 'on earth as in heaven' (Matthew 6:10).

John reminds his listeners that Christ has chosen to exercise his priestly mediation through them. Christ has chosen to live in us. We are to live our lives in union with him in the presence of God. We are called to mediate God's word, God's will, and God's blessing to the world. We are called to offer prayer and praise to God, to offer ourselves as a spiritual sacrifice and to draw others into communion with God. We are to show that God delights in all that he has made. We are to mediate God's forgiveness, to reconcile the world with God, to draw people to a life of obedient faith in God and of love for each other, and so, throughout all the epochs of time, to effect redemption for humankind.

We are able to carry out this priestly function thanks to the grace and peace from God given us by Christ through the Spirit. Those who are listening to John's proclamation are suffering discrimination but they are not to be on the defensive. They are to resist the prevailing culture and continue to mediate the love of Christ and so convert their contemporaries to a life of grace.

The assembly concludes its response with the liturgical 'Amen'.

<sup>1</sup>John quotes the Hebrew text of Exodus 19:6 (See also 5:10; 20:6). 1Peter 2:9 follows the Greek not the Hebrew text, referring to the assembly as 'a royal priesthood'.

<sup>2</sup>1Timothy 2:5.

A second proclamation is made to the assembly. They are invited by the presider who is proclaiming John's words to join him in understanding the significance of what is being presented to them. They are invited to contemplate Jesus 'coming with the clouds'. The allusion is to the Book of Daniel who sees 'one like a *Son of Man* coming with the clouds of heaven' (Daniel 7:13). From now on 'clouds' will be used as a symbol of heaven, that is to say, of the transcendent world, the sphere of God's presence and action in history.

They are suffering persecution for their faith, but, as with those who suffered during the persecution of the Syrian king, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, it is they who will be vindicated in God's judgment. Jesus is the Son of Man to whom God has confided the judgment of the world. It is this Jesus who took the part of the oppressed during his life on earth. They are assured that he continues to take the part of the persecuted and that he will come to take them to himself. The glorified Christ who has redeemed them is now present in the liturgical assembly where he is extending his love to them. This same Christ is bringing, and will continue to bring, the world into contact with the transcendent.

John reassures his audience that those who persecuted Jesus and who are now persecuting the churches will realise how wrong they have been and will lament their actions. The allusion is to the prophecy of Zechariah:

I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him.

– Zechariah 12:10

The Gospel of John also alludes to this passage when describing the response of those who have crucified Jesus:

They will look upon the one whom they have pierced.

– John 19:37

The assembly conveys its approval of what has been said with a resounding 'Yes', and concludes with the liturgical Amen. The reader concludes the dialogue, conveying an oracle from God who has the power to carry out what has been promised. He repeats 'who is and who was and who is to come' (see 1:4).

<sup>1</sup>The first and last letters of the Greek alphabet.

<sup>2</sup>The Greek is *pantokratôr*, which translates the Hebrew *sabaoth*: referring to the heavenly hosts (the stars) and to the armies of Israel: to all the powers which are at God's disposal to carry out his will.

**<sup>7</sup>Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all tribes of the earth will wail.**

**So it is to be. Amen.**

**<sup>8</sup>I am the Alpha and the Omega<sup>1</sup> says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.<sup>2</sup>**