

THE TRANSCENDENT

In the previous scene, John focused attention on those on earth who are living Christ's life and who are his instruments in effecting God's reign. They are protected against the judgment that must come upon those who are opposing God's will.

Here, once again (see 1:12-20), he invites his readers to reflect with him on what they 'see' when they contemplate reality with the eyes of faith. He presents those who, beyond time and space and the tribulations he is about to reveal (7:14), have finally conquered, and are enjoying the eternal communion of heaven. They come from every part of the world (compare 5:9). They are 'standing before the throne', ready to carry out God's will. They are enabled to do so because of their communion with the crucified and risen Christ ('the Lamb', see 5:6). He draws attention to their outer garments for he wishes to focus attention on the way we are to see them and the way they witness to Christ (see 3:4). They are in white festive robes because they share in the luminous splendour of the glorified Jesus (see 1:14). The just will suffer, but their suffering is a participation in the passion and death of Christ. They therefore share in his glory. This is the eternal life promised by God to those who follow Jesus.

Whatever is going to be revealed at the opening of the seventh seal, the participation of the faithful disciples of Jesus in his eternal communion with God, the Lord of history ('seated on the throne', see 4:2), is assured.

The palm branches signify that they have reached the oasis at the end of their desert journey (see Exodus 15:27). The saints are gathered in God's heavenly temple, enjoying an eternal liturgy of remembrance and praise. The 'angels around the throne' participate in the exercise of God's active reign on earth and so their worshipping of God is an invitation to the liturgical assembly to join in worship. The second Amen represents the response of the Christian assembly.

¹See Apocalypse 4:4 ²See Apocalypse 4:6

³Compare Apocalypse 5:12

1. The goal of history

⁹ After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white festive robes, with palm branches in their hands.

¹⁰ They cried out in a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne and to the Lamb!'

¹¹ And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders¹ and the four living creatures², and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God,

¹² singing 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God forever and ever!³ Amen!'

The martyrs have reached the promised land

¹³ Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white *festive robes*, and where have they come from?'

¹⁴ I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows'.

Then he said to me, 'These are they *coming* out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ For this reason they are before the throne of God, and worship him day and night within his temple, and the one who is seated on the throne will *pitch his tent over them*.

¹⁶ They will hunger no more, and thirst no more; the sun will not strike them, nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷ for the Lamb at the centre 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.

John is encouraging his readers by reminding them of the glory promised to those who would give their life to follow Jesus. The 'great ordeal' is the 'persecution' already mentioned (see 1:9). The priests of the cult of Cybele the earth mother washed in bull's blood in order to enjoy communion with the goddess. The disciples of Jesus wash in the blood that Jesus poured out for them (see 5:9). Purified by Jesus, they enjoy communion with him (hence 'white', see 1:14).

They enjoy God's protection and are fully satisfied through their communion in God's love.

The final verses describe heaven in traditional terms:

They shall feed along the ways, on all the bare heights shall be their pasture; they shall not hunger or thirst, neither scorching wind nor sun shall strike them down, for he who has pity on them will lead them, and by springs of water will guide them.

– Isaiah 49:9-10

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want ... He leads me beside still waters.

– Psalm 23:1-2

The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces.

– Isaiah 25:8

2. The 7th seal and 7 trumpets

This is the moment for which all have been waiting: the opening of the seventh and final seal. Now the whole scroll of history is unrolled, and, thanks to Christ the Lamb (see 5:6), we can see its ultimate meaning. The drama of the moment is intensified by the solemn silence in heaven.¹

The seven angels symbolise all the ways in which the transcendent God communicates with creation.² The trumpet (the shofar) announces the presence of the Lord, the divine warrior.³ It is the Lord's summons to battle,⁴ as well as a call to repentance.⁵ John is about to present the terrible plague that Roman oppression is bringing on the world. He is pleading with the Christians: 'Can't you see what is happening. Repent! Change your way of looking at things! Wake up before it is too late!'

The Christian communities are being asked to pray that they will not be caught up in the terrible destruction that is happening all around them. The imagery is traditional:

Fill your hands with burning coals and scatter them over the city.

– Ezekiel 10:2

In an instant, suddenly, you will be visited by the Lord of hosts with thunder, and earthquake, and great noise, with whirlwind and tempest, and the flame of a devouring fire.

– Isaiah 29:5-6

John assures them that their prayer will rise like incense to God (see 5:8). We recall the plea of the psalmist:

Let my prayers be counted as incense before you.

– Psalm 141:2

¹Compare 'Be silent before the Lord God! For the Day of the Lord is at hand' (Zephaniah 1:7). 'Be silent, all people, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling' (Zechariah 2:13).

²See Tobit 12:15.

³See Exodus 19:16; Zechariah 9:14.

⁴See Joshua 6:14ff.

⁵See Ezekiel 33:1-20.

¹When the Lamb opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour.

²And I saw the seven angels who stand before God, and seven trumpets were given to them.

³Another angel with a golden censer came and stood on the altar; he was given a great quantity of incense to offer with the prayers of all the saints on the golden altar that is before the throne.

⁴And the smoke of the incense, with the prayers of the saints, rose before God from the hand of the angel.

⁵Then the angel took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, rumblings, flashes of lightning, and an earthquake.

⁶Now the seven angels who had the seven trumpets made ready to blow them.