

## THE TRANSCENDENT

**<sup>1</sup>Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God<sup>1</sup> is ended.**

**<sup>2</sup>And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name,<sup>2</sup> standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.**

**<sup>3</sup>And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:**

**'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty! Just and true are your ways, King of the nations!**

**<sup>4</sup>Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone art holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgments have been revealed'.**

The crucified and risen Christ has revealed the meaning of history in seven stages, dramatised by the breaking of seven seals. The breaking of the seventh and final seal (8:1) opened the way for seven revelations, each accompanied by the blast of a trumpet. The blast of the seventh and final trumpet (11:15) revealed three signs: the woman (12:1), the dragon (12:3), and now the third and final sign or portent, announcing the 'hour of God's judgment' (14:7).

This portent is described as 'great', for it is most important that we discern its meaning (compare 12:1). It announces seven plagues. We recall the following text:

If you continue hostile to me and will not obey me  
I will continue to plague you seven times for your  
sins.

– Leviticus 26:21

The sea is a symbol of chaos (4:6), so the sea which John sees in heaven is of glass. It is also of fire, for our focus is on the purifying fire of God's judgment (1:14).

The martyrs who have withstood the power of Rome and refused to partake in the cult of the emperor are singing the song of Moses: the triumphant song of the Exodus heard on the occasion of God's victory over the pharaoh and his liberation of Israel from Egypt (Exodus 15:1). Its mention here prepares us for the final and eternal liberation effected by God's final judgment of history.

It is also the song of the crucified and risen Christ ('the Lamb', 5:6), and it echoes phrases from the Old Testament liturgy: 'Great and amazing are your deeds';<sup>3</sup> 'just and true are your ways';<sup>4</sup> 'all nations will come and worship before you'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>On the wrath of God, 6:16-17.

<sup>2</sup>See 13:14,17.

<sup>3</sup>Psalm 111:2; 139:14; Exodus 34:10.

<sup>4</sup>Psalm 145:17; Deuteronomy 32:4.

<sup>5</sup>Psalm 10:5; Psalm 98:2; Malachi 1:11; Isaiah 2:2; Jeremiah 16:19.

## The seven bowls of God's justice

The seven trumpets drew attention to the evils being perpetrated by the Roman Empire. They were portrayed as a call to repentance. The seven bowls are said to be 'full of the wrath of God.' John is speaking here of God's judgment of evil. (For the expression 'wrath of God', see the commentary on 6:16-17.). Evil will not triumph. Oppression will issue in its own destruction. The blood of the innocent will be vindicated.

John takes his readers back to the opening scene of the previous section (11:19). The temple is called here the tent of witness,<sup>1</sup> for it stands as a witness to God's presence and action in history. What we are about to witness is the final action of the risen Christ in history: God's judgment of the world as revealed in him who fulfils in his person all that is signified by the tent.<sup>2</sup>

Those who are carrying out God's judgment are wearing clothing which highlights the priestly nature of their mission<sup>4</sup>

The plagues are contained in bowls which are given to the angels by one of the four living creatures (see 4:6). These bowls are the sprinkling basins which held the blood for the temple sacrifice.<sup>5</sup> This is a further allusion to the blood of the martyrs, whose witness to Christ is about to be vindicated.

God is to be revealed in the judgment that is to be passed upon the world. Those who are obstinate in perpetrating evil will suffer the consequences of their behaviour. Those who have given their lives as instruments of Christ to bring about the reign of God on earth will reap the fruit of their commitment.

John prepares his readers for a sacred encounter in words that remind us of the Old Testament:

The cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

– Exodus 40:34<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Numbers 9:15. Concerning the tent, see also Apocalypse 13:6; 21:3. Concerning witness, see 1:2; 1:9; 12:17; 19:10; 20:4.

<sup>2</sup>See John 2:21-22.

<sup>3</sup>See 19:8.

<sup>4</sup>See 1:13.

<sup>5</sup>See 5:8; 2Kings 16:13,15.

<sup>6</sup>See also Isaiah 6:1; 1Kings 8:10-11; 2Chronicles 5:13.

<sup>5</sup> After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened,

<sup>6</sup> and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests.

<sup>7</sup> Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives forever and ever;

<sup>8</sup> and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.