

POSTSCRIPT

The aim of this commentary has been to establish the author's intended meaning and the way in which he was understood by those for whom he wrote. Our focus has been on the symbols used throughout: the way the author has used and explained them, and the history of their previous use, particularly in the literature of the Old Testament.

This still leaves the question: What contribution might the Apocalypse make to our search for meaning today?

Many attempt to use the Apocalypse as though it contains information concerning events of our own day. They use it as if it were a crystal ball in which they can discover a prediction of events of our own day, enabling us to foretell our own future. It is to be hoped that this commentary has established the folly of such an approach.

If we are to learn from the Apocalypse, we must face up to its message, and not read our own ideas into it. This postscript is a brief attempt to point out some directions for further reflection.

The structure and content of the Apocalypse highlight the truth that transcendent realities are immanent in our lives and in our history. God as presented here is not an extra, or one who leaves history to its own devices except for the occasional interruption. There is a constant influence in our history of the powerful movement of grace coming from the 'throne' of God.

The focus of such influence is the risen and glorified Christ,¹ who is presented as constantly 'loving us'(1:5), and constantly inspiring us to listen, to change our lives, and to be his instruments in drawing the world into sacred communion with God and away from the distractions of sin.

The martyrs and saints who have lived Christ's life on earth, many of whom have lost their lives in witnessing to him, are part of this priestly mediation² of Christ. They inspire us by their faith. They also influence our lives as they draw us to follow their example.

According to the teaching of the Apocalypse, history cannot be understood unless we fix our eyes on Christ, and listen so as to be responsive to his inspiration. It is Christ alone who can unlock the meaning of things.³

While divine reality is constantly influencing us, we are not puppets of fate. The Apocalypse presents us as free to determine our own direction and destiny. We are responsible. We can opt to respond to grace or to resist it. One of the major themes of the Apocalypse is that it really matters what we do, and that we must suffer the consequences of the decisions we take.

¹ See the magnificent portraits in 1:12-20 and 19:11-16.

² See especially 20:4-6.

³ This is the significance of him being the only one able to open the seven scrolls: Apocalypse 5:5.

Life is a battle between good and evil, a battle in which good is assured of victory. Good is represented by the ways in which Christ is incarnate in the world. The focus is on the Church, symbolised as a woman labouring to give birth (12:1-2), under constant pressure from the forces of evil (12:13-17), but the bride enjoying the intimacies of communion with Christ (21:9).

Evil is represented by the ways in which it is incarnate in the world. The focus is on the imperialist Roman forces, symbolised by the beast (13:1).

The Church shares in Christ's priestly mediation in her liturgy which mirrors the heavenly liturgy, and in her life in which she works to establish the reign of God on earth (1:6).

The Apocalypse is a clarion call to persevere in our attachment to Christ and so to God, and to resist the pressures upon us to compromise, or to be caught up in the oppressive counter-values of a corrupting political and economic system.¹ We have the responsibility to locate, to name, and to condemn those elements within our own systems which are responsible for injustices similar to those against which John is speaking.

The Apocalypse reminds us of the importance of the Christian community, in its active mission in the world, and in its gathering to remember Jesus, to listen to the inspiration of his Spirit, and to be caught up in a liturgy of prayer.

The Christian community is to be the radiant manifestation in this world of the active presence of the exalted Christ drawing all to himself. From the middle of the struggle in which we are all involved, there arises from the Christian community assembled in prayer the cry: 'Come, Lord Jesus' (22:20). God does not force his grace, and it is this intense longing in the hearts of the disciples of Jesus that keeps our world open to receive the liberating power of his love.

In conclusion, let us listen again to the words of Christ addressed to the seventh of the churches of Asia:

I reprove and discipline those whom I love.
Be earnest, therefore, and repent.
Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking;
if you hear my voice and open the door,
I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.
To the one who conquers
I will give a place with me on my throne,
just as I myself conquered
and sat down with my Father on his throne.
Let anyone who has an ear
listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

– Apocalypse 3:19-22

¹See especially the critique of the economic oppression of Rome in chapters 17-18.