

Advent III

“blessed is he that readeth” (Revelation 1.3)

We are preparing – not for the Lord's coming in the Incarnation, but for his coming in judgement. To that end, the Church of England used to read the Apocalypse at Evening Prayer in Advent (and a similar gospel text as the Gospel for Advent II). To us struggling through the difficulties of a hostile world, this is a message of hope. (To affirmers of the present world, it is meaningless.)

I commend the Apocalypse to your study. Ideally, experience it as its first hearers did – as a text read out to them in one single event, without commentary or other explanation. Something is lost when it is spread over four weeks of daily readings. More is lost when we study a commentary, with only occasional references to the text itself. Yet even this is not wholly wrong; we are not first century Christians with a large repertoire of Old Testament texts and an unavoidable recognition of the initial context of the work, so some right explanations are beneficial.

Scholars put the Apocalypse into a class of similar writings. Not wrongly, yet it is not typical of them. The typical member of that class studies the present by claiming to write from the past, using some previous figure (Enoch, Daniel, Baruch, Ezra). It calculates that the End is closely at hand – which is a message of hope for a persecuted people. And that calculation is invariably wrong! But here we have John writing in his own name (which is *not* a claim to be the Beloved Disciple). A path from present distress to the End is mapped, but it is *not* certain that the End is close (or the calculations would be obvious, which they certainly are not!) Hope indeed – but for a time difficulties will increase. And what is most striking about the Apocalypse is the vision of the risen Christ, of the Trinity, and of worship in heaven. The process by which evil is defeated is *almost* marginal.

Let us set the context. Nero has launched the first state persecution. Paul and Peter are dead, so churches which might have looked to them can do so no longer. Judea is in revolt (I am inclined to date the Apocalypse before the destruction of the Temple as that is not mentioned in the text). John chooses to send a single letter to seven churches on a ring road in Asia – so one person will take it round them in order, and all will hear the entire text. I doubt John is of high enough status to be sent to an island by the state (though this is a known form of punishment), so presumably he was on Patmos for the gospel. Whoever he was, he knows his letter will be respected.

The seven churches all faced much the same environment, though with varying internal problems. The external pressures were not yet the emperor cult, but that it was difficult to function in city society without conforming. The more cities lost power, the more they imposed empty forms. To what extent could Christians belong? In some places there were also internal problems which appear in coded form. Is it literal fornication or idolatry? Many have forgotten now that the former is a sin; fewer confess to the worship of Mammon than practice it – so these are our challenges, along with conformity to secularism. We have to learn how to be different in a state which imposes its “values”.

The way John's vision works is a circling around the same pattern, in which what were shades of grey increasingly are seen as black and white. Paul's guidance on living in the world had been quite complacent. I do not criticize it; but the world is not static. Pressures were getting worse. They continued to do so until Constantine (when they changed in character rather than ended). In our post-Christian days the Apocalypse has more of its original relevance.

We do not have to concentrate on the details of the destruction of evil. There is positive content. There is much about the risen Christ, about the Trinity, about worship in heaven (which has implications for worship on earth). That is why the Church of England used (before recent troubles) Apocalypse chapter 1 for Morning Prayer on Easter Day, and 4 for Trinity Sunday (besides 12 for St. Michael and 7 for All Saints). There is simply nothing else in the New Testament which expresses these concerning truths so well.

But expresses them in the terms of the genre. They do badly who read the Apocalypse as a detailed day by day future chronicle and seek to find out what date we have reached. It is a Christian reflection on Old Testament images in the light of Gospel truths – an uncovering of meaning. When

these things indeed do come to pass, then (perhaps) the faithful will appreciate how the prophecy has been fulfilled. Until then, some images are of perennial value, some (like the mark of the beast) may be warning signs for our own time; others (like 666) will remain incomprehensible. That is indeed the nature of all Scripture.