

All Saints

We are in the strange territory of the “Apocalypse”. This title is slightly exaggerated in translation as the “Revelation of St. John the Divine”, and still worse if corrupted into “Revelations” as if we were in tabloid territory. The word itself has no stronger meaning than “uncovering”.

A few background points. This is not an isolated book; it is one of many works of the same general kind, which scholars call “Apocalyptic” and say begins with parts of Isaiah (chapters 24-27) and is found in full form in the second half of Daniel. The genre is thus Jewish before it is Christian; but it is, as we shall see, totally at home in other New Testament writings. Apocalyptic as a genre is not essentially lurid or vindictive. Certainly it can degenerate into such mere sensationalism, and did in later Christian books which were wisely excluded from the New Testament. (If you are determined to read about them, look for “The Apocryphal New Testament” by M. R. James, that remarkable writer of ghost stories. Personally, I prefer the ghost stories.) But the wise reader of apocalypses does not dwell on such incidental details. Apocalyptic is in fact a highly learned discourse, building on existing Scripture (the Old Testament) and attempting to tidy up the loose ends. You might almost say that it is the beginning of systematic theology.

Inevitably in the appointed readings for a feast day, we have dropped into the middle of the picture. Fortunately, we don't need to work through the rest of the Apocalypse, nor, this time, to study more obscure writings. We don't need anything more than the Law. The insight is that God is not wasteful; he does not set up institutions in order to make nothing of them. So if we see the blessing of the Twelve Tribes at great length twice in the Law (Genesis 49, Deuteronomy 33), we can be certain that God is going to perfect this institution. This is not an insight peculiar to apocalyptic; the Epistle to the Hebrews uses exactly the same tool. For the law made nothing perfect (Heb. 7.19), yet, after its fashion, it sets the agenda, it defines what is to be perfected. So God claims for his own (which is the point of sealing here) the full number of his chosen from each of the Twelve Tribes.

St. John the Divine may hate Jews (he refers to the “synagogue of Satan”) but he is faithful to God and his purposes, and will not deny that the chosen of the Old Covenant are to be sealed and will be found in heaven. Don't be fooled by the numbers. John works both with the limits of Hebrew numbers (which were very limited) and with the expressive meaning of Hebrew numbers. Both twelve and a thousand are expressive of perfection. So in effect we are dealing with all who had kept the Old Faith. We are not in the business of counting and excluding number 144,001!

So much for the Old Faith. Yet St. John the Divine is part of the Gentile mission (at least, all his addressees seem to belong to Gentile churches in Greek cities) and he does not stop at 144,000 of the Old Faith. The sealing continues with the Gentile Church, and whereas the Old Faith was a bounded and ordered perfection, this is simply a multitude with no inherent limit - a vital truth for the Church. (St. John could have known about Jewish speculation about the 70 nations and produced another mathematical model, but he has good reasons for not doing so.) We are, please God, numbered among that multitude. St. John does not speculate about some special class of super-Christians (or at least not here; he already distinguishes the martyrs as a special group, and the twelve apostles), but he is describing the *ordinary* faithful (and we can tell from the seven letters at the start of his Apocalypse that they have faults). We will have been sealed. (I am not too sure about tenses here; for a Hebraist like St. John, what is to us a past tense may mean a certain future.)

There is a separate puzzle about how this “sealing” here and elsewhere in the New Testament relates to baptism. I do not propose to tackle that problem here, more than to say that the normal practice at this time was certainly adult baptism, completed in a single process and immediately followed by first communion; to the extent that the “sealing” corresponds to earthly practices, therefore, there is only one process (even if that might be complex) to which it can be referred. Now clearly baptism is the point at which the Holy Trinity takes possession of the candidate and, in making him or her a Christian, claims him or her, and comes to dwell in him or her. We have been sealed; we remain, however imperfectly, in the faith; we may apostatise in the future, but the way of salvation leads to the perfecting of the seal, by our purifying whether in this life or afterwards.

Apocalyptic deals both with the ambiguities of our present life and with the simplicities of the world to come. Here we have shades of grey; in the world to come there is only black and white, heaven and hell, God and Mammon. Part of the subtlety of St. John's writing is that he goes over the same ground several times, but each time the underlying black and white emerges more and more clearly from the greyscales. This is not a distortion of the Gospel. Jesus warns us of the same great divide. You cannot with any honesty treat apocalyptic as a wicked intrusion, distorting a simple and cheerful original gospel. There is nothing in St. John's work that is not in his Master's teaching.

In the end (whether we are talking about time or about fundamental analysis) there are only two choices. Here we have read, as is right because this is the Way we have chosen, of the sealing of the righteous. But there is an alternative, and it is the "mark of the beast".

It is part of the folly of the present age that it likes religious puzzles but does not want to face God. If the "number of the beast" conveys to the original readers Solomon's annual income (1 Kings 10.14) before his apostasy (and perhaps causing it), the "mark of the beast" puts us back in the world of Mammon. This is the alternative to the sealing by God; the others, Mammon will claim for his own. And in this world, those without Mammon's mark will suffer. (I know St. John does not use the name Mammon, but Jesus does, and the realities are, as I have already said, indistinguishable.) Commerce is close to evil, both in Jesus' teaching and in other non-apocalyptic texts such as James 5, and the space given to the collapse of commerce and the lament of the merchants in Apocalypse 18 cannot be ignored. Yet I do believe, as did St. Paul, that it is still possible to trade without sin. Else we would find it very hard to earn our livings! It is only the *love* of money that is the root of all evil, and I think that modern translations of scripture which render "Mammon" as "money" are dangerously superficial. All that said, there is a clear warning given to us that the world tends to organise itself ever more closely into a unified system, and behind that system, unrecognised it may be by many who think they are merely promoting efficiency whether in business or in the welfare state, lies the power of evil. Christians must be on the alert in case, little by little, they are sucked into a system which is incompatible with the faith. We have known several such in the last centuries. Modern society is not so blatantly anti-Christian as the French Revolution, Bismarck's Germany, Hitler, Stalin and Mao (to name but a few). But "democracy" is quite capable of being totalitarian and anti-Christian. I do not denounce as a prophet. I dare not say "Thus saith the Lord" in these matters. But I say with the authority of both Jesus and St. John the Divine behind me, that you "cannot serve God and Mammon". When it comes to the end, you will either be found with the seal of God or with the mark of the beast. There will be no middle ground. There are no comfortable words here!

If you think I have neglected the Gospel reading so far, then hear it again. "Blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall reproach you, and persecute you, and say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you." (Matthew 5.10-12). The Christian vocation is to be saints, and it is inherently in conflict with the world. Jesus had no gentler message, not even in the Sermon on the Mount, not even in the Beatitudes, than St. John the Divine. You cannot run away from the one to take refuge in the other.

It is my duty to show you that the ultimate issues are black and white, the seal of the saint or the mark of the beast. But much of the time our present life is more ambiguous, and so more difficult. We do not have the option, as St. Paul pointed out, "to go out of the world" (1 Corinthians 5.10). Some of us have to earn a living. All of us have to exist among unbelievers. It is not easy to work out how we should live in such a situation, though this is also the situation of the New Testament writers, so their guidance is of the first value. It is not easy to live as we ought, when we have worked out how we should live, partly through our own weakness, partly through the forces organised against us and all of God's kingdom. I do not pretend that the vocation to be saints is easy; but that there is no lesser vocation, no halfway position, available. "In the world ye have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world." (John 16.33)