

II. Apocalypse 19:1 - 20:15

Penetration of The Transcendent (6)

Celebration in Heaven : Marriage of the Lamb (19:1-10)

Scene 6 : Final Victory of Good over Evil (19:11 - 20:15)



Penetration of The Transcendent (6)

Apocalypse 19:1-5

After this I heard what seemed to be the loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying [fullest doxology], ‘Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power to our God, for his judgments are true and just; he has judged the great **harlot** [Rome, chapters 17-18] who corrupted the earth with her fornication, and he has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’ Once more they said, ‘Hallelujah! The smoke goes up from her forever and ever.’ And the twenty-four **elders** and the four **animal-like creatures** fell down and worshipped God who is seated on the throne, saying, ‘Amen. Hallelujah!’ And from the throne came a voice saying, ‘Praise our God, all you his servants, you who fear him, small and great’(Psalm 115:13).

Apocalypse 19:6-9

Then I heard what seemed to be the sound of a great multitude, like the sound of many waters and like the sound of mighty thunder-peals, crying out 'Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty established his reign.'

Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the **marriage of the Lamb** has come, and his **Bride** [woman of 12:1] has made herself ready [see Cana, John 2]; to her it has been granted to be clothed with fine linen, bright and pure' – for the fine linen is the righteous **deeds** of the saints [They have 'put on Christ', Romans 13:14]. And the angel says to me, 'Write this: Blessed [4th of 7 beatitudes] are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb'. And he says to me, 'These are true words of God'.

Apocalypse 19:10

Then I fell down at his feet to worship him, but he says to me, 'You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your comrades who hold the testimony of Jesus. Worship God!'

For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.

Much of the Apocalypse has been about the evil of the imperial cult. God's messenger insists that no one, however close to God, is to be worshipped. Worship is to be offered to God alone. Jesus gave his life for this, as have the martyrs since. All genuine prophecy insists on this. Only if we seek first the reign of God as revealed in Jesus will we enjoy the communion of love which he offers us in the Eucharistic wedding banquet.

SCENE 6 : Final struggle, victory and judgment

I. The glorified Christ

Our eyes are riveted upon the glorified Christ. We first encountered him upon his white horse when the first seal was opened. He ‘came from victory that he might conquer’ (6:2). Now heaven is completely opened: we are able at last to see, clearly revealed, God’s ultimate purpose and action in history. The love poured out over the world by Jesus’ life-giving on the cross will conquer whatever power is exercised by the kingdoms that oppose him – kingdoms which have their origin in this world.

Apocalypse 19:11-13

Then I saw heaven opened [door, 4:1; temple in heaven opened, 11:19; 15:5], and there was a white horse! [6:2] Its rider is called Faithful (1:5; 3:14) and True, (3:14) and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire (1:14; 2:18), and on his head are many diadems (14:14); and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself.

We do not necessarily and immediately recognise the action of the risen Christ in history or the way he chooses to relate to us.

He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood [5:9; Jesus' Passion], and his name is called the Word of God.

He is God's self-revelation and self-communication to the world. We are judged in reference to him: those who have obstinately resisted what he has revealed are condemned; those who have accepted his challenge and worked to establish the reign of God are victorious.

‘He made my mouth like a sharp sword’(Isaiah 49:2).

‘While gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half gone, your all-powerful word leaped from heaven, from the royal throne, into the midst of the land that was doomed, a stern warrior carrying the sharp sword of your authentic command’(Wisdom of Solomon 18:14-15).

‘The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the sources of the psyche and the spirit, of physical life and vital energy; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to his eyes. The word is to face us towards him’(Hebrews 4:12-13).

Apocalypse 19:14-16 - what ultimately is happening NOW

And the armies of heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will shepherd them with a rod of iron; he will tread the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, 'King of kings and Lord of lords'.

Those fighting on the side of truth are wearing their wedding garments (19:7-8) and are following their risen Christ (14:14), the King of kings and Lord of Lords (17:14). It is his word ('a sharp sword', (1:16) that will win victory. The wrath of God (6:16-17) has already been likened to a winepress (14:19-20, 29). John is preparing us for battle and for the victory of Christ and all those who share his mission.

2. The forces of evil on earth are defeated by Christ

Apocalypse 19:17-18

Then I saw an angel standing in the sun [see 1:16, Jesus' face is 'like the sun shining with full force'], and with a loud voice (1:10) he called to all the birds (18:2) that fly in midheaven, 'Come, gather for the great supper of God [following slide], to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders - flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great.'

Ezekiel 39:17-20

‘Speak to the birds of every kind and to all the wild animals: Assemble and come, gather from all around to the sacrificial feast that I am preparing for you, a great sacrificial feast on the mountains of Israel, and you shall eat flesh and drink blood. You shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth. And you shall be filled at my table with horses and charioteers, with warriors and all kinds of soldiers, says the Lord God.’

Apocalypse 19:19-21

Then I saw the beast [emperor and his adjutants, 13:1] and the kings of the earth [1:5] with their armies gathered to make war against the rider on the horse and against his army. And the beast was captured, and with it the false prophet [16:13, who encouraged emperor cult] who had performed in its presence the signs by which he deceived those who had received the mark of the beast and those who worshipped its image. These two were thrown alive into the lake of fire [9:17, 'hell'] that burns with sulphur [14:10, no possibility of revival]. And the rest were killed by the sword of the rider on the horse, the sword that came from his mouth; and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.

It is not John's intention to leave us with an image of a bloodthirsty, vengeful God. The imagery is of war, because he is describing the final defeat of evil. The victorious sword, however, is the word, the revelation, of the crucified Jesus. It is non-violent love that conquers the forces of evil.

3. Evil has some influence in history, but far greater is the influence of the exalted Christ

Apocalypse 20:1-3

Then I saw an angel coming down from heaven, holding in his hand the key to the bottomless pit and a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the Devil and Satan [12:9], and bound him for a thousand years, and threw him into the pit, and locked and sealed it over him, so that he would deceive the nations no more, until the thousand years were ended. After that he must be let out for a little while.

John is contrasting the action of the risen Christ in history and the action of Evil. For a thousand years Satan is bound. It is God who binds him, as is symbolised in the angel who comes from heaven. Christ reigns supreme, and reigning with Christ are those who have given their lives for their faith, and those who have remained faithful: the martyrs and saints.

Satan is bound **for a thousand years**. By contrast, **for a little while**, Satan is let out and comes out to deceive the nations and gather them for battle against Christ and his saints. We are left in no doubt as to which power is superior, for Satan, like the beast and the false prophet, is totally defeated (20:10).

To grasp the meaning of this passage, we should remember that numbers in the Apocalypse are always to be interpreted symbolically: the **thousand** years and the **little while** both refer symbolically to the whole of history before the end.

The **thousand** years refers to God's action in history considered in its totality (7:4; 14:1). It stands for the whole of history as it is influenced by the action of the transcendent God.

The **little while** refers to the action of Evil in history considered in its totality. There is no comparison! Evil is still present, but ultimately insignificant.

Apocalypse 20:3

Satan is bound for a thousand years.

‘After that he must be let out for a little while’.

The ‘after’ in verse three does not refer to sequence in time, but to position on the scale of importance. The power exercised by evil is insignificant when contrasted with the power exercised by Christ. It is short-lived and ultimately must come to nothing. Evil does deceive and there are those who gather to fight against Christ, but their action lacks ultimate significance and they provide no real challenge to the superior action of Christ and the certainty of his victory.

Apocalypse 20:4

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw alive those who had been beheaded for the testimony of Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshipped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

This scene does not depict the final judgment, but the effective judgment of evil in history and the role played in this judgment by those followers of Christ who have died in Christ, including those who have been deprived of life because they accepted Jesus as God's word, even to giving their lives. Like Jesus they have died, but they live.

Apocalypse 20:5

The rest of the dead did not live until the thousand years were ended [end of history]). This is the **first resurrection**. Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection!

John imagines the resurrection, according to the thinking of his day, as awaiting the end of history. Here he speaks of the active influence of the saints and martyrs in history as being a **first resurrection**, reserved for those whose lives were such that they continue to have a striking influence on history (compare witnesses of 11:3).

We, too, think of saints like Peter and Paul, or Augustine, or Francis of Assisi, or Therese of Lisieux, or Catherine of Siena, whose outstanding holiness continues to influence us, as being active in our lives.

Apocalypse 20:6

Over these the **second death** has no power, but they will be **priests** [1:6; 5:10] of God and of Christ, and they will **reign** with him a **thousand years**.

John speaks of them as priests, for they mediate the life and action of God to us

The churches to whom John was writing had their saints too, and John is assuring his Christian brothers and sisters that, while saintly members of their communities have died, they will certainly not suffer the **second death**: the final and only real death. This death is forever and ever and is the end suffered by Satan, the beast and the false prophet and by all those who have obstinately opposed the reign of God on earth.

Apocalypse 20:7-10 Evil ultimately destroyed

And whenever the thousand years might end, Satan will be released from his prison and will come out to deceive the nations at the four corners of the earth, Gog [Gyges, king of Sardis] and Magog [his kingdom], in order to gather them for battle; they are as numerous as the sands of the sea. And they marched up towards the breadth of the earth and surrounded the camp of the saints and the beloved city. And fire came down from heaven and consumed them. And the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were [19:20], and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

The armies of evil are dramatically described as marching up from the subterranean realm of the demonic to the plain of history where they lay siege to God's people. They are consumed by fire from heaven. The victory of God is definitive, simple, direct and complete.

[2Thess 2:8 'The Lord Jesus will destroy him with the breath of his mouth.']

The last judgment : Apocalypse 20:11-12

Then I saw a great **white** [1:14] throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Also another book was opened, the **book of life**. And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books.

‘The hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out - those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation’(John 5:28-29).

The books were opened: nothing anyone has done can be hidden from God who sees reality as it is and who cannot be deceived. He must judge things as they really are. The second book represents all that has been done in Christ in response to his inspiration. This is the book of life.

Apocalypse 20:13-15

And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found in the book of life, was thrown into the lake of fire.

The sea (4:6) is linked with Death and Hades as symbols of negativity, chaos and the demonic. John is concerned here with all those who are not part of the first resurrection; that is to say, all those who have died and who have not been part of the activity of Christ in history, but have been forgotten in the invisible, shadowy existence associated with Hades. Like Paul, John sees Death as the final enemy to be conquered.