

The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

Associated with Famine, Death, Wild Beasts, and Plague

Natural to think: these disasters lead people to repentance

But in the book of Revelation it is not that simple

People do not turn back to God, they do not repent

Simply because they face need and distress

Here we are in 2020: a plague year

And it seems that, judging by what is happening in Europe

It is far from over: does it seem that people are turning back to God?

It is not evident to me, although you might have a different opinion

I'm not here to proclaim my opinion, but God's word

And in today's reading from Revelation is Good News

No matter what trials we go through in this world

God brings us back to himself

God brings us back together with his holy people

From every nation, tribe, people, and language

God brings us back into unity with the whole heavenly host

Through the blood of the Lamb sacrificed for us

It is *this* sacrifice that turns us back to God

And it is our confession of faith together with all God's saints

That reveals here and now that great heavenly worship

Which celebrates the victory of God over sin and death

And in which God wipes away every tear

The Book of Revelation: a vision

The veil between heaven and earth is removed

And we see that in worship heaven meets earth

Listen to the vision that we hear about today:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

The context is significant

John has just *heard* that the number of those sealed by God

- marked out as his servants –

Is 144,00: 12,000 for each of the tribes of Israel

This is evidently an allusion to the book of Numbers
Where God's people are assembled in military formation
Around the tabernacle of God
So John *hears* this number, and this military formation
But what does he *see*?

A great multitude that no one could count

Joe Strelan: the symbolic number vs the statistical number
[This is also like what happens earlier in Revelation
John hears of the approach of the Lion of Judah
What he sees is the Lamb who has been slain]

Let's think about this great multitude

They are from every nation, tribe, people, and language

There is a universality here

Just as all people are made in God's image

So people from every background are redeemed by God

One way to think about the robes and the palm branches:

They appear before the throne of God as righteous and victorious

And they show their unity in the great acclamation:

'Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!'

It is *God* who has one the victory for them

This is not the victory celebration of one nation over another

Or of one ethnicity over another

Or, we could add, of one gender over another

Or one class over another

It is a victory, a salvation, won by God for his people

A victory that brings unity not only with the human community

But with the whole host of heaven

This is what John sees and hears:

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshipped God, singing,

'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honour

and power and might

be to our God for ever and ever! Amen.'

Amen! This is the chief word of the liturgy

Showing assent and bringing unity

Yes! It is so! Salvation belongs to God
Therefore all the things that humans in power attribute to themselves
Like glory and wisdom and honour
Truly belong to God
And it is in the acclamation of this that cosmic unity is revealed

Listen to what happens next:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, 'Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?' I said to him, 'Sir, you are the one that knows.' Then he said to me, 'These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The elder – and one way to understand what an elder is

Is one who initiates another into a mystery -

The elder asks John a question

But it's the elder who knows the answer, not John

What are we to make of this?

Do you remember the Curiosity show? 'I'm glad you asked...'

It's a teaching device, a way of leading the initiate in to understand the mystery

The ones robed in white – the ones ascribing salvation to God

These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. '

First of all, they have come from opposition, trouble, and distress

They have remained faithful

And this has happened because they have washed their robes

And made them white in the blood of the lamb

Picture this in your mind's eye

It is the blood of the Lamb, the Lamb of God

Who takes away the sin of the world

It is the blood of Christ that makes clean, that purifies

That sustains people in faith even in the face of trouble, distress, persecution

It is on the basis of the redemption won by Christ

That we have this great vision of hope:

**For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.**

**They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,**

**nor any scorching heat;
for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'**

The victory is Christ's, it is he who has conquered death
It is by his blood that we are cleansed

And it is the salvation he has won that gives us unity

And we celebrate this, we participate in this, we see this revealed

As God draws us together in worship, around the altar

As we partake in that meal that gives us a foretaste of the feast to come

Listen closely as we celebrate the Lord's supper today

Pastor Josh will chant these words:

It is indeed right and salutary that we should at all times and in all places offer thanks and praise to you, O Lord, holy Father, through Christ our Lord. In the blessedness of your saints you have given is a glorious pledge of the hope of our calling; that, moved by their witness and supported by their fellowship, we may run with perseverance the race that is set before us and with them receive the unfading crown of glory. And so, with the church on earth and the hosts of heaven, we praise your name and join their unending hymn:

God brings us back to himself

God brings us back together with his holy people

From every nation, tribe, people, and language

God brings us back into unity with the whole heavenly host

Through the blood of the Lamb sacrificed for us

It is *this* sacrifice that turns us back to God

May God keep us firm in faithful unity

So that we may at last come into that great feast

Where death is conquered

And where God wipes every tear from our eyes.

In Jesus' name. Amen.