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Easter 3C

Sermon notes on
Revelation 5.11-14
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Revelation 5.11 Καὶ εἶδον, καὶ ἤκουσα φωνὴν ἀγγέλων πολλῶν κύκλω τοῦ θρόνου καὶ τῶν ζώων καὶ τῶν πρεσβυτέρων, καὶ ἦν ὁ ἀριθμὸς αὐτῶν μυριάδες μυριάδων καὶ χιλιάδες χιλιάδων, ¹²λέγοντες φωνῇ μεγάλῃ, Ἄξιόν ἐστιν τὸ ἄρνιον τὸ ἐσφαγμένον λαβεῖν τὴν δύναμιν καὶ πλοῦτον καὶ σοφίαν καὶ ἰσχὺν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ δόξαν καὶ εὐλογίαν. ¹³καὶ πᾶν κτίσμα ὃ ἐν τῷ οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς καὶ ὑποκάτω τῆς γῆς καὶ ἐπὶ τῆς θαλάσσης, καὶ τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς πάντα, ἤκουσα λέγοντας, Τῷ καθημένῳ ἐπὶ τῷ θρόνῳ καὶ τῷ ἄρνιῳ ἡ εὐλογία καὶ ἡ τιμὴ καὶ ἡ δόξα καὶ τὸ κράτος εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. ¹⁴καὶ τὰ τέσσαρα ζῶα ἔλεγον, Ἀμήν: καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι ἔπεσαν καὶ προσεκύνησαν.

On Wednesday night I began the series of talks on "Clear thinking about what it might mean to believe today". I chose this particular theme because surely we need clear thinking when it comes to speaking about God these days. I'm not sure whether everyone present on Wednesday night would agree that what I presented was yet quite clear(!), but one of the dimensions of good Christian theological sense is that it will not necessarily be good "common" sense. The very notion of what a clear thought about God might be is itself not clear and, indeed, highly contentious. The more rabid forms of atheism extant at the moment are quite confident that their thoughts are very clear. One of the advertising slogans currently adorning busses around Melbourne is "Atheism: Celebrate Reason". Clear thinking is here "reasoned" thinking, albeit with a fairly narrowly defined notion of what might be considered reasonable.

Now, if you were to attempt to draw on the Scriptures for a "clear" or "reasonable" statement of what it might mean to believe in this day and age, which of the main readings we've heard today would you go with (Acts 9:1-6, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19)? In the book of Acts we have perhaps *the* paradigmatic account of a religious conversion – Saul's "road to Damascus" vision of the risen Christ. In the reading from John we heard a story of forgiveness and restoration as the fallen Peter is commissioned by the Jesus he denied to build up the body of believers. And in the reading from Revelation – the worship of a "Lamb" with seven eyes and

seven horns and standing there, the seer John says a little earlier in the chapter, "as if it had been slaughtered". If you were to try to draw out a lesson or two for an evangelistic tract, would it be Saul's "sea change", the word of forgiveness spoken to Peter, or the scroll and the throne and the myriads of myriads of angels and elders falling down to worship a bloody, seven-eyed lamb?

If not so much a matter of clear thinking, clear communication at least would seem to rule out the Revelation text for this purpose. For we know something about "seeing the light" and roads to Damascus, and we know something about forgiveness and restoration. But who understands what is going on the Revelation to John? "Anyone", we might think, could be in a position to make some sense of the texts from Acts and John, but the Revelation reading is a different matter altogether – a distant and mysterious image.

And yet, if we *are* thinking clearly, we might pause to consider whether something (apparently) making sense or not is sufficient reason to accept or reject what we encounter in the Scriptures. "Celebrate Reason" runs the atheistic slogan, exhorting all to "make sense" of the world and each other. But what will make sense *of us* as we make sense of the world. What will make sense of the perfect sense of Peter when he demonstrated a well-formed interest in self-preservation in denying Jesus and then, when all the wheels had finally fallen off, went back to fishing again? What will make sense of the clear-sighted conviction of Saul as he hunts out those who distorted the truth of God with their profession of faith in Jesus?

For these stories are about sense and non-sense, but not on the level of any simplistic account of what is "reason"-able. They seek not to apply a particular reasoning but to make sense of the human being which is usually thoroughly reasonable; it is just that we tend to reason ourselves to quite destructive conclusions. It is what is obvious, and so reasonable, which will often be the problem in matters which *really* matter.

I suspect that the strangeness of the Revelation reading is in fact needed by us today as the means by which we might become a little more alienated from the story of the re-commissioning

of Peter and the conversion of Saul. For these apparently "moral" tales are in fact about exactly the same thing as the barely comprehensible reading from Revelation, all the more strange to us because of the passage of time and our having long forgotten what it meant to sacrifice an animal – a "Lamb" – for the remission of sin. In each reading the risen, crucified Christ is the focus, with the full weight not only of the resurrection but also of the crucifixion. But the fact that only the Revelation reading is likely to seem alien to us ought to suggest that we haven't really come to grips with Jesus' handling of Peter or Saul. For as merely moral lessons about forgiveness the stories of Peter and Saul lose most of their power.

But if the restoration of Peter had something to do with the honouring of the seven-eyed Lamb, and so also the conversion of Saul, then we would be better placed to see the strangeness in what has become so passé in Christian confession. "Forgiveness" such as Peter and Saul come to know, is something of an order of difficulty equivalent to the usefulness of a text like Revelation on an evangelistic tract. Time and shifts in language and culture have made Revelation seem especially strange to us, but that strangeness now stands as a sign (sacrament) of the strangeness of the gospel. For the gospel is not merely that "God forgives" but communicates also what an extraordinary – even impossible – work forgiveness is. Or, to put it differently, when the extraordinary scope of the book of Revelation begins to make sense to us, we will have begun to understand the gospel or, more to the point, it will have come to stand under us.

For the first time in quite a while I took a close look at the text of the Revelation reading in the "original" Greek. This I found to be instructive not so much because there was any particular new insight I found in the meaning of the words (and so on) but simply because it was a reminder that this wasn't written in English – it is not "our" scripture. We know this, of course, should we think of it, but it's humbling to have to reach for a dictionary to read what is usually so easy to skim through. And yet, at the same time, it is still about *us*, only not in our time or place (or even *any* time or place, in the case of Revelation). Learning such a humility is part of learning the "reason", the "rationality" or the "sense" of the gospel story.

And yet the focus in the Easter story is, in the end, not on the difficulty of it all but on the actuality of what these stories point to: the battle *has* been won, new life *is* given. Saul's life is turned upside down; Peter is returned in grace to God's promise to him; we might be remade as children of God today.

And so, with choirs of angels and all creation we too might yet join together in the eternal hymn, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!"

By the grace of God may we all come to know ourselves as God knows us, fallen and forgiven, and find voice to join in the song.

Amen.