

The Second Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

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| <i>First Reading</i> | Acts 5:12-16 |
| <i>Response</i> | O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever! |
| <i>Psalm</i> | Psalm 118:2-4, 13-15, 22-24 |
| <i>Second Reading</i> | Revelation 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19 |
| <i>Gospel Acclamation</i> | Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” |
| <i>Gospel</i> | John 20:19-31 |

On the second Sunday of Easter for year C, the Church gives us a powerful, beautiful passage not from the letter of St. Paul this time, but from one of my favorite books in the New Testament, and that is the book of Revelation.

So I’ve mentioned elsewhere, but I’ll say it again... that during the Easter season, one of the things you’ll notice in the lectionary — one of the changes you’ll notice — is that instead of reading from the Old Testament for the first reading, we’ll read from the Acts of the Apostles.

And another change that is worth noting is that instead of reading almost exclusively from the letters of Paul for the second reading, we’ll read from the letters of Peter and James and John — or what are known as the Catholic Epistles... not because Paul is a Protestant and they are Catholics, but because the letters, since ancient times, have been called the Catholic Epistles, weren’t written just to one church, like the church at Corinth or the church at Philippi, but to the Church spread throughout the empire, like the letter of 1 Peter or others.

So in any case... and the reason the Church does this is that during the Easter season, in a sense, She wants us to hear the voices of the first apostles who brought the Gospel after the Resurrection, who preached the Gospel, even before Paul himself. And those apostles were Peter and James and John. So these are the pillars

of the early Church of Jerusalem. So in a sense, during the Easter season, we're going back to... or recapitulating or reliving that experience of hearing the Gospel proclaimed for the first time by the apostles and leaders of the Church in Jerusalem (Peter, James, and John).

So in this case, if you look at the readings, you're not just hearing from the letters of Peter or James or John. Here we have the apocalypse of St. John, chapter 1, verses 9-11 and 12-13 and 17-19. So in this case, the Church picks out certain verses, but I'm just going to read the whole passage so that you can hear it in context. And then we'll unpack this amazing vision from the beginning of the book of Revelation. So here we go — Revelation chapter 1, verse 9:

I John, your brother, who share with you in Jesus the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Per'gamum and to Thyati'ra and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to La-odice'a."

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle round his breast...

Now at this point, the lectionary skips down, but I'm going to read the whole thing so you can get the context:

...his head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

Now the lectionary picks up again:

When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, “Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.

And then the lectionary stops there, but there’s one more sentence I want to give to you. It’s really important; it says:

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.¹

So here we have it — a selection from the infamous book of Revelation, which many Christians and many readers are a little bit afraid of, because it’s so difficult to interpret and because it’s so filled with apocalyptic imagery and symbolic imagery. And so in this case, what I want to do is just make a few brief points to help you not only understand the reading for today, but to understand how to read the book of Revelation as a whole.

So a few things... number one: notice here that this passage for today gives us the setting of the book of Revelation. John has been imprisoned. He’s been thrown into prison on the island of Patmos. This was a famous prison in the ancient world, the first century AD. Like today, sometimes some of the highest security level prisons will be put on an island, because it makes it more difficult to escape from them.

So he’s on this prison island of Patmos, and although he is in prison for the sake of the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus, so he’s been imprisoned there because of his identity as an apostle and his confession of the Christian faith. Nevertheless, in the Lord’s day he says he was “in the Spirit”, and he hears this voice speaking to him.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

So the whole context here is of a heavenly vision that's coming to John while he's in prison on the island of Patmos. And so this opening paragraph here is going to set the context for the rest of the book. Many interpreters think that the book of Revelation is a transcription, so to speak, or a composition based on a series of visions that John experiences during his imprisonment on the island of Patmos.

And what's interesting here is that you'll notice the timing of that vision in this instance is the Lord's day. So according to John, he's not only having a vision, but he's having it on Sunday. This is one of the most ancient accounts we have of Christians referring to Sunday as the Lord's day. So this would become the standard way to refer to Sunday in early apostolic writings, apostolic Fathers and later Church Fathers and whatnot.

So it's very fitting that the Church choose this passage for our Sunday readings, because John actually says he's having the vision on a Sunday. He's being caught up in the Spirit. Okay, so in that context, he hears behind him a loud voice like a trumpet, telling him to write what he's going to see... so write down the vision in a book — literally in a scroll — and then send it to the seven churches.

And the churches listed here are Ephesus, Smyrna, Per'gamum, Thyati'ra, Sardis, Philadelphia, and La-odice'a. Those aren't in the lectionary, but they're in this passage from Revelation. And I included them in the passage so that you can know what he means by "the seven churches". These are the seven churches of Asia Minor. Asia Minor is basically the ancient equivalent of modern day Turkey. It overlaps the same geographical territory substantially.

And John — as we know from ancient Church history like Eusebius, was the apostle that went to Asia Minor and dwelt at Ephesus — in the sense acted as the apostolic administrator, leader of the churches in those territories. He exercised authority in a particular way over the churches in Asia Minor. Just like Matthew was... in tradition in the early Church history was regarded as having gone to Syria to kind of exercise authority in those Semitic-speaking churches, and of course Peter ends up in Rome and exercises authority there. And Paul is all over the place. John was the apostle to the Christians in Asia Minor, with Ephesus as the kind of capital city of it all. So he's in prison on the island of Patmos off the coast, and the

Lord appears to him, gives him a vision, and says, “I want you to write down the vision, put it in a book, and then send it to the seven churches.”

So here we have another example of how, although the book of Revelation isn't a Catholic epistle, there is still a sense in which it begins with an encyclical letter. So it's meant to be circulated not just to one congregation or to one community, but to a number of communities throughout the territory of Asia Minor, seven different churches — Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia (that's not the United States, but Asia Minor), and then Laodicea.

So when John hears this command to write this vision down, he then turns to hear who it is that is speaking to him. So he says:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me...

And on turn, he has this vision. Now... if you try to interpret this literally, you're going to come away with a pretty bizarre image of Christ. I like to encourage my students sometimes to actually take the book of Revelation and try to draw it. It's impossible. You'll end up with the most bizarre images if you try to take the words and draw them out on a page. And that's because it's not meant to be interpreted literally. The things that John is seeing are symbolic images; they represent other realities. So he's seeing these things, but they're symbols of other things.

And you can actually see this in the very first thing he says. He said:

... I saw seven golden lampstands...

Pause there for a second. Although you and I, when we hear those words, might imagine seven candlesticks or maybe seven oil lamps, for a first century Jew, when you talk about seven lampstands, the first thing that would come to mind is the seven branched candelabra of the menorah that was in the temple. It's in the book of Exodus chapter 25. God commands the Israelites to build a seven-branched candelabra, which in Hebrew is called a menorah. The menorah is the candlestick that illuminates the inside of the holy place in the ancient tabernacle of Moses and then eventually in the temple of Solomon as well.

So when John turns to see, turns to look and he sees seven golden candlesticks or seven golden lampstands... to a first century Jew, that would mean John is in the temple. That's the only place you see the menorah, is in the temple, the seven-branched candelabra.

In fact, even to this day, you might think, "Well, wait. I've gone to my Jewish friends' house, and they have a menorah in their house." That's true, but it's eight branches, not seven. The seven-branched one was reserved for the temple alone.

Press pause for a second; we're going to come back to that vision. But if you go down to verse 20, I read that final verse of the chapter in order to just give you a little help with reading the book of Revelation. So when John sees Christ and Christ begins speaking to him, Christ is going to say some different things to him. And one of the things He says at the end — which isn't in the lectionary but which is important — is He's going to explain the meaning of the symbol. So verse 20, it says:

As for the mystery of the seven stars which you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

Okay, so notice here... it's not just *me* telling *you* that the imagery in Revelation isn't meant to be taken literally, that it's symbolic. That's not what the point is. It's Christ Himself telling John, "What you saw was a mystery" — in other words, it points beyond. It's a visible sign that points beyond itself to something invisible. It represents something else. It symbolizes something else.

And in this case, the mystery of the seven lampstands is that they represent the seven churches. And the mystery of the seven stars that Jesus is holding in His hand and John sees in the vision, isn't that Jesus has gathered together seven balls of gas from the cosmos and put them in His hand. It's that those seven stars, the vision he sees, represents the seven angels of the seven churches.

And this is a fascinating aspect of early Christianity. In Judaism at the time of Jesus, the book of Daniel and other texts testify to the belief that each people, each nation (like the nation of Israel) has an angel set over it to govern it, to guard it, to watch it, to keep it. And that gets translated into the early Church with the belief that each church and each different city has an angelic guardian, an angelic patron, an angel that governs it and guides it, protects it.

And this is where — sorry, I can't help but share this. This is where we get the idea of heavenly patrons for parishes too and dioceses. So I go to the church of St. Mary Magdalene. I go to the church of St. Philip Neri. I go to the church of Our Lady of Perpetual Help or whatever it might be. This is rooted in an ancient tradition of naming some kind of heavenly or angelic patron over a body, over a group of people, over a church.

Okay, so Jesus Himself is telling us that the image of the lampstands is a mystery, and so as you go back to read the description of what John sees, keep in mind each of these things is a mystery. It represents something. It's meant to reveal some hidden truth about who God is, about who Christ is, and what John is seeing. So in this case, the vision — what does John see? If you back up, he says:

Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw...

Number one:

...seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands...

Number two:

... one like a son of man...

Who's the son of man? That's the heavenly figure from the book of Daniel, who comes riding on the clouds and receives the everlasting kingdom. Number three: he sees the fact that the son of man is:

...clothed with a long robe and with a golden girdle...

That's a little funny. This RSV is a little antiquated here. We don't usually think of girdles as something men wear. It literally means a golden sash, so a band of cloth striped around it. Well, what are those? Those are the garments of the high priest. In Exodus 28, the high priest has to wear a long linen robe and a golden sash.

...his head and his hair were white as white wool...

Wow, evidently Jesus went gray after He went to Heaven. No, this is a mystery. Who in the Old Testament has hair white as wool? Go back to the book of Daniel. When Daniel in chapter 7 sees God — the ancient of days he calls him — seated on the throne, says his hair was white like wool. So this is a symbol of the antiquity of God — of the ancient of days is what Daniel calls him. And yet here the image is being applied to Christ. Very interesting.

So he sees the menorah and the middle of the menorah is the son of man, and the son of man looks like a son of man, but he also looks like the ancient of days. So is he the son of man or is he the ancient of days? Is he the high priest or is he the king? You've got to think of this as layer upon layer of mysteries in the imagery that is given. And then the lectionary skips here down to verse 17 where it says:

...I fell at his feet as though dead.

But I wanted to add in these other verses just for a second when it says:

... his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters; in his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth issued a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.

So each of these is a mystery, each is symbolism. And usually — here is the tip for you. When you're reading the book of Revelation, if you encounter something weird, strange — which you will, like a sword was coming out of his mouth — it doesn't mean that Jesus has an actual sword made of steel coming forth from His

mouth. It's a mystery. It's a symbol of some spiritual reality. And in this case, in Revelation, the key to unlocking the spiritual mystery is usually found in the Old Testament.

So what does it mean to say he's got a golden sash and a robe? It reveals that He's the high priest. What does it mean to say that his head and his hair are white as wool? It means that He's the ancient of days, not just the son of man. What does it mean to say that He's got a sharp sword issuing from His mouth? Well, if you go back to Isaiah 11, it says that the Anointed One (the Messiah) will destroy the wicked with the breath of His mouth — the word itself is a weapon for the Messiah, the Word of God. When finally, it says:

...in his right hand he held seven stars...

In this case, Christ Himself actually interprets the mystery. He says:

...the seven stars are the angels ...

So Christ has authority over the angels of those seven churches to whom John is writing. So I just give that to you as an example of how to slow down, unpack the book of Revelation, and realize if you want to understand it, you have to understand the Old Testament.

Now with that said, you can understand why when John sees all this — like the sword coming out of his mouth and the stars in His hand and His hair white as wool and His face like burnished bronze — John's response is to fall at his feet as though dead.

Now this is striking, because in the tradition, the author of the Gospel and the author of the Apocalypse of John (the book of Revelation) is the same John. So it's a striking difference between John's reaction to the earthly Jesus and John's reaction to Jesus in glory. And the earthly Jesus, John the beloved disciple lays his hand in the bosom of Jesus, on the breast of Jesus at the Last Supper. But when John the apostle (the same John) sees the risen Christ in power and glory, his

response is not to lay his head on his bosom; it's to fall at his feet as though dead. He's overwhelmed by the glory. He's overwhelmed by the vision.

But he laid his right hand upon me, saying, "Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one; I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

Why does the Church give us this passage? I think, above all, it's that last line, because during Easter, what is the Church celebrating? Not just the resurrection of Christ, but the victory of Christ over death. And so when Jesus says to John:

...I have the keys of Death and Hades.

...what do the keys symbolize? What's the mystery? It's the mystery of authority and power. So Christ has power over death and power over the realm of the dead, because through His crucifixion, death, and resurrection, He's conquered death. And now He is Lord of the cosmos — not just the Lord of Heaven or the Lord of the Earth but the Lord of those under the Earth as well, those who have died, the realm of the dead.

And so it's fitting that the Church would give us this image of *Christus Victor*, Christ the Victor — the one who has triumphed over death and Hades during the Easter season in this second Sunday of Easter. Beautiful, powerful, powerful passage. And again, this is the way the passage has been interpreted in the tradition.

So in this case, I'd like to just give you an example of how to interpret this. This is from St. Bede in the 8th century in the British Isles, Northumbria. He's one of our English saints. Bede wrote his commentary on the book of Revelation. This is one of the earliest complete commentaries by one of the Doctors of the Church, so Bede is a Doctor of the Church. And in his *Commentary on Revelation*, which I recommend if you want to get a sense for how did medieval Christians or Christians in the early medieval/late antiquity... how did they read the book of Revelation? Because a lot of times our exposure to readings of Revelation are just with contemporary, often fundamentalist readers. This is what Bede said:

He says that he is ‘like the Son of Man’, because after overcoming death, [the Son of Man] ascended into heaven... [He says] “*First, because ‘all things were made in him’ [John 1:3]; last, because all things are restored in him... Not only, he says, have I overcome death by my resurrection, but I have dominion over death itself.*”

That’s from Bede’s commentary, chapter 1, verse 13 and following. So in other words, what Bede is saying here is that John is not just having a vision of the crucified and resurrected Messiah. He’s having a vision of the Messiah who is ascended into Heaven and who now reigns over Heaven as Lord of all things and who reveals to John that He is the same one who made the Heavens. In other words, Christ is not just Messiah but Creator, and He’s also the one through whom the world will be restored. He’s the first and the last; He’s the alpha, He’s the omega. And if you have any doubts, He says:

I have the keys of Death and Hades.

In other words, “I have dominion over death itself.”

Now, the reason that’s so powerful is because... I don’t know about you, in recent years with everything that’s been going on, it’s dawned on me just how afraid we are of death. Human beings fear death. And they’re right to — it’s a terrifying prospect. So John, in the midst of imprisonment and probably assuming that he might well himself end up dead, is visited by Christ in His glory, Christ the Victor, who tells him not only not to be afraid of this extraordinary vision he’s having, but to recognize that there’s no reason to fear death, because Christ is the one who has the keys of death and of Hades.

And so I just end with that. I think that’s a word of consolation. It’s a word of comfort to us in the Easter season as we are celebrating the Good News of the Resurrection and the Good News of Christ to remember that Christ is not only risen but He is Lord of Heaven and Earth, and He is the one who has power over death and the keys of death and Hades.