

The Fourth Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 13:14, 43-52
<i>Response</i>	we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 100:1-2, 3, 5
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 7:9, 14b-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me
<i>Gospel</i>	John 10:27-30

The fourth Sunday of Easter for year C continues our sampling of passages from the Apocalypse of John, also known as the book of Revelation. And here the Church picks a powerful vision of the innumerable multitude of the city that John sees in this vision of Heaven. So let's look at Revelation 7:9, 13-17. John says this:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands...

And then it skips down to verse 13:

Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?" I said to him, "Sir, you know."

...which, by the way, it's always a good response when an angel asks you about some heavenly mystery. Just say, "Sir, *you* know." Very humble response on John's point. "I don't know; you tell me!" Then it says:

And he said to me, "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Therefore are they before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night within his temple;
and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water;
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”¹

Such a beautiful book — so good.

Okay, so what’s John talking about? What’s he having a vision of here? Well, in order to understand this vision fully, it’s important as always to put it in context. So this is in chapter 7, verses 9 and following of Revelation. If you back up to chapter 7, verse 1 in Revelation — which the lectionary doesn’t give us — John has the famous vision of the hundred and forty-four thousand who were sealed out of the twelve tribes of Israel. And then he has the vision of the innumerable multitude.

So what he’s doing here is he’s having a two-part vision. The first vision of verses 1-8 is of those who are saved from the twelve tribes of Israel. The second vision by inference is those who are saved from among all the nations of the world. So this is a vision that John has of, effectively, the number of those who will be saved from among the Gentiles, so to speak. But the Church uses it frequently — and not just here but in other places in the lectionary — as an image for the Church Triumphant, the heavenly Church.

And when John says he had a vision of a:

...great multitude which no man could number...

As always — almost every verse of this book is this way — John is alluding to the Old Testament. So if you’re a first century Jew, you’re reading the Apocalypse of

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.

John, and you hear about a number of descendants that no one — I'm sorry, a number of people that no one could count, what would that make you think of? It makes you think of Abraham. In Genesis 12 and then again in Genesis 15, God takes Moses — sorry. They both have long white beards, so I get them mixed up. God takes Abraham out and says:

“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

So the idea of an innumerable multitude of people — there's just too many to even to count — fits with Abraham's... or is an allusion to God's promise to Abraham, that his descendants would be as many as the stars of Heaven. So many that you can't even count them.

So on the one hand, what John is seeing here is a vision of what we would call the saints, the saved in Heaven. On the other hand, what he's seeing from a Jewish perspective is the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham about his innumerable multitudes that would come from many nations, because in chapter 12 and then again in chapter 15 and 22, God is going to say, “All the nations of the Earth shall be blessed through you, Abraham.”

So this is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, which is all the Gospel ever was, anyway — the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. And so John sees this image here, and I want you to notice something. If John is having a vision of the Church Triumphant — we're going to see that in a second, of those who are saved — notice its makeup. What does he say? Not only is it innumerable, but it's from every nation. And the Greek word there for nation is *ethnos*. We get the word “ethnic” from it.

So the Church as John sees it isn't just big; it's not just innumerable people. It's multi-ethnic. So it's a number of ethnicities. It's a number of people. It's also multilingual, because he says not only are they:

... from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues...

So it's multiethnic. It's multilingual. There are many different languages. And in that case, what passage would that make you think of? Tower of Babel, Genesis 11, which is right before Genesis 12, believe it or not. So you have chapter 12, the promise of the blessing of all the nations. Chapter 11 is the description of the various languages. And so what we're seeing here is not just the fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, but the undoing of the division of humanity at the Tower of Babel. They are all being reunited, not through their own power — like in Genesis 11 — but through God.

And what is it that's uniting them? They are:

...standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands...

Now why are they having palm branches in their hands? Because in the Old Testament, in the book of Leviticus 23 — and also later in Jewish writings, like 2 Maccabees, which is from much later times written in Greek — the image of having a palm branch, waving a palm branch, was something associated with the Feast of Tabernacles...also with royal processions. When a king would come, he would have palm branches out to kind of greet him — like in the triumphal entry, for example.

So in this case, it's fascinating — the fact that they have palm branches in their hands means that they are in a sense celebrating a kind of heavenly Feast of Tabernacles in the presence of a king. And of course, that's exactly what they *are* doing. Because in Jewish theology, the Feast of Tabernacles was a joyful feast in Jewish practice at the time of Jesus. It was a celebration that not only looked back to the exodus from Egypt to the liberation from Egypt and the people dwelling in tabernacles or tents as they journeyed through the desert...but the Jews also eventually saw it as an anticipation of the peace and the joy of the new creation.

So they would not only have tents and things to recline and rest and sleep outdoors in, but they would celebrate with the fruits of the fall harvest. The Feast of Tabernacles, they'd have — in addition to their palm branches, they'd have their first fruits of the fall harvest. They'd have wine and... it was a celebratory festival.

It was meant to kind of, in a sense, give you a little foretaste of what the new world would be like, what the new creation would be like.

So in this case, John is seeing not only them having a foretaste of the new creation and of salvation, but actually experiencing it. So it's fitting that they would have palm branches in their hands. Although in this case, the thing that would be striking to a Jewish reader is it's Gentiles celebrating Tabernacles. So this is clearly an eschatological Feast of Tabernacles. It's a beautiful, powerful vision of the joy and the glory of Heaven.

And so they're singing. They're crying out with a loud voice. They've got these palm branches in their hand, and John's amazed by what he's seeing. And one of these heavenly beings, the elders, turns to him and says, "Who are these people?" And John says, "You know better than I do." He doesn't say it disrespectfully like that, but that's effectively what he means: "Alright, sir, you know." In other words, he's inviting the heavenly elder to explain the vision to him, because he asks him, "Who are these people? Why are they wearing white robes, and where did they come from?" And John says, "You know." And then the heavenly elder tells him. This is important:

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

My wife will tell you — I haven't washed a ton of clothes over the course of our married life, but I'm pretty sure that if you take a white garment and you wash it in lamb's blood, it's not going to come out white. So, husbands out there, if you're doing the laundry, don't put the lamb's blood and the white clothes in the same cycle. I don't think it's going to get them clean.

Okay, so this is obviously a mystery. It's a paradox:

...they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

Obviously, this is an imagery of being washed in the blood of Christ. And the white robes are fascinating. In a Jewish context, they would have symbolized priesthood, because the priests wore white linen vestments — which by the way, are going to get covered in red blood. They *would* be stained. In this case, it's a mystery. They have these white garments. They have these garments that have been made white — sorry, made white by the blood of the Lamb. It's the Lamb that makes them white. And they're described as representing those who have come out of the great tribulation.

Now what is the great tribulation? Now, as soon as you see this passage, you can imagine all kinds of apocalyptic fundamentalist readers of Scripture beginning to pontificate about what they think the great tribulation is, when it will be, whether we're going through it, and that kind of thing. But remember, John's first readers are Jewish Christians. And so when he would have spoke of the great tribulation, they would have again thought of the Old Testament. He's alluding to a prophecy in the book of Daniel.

So if you go back to the book of Daniel, just for a moment — Daniel 12 is a passage which describes the final resurrection of the dead at the end of time. And Daniel says something very interesting. He says that before the final resurrection takes place, there will be an unparalleled time — or a time of unparalleled tribulation and suffering. Listen to these words — chapter 12, verse 1-2 and verse 4 of Daniel:

“At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people.

That's St. Michael, by the way — the archangel.

And there shall be a time of tribulation, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book. And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. And those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament; and those who turn many to

righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. But you, Daniel, shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the end. (Daniel 12:1-2, 4)

So notice, what the angel is revealing to Daniel is that yes, there's going to be a resurrection of the dead. Yes, those who participate in the resurrection will shine like the sun. Yes, they will be white like the star, but it's not going to happen until it's preceded first by a time of tribulation in which there will be unparalleled suffering. And it's only through the tribulation that those will be saved whose names are written in the book, meaning the book of life.

So, in other words, long before the time of Jesus, Daniel is prophesying a future age of tribulation, a great tribulation that will precede the final resurrection of the dead. And what John is seeing here is that those who believe in Christ, who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb, and who have suffered the great tribulation — think here of the martyrs who give their lives to Christ — they are going to share in the glory of the resurrection and have their names inscribed in the book of life.

So that's what John is seeing. He's seeing a vision of the church of the martyrs, of the church of the nations, of the church of many tongues and many languages, and how those who are members of that church — above all, the martyrs — will pass through the great tribulation and will share in the resurrection of the dead. And that's basically what that hymn, that the reading brings to a close, is all about. It's a song of praise for the Church Triumphant who stands:

...before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night within his temple;
and he who sits upon the throne will shelter them with his presence.
They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more;
the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat.
For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water;

Sounds like Psalm 23?

...and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Which, by the way — that’s an allusion to Isaiah’s prophecy of the new creation, where there will be no more crying, no more pain anymore.

So that’s what John is having. It’s a vision of the great tribulation and of the final resurrection. And it’s fitting that during this Easter season the Church would present this to us, so that we keep in mind not just the cross and the suffering that every Christian is called to, but also the glory of the resurrection and of the new creation that will come in Christ.

And so I’d like to close with just two points. First, I realize that some readers might be a little alarmed by the talk of great tribulation. Especially contemporary Catholic readers will often associate the great tribulation primarily with dispensationalists or fundamentalist Protestants who tend to be very interested in matters about the end times and matters about the great tribulation and the Antichrist and those kind of things. And so they tend to often think — not always, but often think — that, well, those are the things that non-Catholic Christians talk about.

But the reality of the fact is that the New Testament — Jesus Himself — talks about the great tribulation that will precede the final parousia of the Son of Man. I actually wrote my entire dissertation — my dissertation was on this topic. It’s about 500 pages, so I have some interest in it as well. But for our purposes here — don’t read the dissertation. Don’t worry about the dissertation; it’s not in print anymore anyway.

But if you look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, there’s an important section in the *Catechism* that affirms this basic teaching of Scripture that is... as Catholics, the Church teaches and we believe that before Christ’s final resurrection, there will be this time of trial.

So if you look here, I’d encourage you to take a look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 675 and 677. And these paragraphs are interesting to me personally or important to me personally, because as I was working on my

dissertation on Jesus and the tribulation, I remember thinking, “Is this some marginal topic? Is it really significant? Is it worth studying?” And then I found these paragraphs in the Church’s *Catechism*. And this was kind of a confirmation to me that no, this is an important part of the deposit of faith and of the teaching of the Church and of Her eschatology — Her teaching on the Last Things. So this is the *Catechism* on the final tribulation, and I quote:

Before Christ’s second coming the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the “mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.

Then if you skip down to verse 677 — paragraph 677 — it says:

The Church will enter the glory of the kingdom only through this final Passover, when she will follow her Lord in his death and Resurrection. The kingdom will be fulfilled, then, not by a historic triumph of the Church through a progressive ascendancy, but only by God’s victory over the final unleashing of evil, which will cause his Bride to come down from heaven.²

So...that’s what John is talking about. He’s giving a vision of the great tribulation, this time of tribulation through which the Church shall pass, in which people will be martyred... through which the Church shall come into the glory of the resurrection.

So this is a very beautiful, very powerful passage. And it’s just one more witness in the Scriptures testifying to the fact that there is no resurrection apart from Good Friday. You don’t get to the glory of the resurrection without participating in the cross of Good Friday. So I wanted to end with that. And then one last point —at

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par 675, 677

least for me personally too — I think John’s vision of the innumerable multitude is, for me, a strikingly biblical way of depicting the catholicity of the Church.

So one of the things we say in the Creed is “I believe in the catholic church” and in the communion of saints. And the Greek word for catholic is often translated “universalness” — and that’s fair enough. That’s accurate enough. But it actually means “according to the whole” — *kata* according to *holos* in Greek, catholic. And in this case, notice John’s vision of the Church is precisely that. It doesn’t just consist of Jews. It’s Jews and Gentiles. And it’s not just some Gentiles; it’s from *every* ethnicity and from every language under Heaven.

And so I would just challenge you to think about this. At least for me, one reason I belong to the Catholic Church is because it isn’t limited to one nation. It isn’t limited to one language. But when I join the Catholic Church — I’m a cradle Catholic, so I joined it when I was baptized as a baby. When a person joins the Catholic Church and enters into communion with the Catholic Church, they not only enter into communion with their local church and its local languages, or even the church at the national level and its various national languages, but you’re in communion with a church that has communions, rites, and the languages of the world, with all of the apostles and their successors.

It really is according to the whole Church. It’s not just the east — it’s the east and the west. It’s not just Greek — it’s Greek and Latin. It’s not just ancient — it’s ancient, medieval, and modern. It’s according to the whole. It’s a multiethnic, multilingual, living human society which is a living participation in the heavenly Jerusalem. And the reason we belong to a Catholic Church that consists of many languages, many tongues, many peoples, many ethnicities, is because that’s how they do it in the Church Triumphant. It isn’t divided along linguistic lines or national lines or ethnic lines. It truly is catholic on Earth, because it’s catholic in Heaven.