

The Seventh Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 7:55-60
<i>Response</i>	For thou, O Lord, art most high over all the earth
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 97:1-2, 66-7, 9
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 17:20-26

The Seventh Sunday of Easter for Year C brings us to the end of the end, to the end of the book of Revelation. If you ever wondered how does the story end at the end of the Bible, well, here's how it ends. In Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, and 20. It's a couple of snippets. The Apocalypse of John says these words, this is Jesus speaking, by the way:

“Behold, I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.” Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and that they may enter the city by the gates.¹

Now, it skips down to Verse 16:

“I Jesus have sent my angel to you with this testimony for the churches. I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright morning star.” The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let him who hears say, “Come.” And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price

Then it skips to Verse 20:

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.

He who testifies to these things says, "Surely I am coming soon." Amen.
Come, Lord Jesus!

Now, technically, I should add this. The actual ending is there's one more verse that the lectionary left out:

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all the saints. Amen

There's a little blessing at the end of the book of Revelation after that, "Come, Lord Jesus!" because the book of Revelation is framed, although it is a prophecy, it is an apocalypse as its overall genre. It's also framed as a letter to the churches, because if you go back to chapters 2-3 in the book of Revelation, there are the letters to the seven churches that were meant to be circulated, apparently along with the Apocalypse of John. It's kind of a combination document, in terms of two genres. It has characteristics of a letter or an epistle, and characteristics of a prophecy or an apocalypse. The ending that the Church gives us there is the ending of the vision, with the expression, "Come, Lord Jesus." And then there's a final blessing at the end, for the readers of the Apocalypse.

Okay, with that in mind, for our purposes here, what I want to look at is what these last verses in the book of Revelation reveal, not just about the end of Revelation, but about the person of Christ as well. A few features are worth highlighting. Number one, notice the emphasis on eschatology, on the Parousia, as they say in Greek, the second coming, the coming of Christ, the final advent of Christ. This is one of the basic messages of the book of Revelation: "Behold. I am coming soon." That's a reference to the final coming, the second advent of Jesus at the end of time.

Second, notice that the Parousia... You can tell this is the Parousia that He's speaking about, and not just His coming within time, His presence with us, because He ties it to the final judgment. He says:

I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for what he has done.

This is a reference to the final judgment. Now, notice here, this is really important for Catholics to highlight, is that over and over again, in The New Testament, although of course, we are saved by grace, salvation is a gift of God's grace. The

New Testament is equally clear that we will be judged at the final judgment by works. You see this not just in the letter of St. Paul, who will talk about judgment according to works, for example, in Romans 2, but here in The Apocalypse of John, as well, where Jesus himself says:

I am coming soon, bringing my recompense, to repay every one for

how he has believed? No, that's not what he says, although obviously, faith is important, don't get me wrong. But he says,:

to repay every one for what he has done.

This is where we get the doctrine or the teaching of Judgment by Works, final judgment according to actions. It's always a both and for us as Catholics, both faith and works are crucial in the process and in the path of salvation.

A third aspect of this text that's really crucial, and for me at least, the central one I wanted to emphasize here, is its revelation of the divinity of Christ. This is something that people continue to debate. Obviously, a lot of the heresies in the early church revolved around the question of Christ's humanity and divinity, the fullness of His humanity, the fullness of His divinity. What's important to emphasize here is that the divinity of Christ is not just something revealed by Jesus Himself, it is, in the Gospels, or taught by apostles like Paul, which he does. For example, in Philippians 2 he's real clear about this. But also in The Apocalypse of John, the book of Revelation is one of the clearest witnesses to the fullness of Jesus' divinity, because in the Apocalypse of John, the risen Christ talks about His divinity in ways that are very, very explicit.

I don't know if you have, like I did when I was confirmed, I received a what they call a red letter Bible. It was a Catholic Bible, but the words of Christ were printed in red. You could always find the gospels very easily just by seeing the red letters because that's where Jesus spoke. But one of the things I noticed early on when I was reading my Bible was that there were red letters not just in the gospel, there was one other place where there were red letters, and that's in the book of Revelation, because John hears the words, not of the earthly Christ during His public ministry, but of the risen Christ during His heavenly glory. Christ here is

speaking to John about His own identity. He's not just revealing that He's coming soon. He also reveals the nature of His divinity, and this is what he says:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

To a contemporary Gentile reader, you might not hear the words, "I am God" when you read those words, but to an ancient Jewish reader, as well as an ancient Greek speaker, this is actually going to be fairly clear because of what these words imply. When Jesus says He's the Alpha and He's the Omega, those are a reference to the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. Just as the English alphabet begins with A and ends with Z, so too the ancient Greek alphabet began with an alpha and then ended with the letter omega. It's a powerful way of emphasizing first and last, like we will say, "From A to Z" as a metaphor for, "From the beginning to the end". Jesus says here alpha and omega.

Then of course He makes that clear by saying I'm

the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

Now, with that expression, John is alluding to a passage in the Old Testament—surprise—that gives it a deeper meaning. If you go back to Isaiah, the book of Isaiah 44:6 you'll read these words:

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel
and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
"I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.

When the risen Jesus speaks to John and says, "I am the first and the last", He's taking the Words of God from the book of Isaiah 44 and then making them his own words. If you're a Jew and you know the context, the original context of that declaration, "I am the first and the last", you'll realize it's one of the most explicit oracles about what we call monotheism. In other words, the God of the Old Testament is saying, "I'm the first and the last, because I'm the only true God. There is no other God beside me". And yet here we have Jesus of Nazareth, who's

also fully human, but has now risen, speaking to John, the author of the Apocalypse and saying:

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

What this means, this is beautiful and powerful, is that the risen Christ in the Apocalypse is both affirming His divinity and doing so in the context of an illusion to an affirmation of monotheism in the book of Isaiah. At the same time that He's revealing His divinity, He's also safeguarding the oneness of God, that Jesus is not another God in addition to the God of the Old Testament. Jesus is not another deity in addition to the God of Israel. He is both somehow fully human and fully God, such that we can speak of one God in more than one person. And if you have any doubts about that, you can actually look at the way this language is used throughout The Book of Revelation.

For example, if you look at this chart, you'll see the parallels really clear that throughout the book of Revelation, God will speak about His identity and divinity. Then, the risen Christ will speak about His identity and divinity using the exact same words. For example, in Revelation 1:8 God says:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.

Then in 1:17 Christ says:

"I am the first and the last, the living one"

Then again in Revelation 21:6, God, who is sitting on the throne, God the Father says:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end."

And then in Revelation 22:13, Christ, the risen Christ says:

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end."

So which is it? Is God the Father Alpha and Omega, or is it Christ? Is God the Father the First and the Last, or is it Christ? The answer is of course, yes, both of those are true because what's being revealed in this final passage from the book of Revelation is nothing less than the mystery of Jesus' divinity. It's revealing to us that the divinity of Christ is not the divinity of another deity in addition to the one God, but rather of the Son who is one with the Father, to use the language of later Trinitarian dogma.

It's very powerful and very significant, in other words, that the entire Bible and the book of Revelation ends with the revelation of Jesus' divinity, and not just any kind of divinity, but His eternal divinity. He's not a man who is made God. He is God from all eternity. He is the Alpha and the Omega. He is the Beginning and the End. His divine person has no beginning and has no end. Now that divine person is going to be united to a human nature in time, but the person of Jesus Christ is the eternal Son of the Father. It's the eternal divinity of Jesus that's being revealed here. That's very important because as you'll see, when you get to the saints, the writings of the saints, they're going to talk about our becoming partakers of the divine nature. That in Christ we've all become partakers of the divine nature or the divinization or theosis of Christians. You'll see this in the 2 Peter, but also in the writings of the early Church fathers.

It's always important to emphasize that when the fathers and saints talk about our divinization, they mean that we remain human persons, but we become partakers of the divine nature, but with Christ. He is a divine person for all eternity who assumes the human nature and then allows that human nature to be put to death, raised up and glorified. A very powerful emphasis here on the oneness of Christ with God the Father and the eternal character of His divinity. That's an important place to end because it's, in a sense, the foundation for the confession of Jesus as not just the Christ, as not just the Lord, not just the Savior, but as the one who is to come, as the coming one, as the one who will come in glory at the end of time.

It's powerful here that the book of Revelation ends with this calling for the second coming, the Parousia, the final judgment with this beautiful passage:

The Spirit and the Bride say, "Come." And let him who hears say, "Come."

Now on the one hand you might think, "Oh, well, that's just an affirmation of a desire for Jesus to come back, for the second coming to happen soon." That's true. In fact, if you look at Paul's letter to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 16, he actually uses an Aramaic expression, that's the Aramaic equivalent of this maranatha, which means, "Come, Lord." Very early on there was this expectation that not only would Christ return, but that our desire was for Him to return soon, for Him to come back soon. At the same time though, even this reveals the divinity of Christ, because if you know the Old Testament, anytime you hear about a bride telling her bridegroom to come quickly, you're going to think about the Song of Solomon.

If you read the Song of Solomon, which is this great love poem between the bride and the bridegroom, which you'll be familiar with if you've studied that particular text, is to notice that although it's couched as a love song between a bridegroom and a bride, it's actually an allegory of God, who is the bridegroom, and Israel, who is the bride. If you read the Song of Solomon with that allegorical dimension in mind, when you get to the end of the Song of Solomon, you'll realize that it ends with the bride calling to her bridegroom to make haste and to come quickly. In other words, the Song Solomon ends with the bride waiting for the groom to come and telling him to make haste. Well, if the bride is Israel and the groom is God, then the Song of Solomon ends with the Israelites calling for God to come and bring the age of salvation.

In the same manner, if you fast forward to the book of Revelation, if the bride is the Church and the spirit and the bride are saying "come", what is it revealing? It's revealing that Jesus is not just the Christ, He's also the God of Israel. He's the one who the Old Testament people were waiting to come. And now He's the same one who the New Testament people, people of the new covenant are waiting to return. It's just another implicit revelation of His divinity. It shows how powerfully and beautifully the book of Revelation is a tapestry woven from these fabrics of the Old Testament. All of these allusions to the Old Testament are really the key to interpreting the Apocalypse of John. In this case, I think it's fitting that the book of Revelation, which brings the Bible to its climax ends with really the heart of our faith, which is the mystery of the person of Christ, who is both Alpha and Omega, Beginning and End, the First and the Last., the Divine Bridegroom, come in person.

That's how the text has been interpreted since ancient times. I've quoted him before, but in the living tradition, St. Bede's *Commentary on Revelation* says exactly this about this final passage. He says this:

*By Alpha he indicates the godhead of the Word, and by Omega the humanity he assumed—a beginning without an end. This is attested by frequent repetition in this book, either to convey at frequent intervals the divinity and humanity of the single Christ, or else to prove that the whole Trinity is of a single nature, which is expressed through the prophet: ‘Before me there was no God formed, and after me there shall be no more’ [Isa 43:10].*²

Notice, Bede is doing what I love to do. Looking at the Jewish roots of the New Testament books and using the Old Testament background to unveil the deeper meaning of what the Apocalypse of John is saying. In this case, it ends with these words:

“Surely I am coming soon.”

and we say:

Amen [so be it]. Come, Lord Jesus!

What a beautiful way to bring the Easter season to its climax as we await, not the coming of the Lord at the end of time, but the coming of the Holy Spirit, with whom Christ the Son is one, on the great feast of Pentecost.

² Bede, *Commentary on Revelation*, 22:12-13