

The Third Sunday of Easter

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Acts 5:27-32, 40b-41
<i>Response</i>	I will extol thee, O Lord, for thou hast drawn me up
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13
<i>Second Reading</i>	Revelation 5:11-14
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	Christ is risen, creator of all; he has shown pity on all people.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 21:1-19 or 21:1-14

The third Sunday of Easter for year C continues our journey through the Apocalypse of St. John, the book of Revelation. And I'm just thrilled that the Church gives us selections from the book of Revelation in the Easter season for year C, because it's one of those books that people have lots of questions about, and it also is one of those books that's just magnificent. It's marvelous.

And so in this case, the Church gives us a section from one of the parts of the book of Revelation that are focused on the heavenly liturgy, focused on the worship of the lamb in Heaven. So let's look at Revelation 5:11-14. It's a short passage, but it's beautiful, and it's also very important for us to grasp. So in Revelation chapter 4:11, John has another vision, and he says these words:

Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" And I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all therein, saying, "To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for

ever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders fell down and worshiped.¹

Beautiful, beautiful, momentous passage.

Okay, so what’s going on here? Well, this passage represents, in a sense, the climax of a vision of the heavenly liturgy that John sees in Revelation 4 and 5. So if you really want to feel the full impact of it, you need to go back to chapter 4, verse 1, and read all the way through where John has this vision of the heavenly throne room, and he has the vision of one seated on the throne. Then he has a vision of a lamb standing as though slain, and he’s surrounded by 24 elders and angels. And there’s all this activity taking place in the heavenly Jerusalem, in the heavenly throne room. The worship of God is being carried out by heavenly beings, by heavenly figures, by heavenly angels.

And so at the end of that extended vision of the heavenly worship and the heavenly liturgy, it comes to a climax when John looks around and he hears all of the voices of that heavenly chorus:

...saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain...

A hymn to Christ crucified and resurrected, a hymn to Christ risen in Heaven.

So, in order to understand this passage, it would take us hours to go back through 4 and 5. There is so much in there that we could look at. But for our purposes here, I just want to highlight a few elements of what the lectionary does give us. So the first thing is that John is in the throne room of God. So he’s been caught up, and he’s seeing the heavenly kingdom and the heavenly throne room — the center of it. And so he hears:

...around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads...

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 first thing he experiences here is the voice of the angelic hosts. Now I think, at least in the conceptualization of most modern Christians, we tend to...if you're not a Christian believer, you tend to accept the existence of angels: "Yeah, there are angels. I believe I have a guardian angel. I believe there are angels around us." But sometimes I suspect we can tend to underestimate just how many angels the biblical worldview presents to us.

So in this case, John doesn't see all the angels, but he sees the heavenly angels, and he says there are myriads and myriads — and a myriad is ten thousand. And what the actual Greek here means is "I saw ten thousand times ten thousand angels". So what John sees in the heavenly court is a hundred million angels, if my math is right (I think that's right). So ten thousand times ten thousand — and it's usually not right, by the way. So ten thousand times ten thousand is a hundred million angels.

Now that alone should blow your mind, to really try to wrap your brain around John seeing a vision of a hundred million angels. So he sees a throne surrounded by these living creatures, and then a hundred million angels, and all together those angels are singing with a loud voice: "Worthy is the lamb..."

Now pause there. I don't know if you've ever been to a concert — maybe like a rock concert or whatever it might be — where a hundred thousand people were all chanting together. Maybe you've been to a sports game, sports event, where a hundred thousand people were all roaring together.

I'll never forget — I brought my son once to the Saints game in New Orleans. And everyone who knows me knows I'm not a huge football fan, but my brother had free tickets, so I thought this would be an opportunity, so we went. And I don't really know anything about — I shouldn't say all this publicly — but I don't know anything about sports or anything. But we happened upon this game where it was one of the most extraordinary games they've played in years. It was extremely close, and at the very end, the Saints brought it out and won.

And I remember as we were there, the stadium got so loud that I couldn't even hear the vibrations in my ears. The sound was breaking up because the decibel level had gotten so high. They actually have a screen that runs — tells you how high it was. And I'm sitting there with my ears covered, because they were so painful. And that was just a couple hundred thousand people. What John hears here is the unified voice of a hundred million angels all singing together, one chorus: "Worthy is the lamb." That's the chant — "worthy is the lamb". And so they're singing the praises of the lamb, who earlier in this chapter is standing — John says:

...I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain...

And that's a mystery too. How can it be standing if it's slain? Well, it's because the mystery here is the image of Christ the lamb — lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world — who is crucified and risen. He's standing (so He's risen) as though slain, because He's been crucified. So He's both crucified and resurrected.

So this is John having a vision of Christ in Heaven being worshiped by a hundred million angels in the throne room of God. And they sing the song:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!"

So this is just a hymn of praise of just keeping every possible word of praise upon: wisdom, might, honor, glory, blessing. And then to add to that chorus:

And I heard every creature in heaven...

Not just the ones he can see, but all of them. And then every creature on earth. How many people would that be? What are we at... six billion here on Earth right now? And then every creature in the sea — who can even count that? And then every creature *under* the earth — that's all of the dead. All of them saying together in unison:

“To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might for ever and ever!” And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” and the elders...

...who are this group of elders that John sees, the 24 elders representing the 12 tribes and 12 apostles, they:

...fell down and worshiped.

Now there are so many things we can talk about here about this passage. For our purposes, I just want to highlight two. First, it's fitting that the Church gives us this reading for the third Sunday in Easter. Because remember, Easter is the celebration of the resurrection and the risen Christ, but it doesn't stop with just Jesus coming out of the tomb. It culminates with Him ascending into Heaven and being seated at the right hand of God the Father, being victorious over death and reigning as king.

So what the book of Revelation does is it... here it takes what we learn about in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, it helps us to see the heavenly result of it — namely, Christ seated as king over the universe. And it celebrates that by showing us that whatever might be happening on Earth, what's going on in Heaven is that Christ is being eternally worshiped by the angels, by the elders, by the four living creatures, in this eternal song of praise to the lamb who was crucified and is now risen.

So that's the first point. So I think the basic reason the Church picks this is because during the Easter season, we're singing the praises of Christ risen and ascended, and so it's fitting that we would see the vision of Christ risen and ascended that John gives us in Revelation 5.

But there's a second thing I want to highlight here, and I think it's just important for us to know — I'm going to take the opportunity to give it to you. And it's this identity of the four living creatures...four living creatures. You notice it climaxes with saying after all those other people sing the praises of God, of Christ, the four living creatures confirm it with this “Amen!”

Now who are these four living creatures? As I've mentioned elsewhere, if you want to understand the book of Revelation — anything weird in the book of Revelation, like four living creatures up in Heaven — you need to go back to the Old Testament. Because in the Old Testament, the four living creatures have been seen before. This is not the first that they are seen. They are not just seen by John in the book of Revelation, they're seen by the book of Ezekiel — not by the book of Ezekiel, they're seen *by* Ezekiel, in a vision that he has that's recorded in the book of Ezekiel.

So if you look... the book of Ezekiel 1 actually begins with this famous vision of the throne chariot, the chariot throne of God. God comes to Ezekiel. He has a vision of God on this fiery chariot, and the chariot is powered by these living creatures or these four creatures. And they're angelic beings, but they're described in a unique way, so listen to this. This is from Ezekiel 1:5-6. He says about the throne:

And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance: they had the form of men, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings.

Then if you skip down to verse 10, it says:

As for the likeness of their faces, each had the face of a man in front; the four had the face of a lion on the right side, the four had the face of an ox on the left side, and the four had the face of an eagle at the back.

So notice the four creatures associated with these beings carrying the throne of God are a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle. Those should sound familiar, because if you fast forward to the book of Revelation, in chapter 4, verse 6-7, that's what the four living creatures are identified with in Revelation. So if you look at 4, verses 6-7, John also sees these four living creatures. In verse 7:

...the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with the face of a man, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle.

So in the context of Scripture itself, John is having a vision of the same heavenly beings that Ezekiel did. Just like Ezekiel saw the throne of God, now John is seeing the throne of God in the book of Revelation.

However, for most of us, when we hear about a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle, what do we think of? We think of the four evangelists. So where does that come from? Well, this is a great example of a situation in which the living tradition of the Church doesn't just interpret Scripture but it expands upon it and applies it.

So in the book of Revelation, there's simply no indication in the book itself that these four creatures represent the four evangelists — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — in any way. But pretty quickly in early Christian art and interpretation of all the different symbols in Revelation, these four heavenly beings were associated with the four evangelists, either as the spirits that inspired those four evangelists to write the four Gospels or as symbols of each of the different evangelists and the characteristics of their Gospels. That's how you tend to see it played out. In other words, there's a kind of correspondence between the four Gospels on Earth that proclaim the glory of Christ through their words and then the four living creatures in Heaven who proclaim the glory of Christ in the heavenly liturgy. That would be the correlation there between them.

So in order to show you this, just I want to recommend to you the commentary on the Gospel of Matthew from St. Jerome, one of the Doctors of the Church, translator of the Latin Vulgate. He is actually the one who sets the course for the traditional interpretation of these figures that you and I are probably familiar with.

So a lot of people don't know there was actually a debate in the early Church among Irenaeus and Augustine and others about which beast corresponded to which evangelist. And Irenaeus had his opinions, and Augustine had his opinions. But in this case, it was Jerome that won out in the west. Jerome doesn't usually beat Augustine, but in this case, he beat him. So Jerome, in his *Commentary on Matthew*, in the preface says this:

The first face of a *man* signifies *Matthew*, who began his narrative as though about a man: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ...” [Matt 1:1].

So he emphasizes the humanity, so he is depicted as man.

The second [face signifies] *Mark*, in whom the voice of a *lion* roaring in the wilderness is heard: “A voice of one shouting in the desert: Prepare the way of the Lord...” [Mark 1:3].

So he begins with this voice roaring in the desert; that’s what lions do. That goes to Mark. And Jerome continues:

The third [is the face] of *the calf* which prefigures that the evangelist *Luke* began with Zachariah the priest.

Because what do priests do? They sacrifice bulls. They sacrifice calves.

The fourth [face signifies] *John* the evangelist who, having taken up *eagle’s wings* and hastening toward higher matters, discusses the Word of God.²

The Word is made flesh. So according to Jerome, John correlates with the eagle because he’s the loftiest of the four Gospels, because he deals with the divinity of Christ. He emphasizes divinity. Whereas Matthew emphasizes humanity, John emphasizes divinity. So that’s from Jerome’s *Commentary on Matthew*, preface 1.3, which I highly recommend you reading through his commentary.

In closing, I just thought you might be interested to know where that came from, where that artistic association with evangelists was made, and how it flows out of the book of Revelation... not because John is describing Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John up in Heaven. I mean, after all, if he’s John the evangelist, he’s on Earth. He’s having a vision. But the correlation involves: what are the four living creatures doing? They’re praising God with their words for all eternity. They’re the climax, the apex, of the praise of God in Heaven.

² Jerome, *Commentary on Matthew*, Preface 1.3; trans. Thomas P. Scheck

And so too, it's fitting that they be correlated with (or that they symbolize or represent) the four evangelists who are the apex of proclaiming the Word who was made flesh by giving us the four Gospels — the accounts of the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.