

OK, here's my nod to Mother's Day. A young man was walking down the supermarket aisle picking up a few things he needed when he noticed an old woman staring at him. He thought nothing of it and continued his shopping. When he got to the checkout line, the old woman appeared. He politely let her step in front of him. "Pardon me," she said. "I'm sorry to stare at you. It's just that you look so much like my son who died recently." The young man was filled with compassion for the old woman. "I'm terribly sorry, ma'am. Is there anything I can do for you?" The old woman smiled. "You know what would make me feel better? My son and I always went shopping together. As I'm leaving, do you think you could say, 'Goodbye, Mother?' It would be like my son is here with me one more time." "I'd be happy to," the young man said.

As the old woman gathered up her bags from the checkout counter, he called out, "Goodbye, Mother!" She smiled and waved back. The young man then emptied his basket of items and the cashier totaled up the bill. The total was \$140. The young man was stunned. "Excuse me? That can't be correct. I only have 3 or 4 things here. It shouldn't be more than \$25." The clerk said, "Your mother said you would be paying for her." (CONNECTIONS, Sept 2002, p. 4) HAPPY MOTHER'S DAY. We'll have a special blessing for you at the end of Mass.

A number of seminary students were serious basketball players, but there was no gymnasium on campus, so they played basketball in a nearby public school. The janitor, an old man with white hair, would wait patiently until the seminarians had finished playing so that he could lock up the building. Invariably, he sat there reading his Bible. One day, Bernie (one of the students) went up to him and asked, "What are you reading?" The man did not simply reply, 'The Bible.' Instead, he answered, "The Book of Revelation." With some surprise, Bernie said, "The Book of Revelation? Do you understand it?" "Oh yes," the man assured him. "I understand it." "You understand the Book of Revelation? What does it mean?" "It means," said the old janitor quietly, "that Jesus is gonna win." (Source unknown)

I've practically never preached on the Book of Revelation in 43 years! And I'll tell you at the very beginning – the old man's explanation is as good as it gets. Revelation is a book of hope, reminding a people being persecuted that Jesus will be victorious in the end. This book contains the most famous last words written, the Revelation. No others come close in the competition. But 'most famous' does not mean 'most admired' or 'best understood.' Many, confused by the bloody dragons and doomsday warnings, are only bewildered. The homiletic challenge here is immense, so if we can all walk out of here with a little bit of understanding of this inspired work, then I'll feel like this homily is a 'success,' whatever that means with a homily!

The words of Revelation are famous not because they are sensationally bizarre. They are famous because they are TRUE, backed up by centuries of mature experience. The famous last words of Revelation are famous because they summarize and conclude centuries of biblical insight and experience in the persons to whom God chose to reveal Himself, and who in their turn chose to live by faith in God.

The odd images and vivid visions that combine to make up the book's proclamation of judgments have made it a love-hate favorite. Depending on our particular disposition, religious denomination, and psychological state, the book of Revelation has been used as a window to view the future, a rearview mirror for fatalistic excuses and explanations, or a mirror when immersed in personal turmoil or tribulation. And Hollywood has had a field day with it!

Within the Catholic Church, the Book of Revelation has often been the favorite New Testament book to ignore. Biblical critics have wrestled with how to deal seriously with a book that declares itself to be a vision of the end times. At best, the best scholars are confused by the layers of visionary images that stack up on each other page upon page. At worst they are embarrassed by Revelations' reliance on strange supernatural creatures as key players in the church's future.

Still, however abused, misused and confused our tradition's relationship with Revelation has been, it remains one of the most quoted and talked about book in the Bible. And the one most made into movies! But behind all the cryptic numbers, composite creatures and dire warnings, the Book of Revelation proclaims a consistent message of comfort and reassurance. John's vision of the Apocalypse may be a visual embarrassment of riches to the point of clutter, but it always offers a resounding refrain of hope. I am reminded of one writer's description of THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV, which could be used for the Book of Revelation: "That great seething bouillabaisse of a book!" Revelation steadfastly upholds the need for continued faithfulness among believers and holds out the promise of a redeemed future. Jesus is gonna win.

This week's text doesn't begin to force us to face some of the scarier stuff in John's vision. The whole of chapter 7 offers a kind of textual time-out from the angst-inducing opening of the 7 seals. Whereas the first of these visions restricts the saved by number to 144,000 (not good odds for any of us since just at this very moment there are about 6 BILLION of us on the planet!), verse 9 begins a second, far more inclusive representation of the faithful, "which no one could count."

Verse 9 begins with the formulaic "After this I looked," a phrase that signals the writer is now moving on to a new and separate vision. The new sight is accompanied by new sounds – a fact which emphasizes the structure of a hymn. In fact, parts of this book, which show up in so many hymns, probably existed already at the time of its writing as songs used at liturgy. (adapted from HOMILETICS, May 1998, using work from Balmer H. Kelly, "Revelation 7:9-17", INTERPRETATION, 403, July 1986, p. 194)

Which brings me to my second of only 2 points. The book is essentially an act of worship that calls us to worship. From verse 1:10: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." To the last page, where John is told "Worship God" in 22:9, the book is one long scene of robust worship – the sights and sounds pulling together everything in heaven and earth, in creation and Cross, in history and salvation – all involving us in worship.

But we are so easily distracted. John's vision, if only we submit ourselves to it, is powerful enough to catch our attention and pull us back again to the main action, to the "God center." It enlists our bodies, minds, and emotions in participation, in worship.

This is an important point. The Bible concludes with Revelation, which is to say, with a call to worship. By the time we have come to this final entry in the Bible's 66 books, our minds are bursting with knowledge and our hearts burning with desire. With all that knowledge and all that desire there is a great danger that we will just run off and put it to good use – tell everybody we know, enlist everyone in our cause: communicate, motivate.

And that is pretty much what we have reduced religion to – talk ABOUT God rather than talking TO God. Which is probably the biggest problem we have. Why aren't things any better in our world? Why isn't the truth well known or well lived? Why isn't the good winning out? Why is the Church – that's US! – often such an embarrassment? Why are so many Catholic and Christians demoralized? Maybe it's because we haven't paid enough attention to the final Book of the Bible. Maybe it's because we haven't understood how important it is to worship. We think it's something we do if we feel like it on a weekend. Despite the fact that

the Catholic Church teaches that it is sinful to deliberately skip Mass on a weekend, a lot of people seem to think that it is optional. I can't wrap my head around anyone who realizes that everything we have and are has come from God could even imagine that 1 hour of worship in a week even BEGINS to thank God enough for the gift of life itself. How could we NOT come to Mass? The Book of Revelation reminds us that it is for worship that we are made, and it is worship that we will do for eternity. What we do here is dress rehearsal for what we will do for eternity. It's a big deal what we do here on weekends. (adapted from Eugene Peterson, SUBVERSIVE SPIRITUALITY, p. 88-89)

Look, we live in a world that is disordered. Our worship is so ORDERED that in one hour we relive the story that informs all of life with its meaning – that Jesus died to save us from our sins out of love for us. Worship is the supreme act of our faith, the gambling trust that although we cannot often see it, the whole cosmos is being shaped as history by the hands of God. Like the old janitor said, "Jesus is gonna win." (Adapted from W. Paul Jones, in WEAVINGS, July/Aug 95, p. 12)

And so at times, our worship sends tears down our cheeks. It gives us specific things to be done and the strength to undertake them. It rests us. It upsets our sluggish rest. It prepares us to live. It sacrifices us and breaks down the hull of our life and shows us how we might live. It warns us that we are too cowardly, but reminds us that it is not what we give that makes us suffer but what we hold back. Worship comforts and quiets us when we are torn and hurt, and it digs up the garden of our souls when we thought we were already doing all we could do. It challenges us in our stinginess, demands our forgiveness, and enlarges our loving. (Adapted from Glenn Hinson, SPIRITUALITY IN ECUMENICAL PERSPECTIVE, p. 165)

There is a painting in Avila, Spain in the convent of the famous spiritual leader and reformer, Teresa of Avila. She was a spiritual friend of the much younger but equally famous John of the Cross. They were very different types of personality, as their writings clearly show. They seldom met. But when they did meet and share God's love through conversation and prayer, something remarkable would apparently happen.

This painting hangs in the room where Teresa and John would meet and talk. It celebrates an event which may be either symbolic or actual – or both. It shows them sitting on straight wooden chairs, deep in conversation. So intense is their sharing, they have not even noticed that their chairs have simultaneously risen several feet off the floor and are hanging suspended in the air! One of the young sisters of the community is staring in amazement at them through the window. But the love of God they are experiencing together is obviously more important to them than a mere levitation.

Few of us rise from the floor at our Sunday Mass, but most of us have experienced that sense of being gathered up and held in a new unity and power as we meet, work, share, and create prayer with others who love Jesus. Thoughts come that we know are from a deeper source than our own selves. A new strength, energy, and vitality rise from an indescribable source. We feel a joy, pain, generosity and compassion that we did not know we were capable of feeling. We feel an intensity of love for the others that goes far beyond mere good community fellowship. We find ourselves listening to the pain, the need, the gift, the thought of the other in a way we did not know we could listen. And we feel, perhaps for the first time, heard by the other. This is true 'levitation' which comes when Jesus is in the midst of us, a small community gathered in His name. It happens when we worship, because we know, as Revelation tells us, and our weekly gathering reminds us – Jesus is gonna win. He's gonna win. Amen. (adapted from Flora Slosson Wuellner, WEAVINGS, July/Aug 90, p. 11-12)