



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Follow the Lamb Revelation 14 Fr. William Klock

May 22, 2022

A few weeks ago we observed what's often called "Good Shepherd Sunday", the Second Sunday after Easter. We read the Gospel from John 10. That's where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14). Later he says, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). The good shepherd knows his sheep, but because he knows us, we grow to know him in return. "My sheep hear my voice," he says. It's the image of a shepherd, not driving his sheep from behind, not corralling them with sheep dogs, but going ahead, leading the way. And because the sheep know him, they follow. They know they are secure. Throughout the Gospels that is Jesus' call: "Follow me." To the fisherman tending their nets, he calls out, "Follow me." To Matthew, sitting in the customs house counting his money, he calls out, "Follow me." When his friends ask him stupid questions or complain that they don't know what the future holds, Jesus sets them back on track and says to them, "Follow me." That's what it's all about: following Jesus. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff comfort me."

In contrast, the last couple of chapters in Revelation have shown us the dragon and his beasts. The first beast boasts blasphemously, claiming to be divine. His pet, the second beast, compels the people of the nations to

worship him. In contrast to the Israelites, who were to bind God's law to their heads and hands—to meditate on it and to live by it—the nations are similarly marked by the beast with a parody of the Lord's exhortation. They devote themselves to the beast, to his values, and to his system. And those not devoted to the beast and his worship become outcasts and are persecuted. In the midst of all this, John is exhorted: "Here is a call for the endurance and faith of the saints." This is the valley of the shadow of death, but keep following the good shepherd. And now as we begin Chapter 15, we see Jesus leading those who endured in faith. Look at 14:1-5.

Then I looked, and behold, on Mount Zion stood the Lamb, and with him 144,000 who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. And I heard a voice from heaven like the roar of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder. The voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, and they were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb, and in their mouth no lie was found, for they are blameless.

Picture the good shepherd as he makes his way up to the mountain top, to the sheepfold, and behind him follow his sheep—a multitude of them. It may have seemed as though the entire world was bowing before the beast, capitulating to the empire, offering their pinch of incense to Caesar. As we read in 13:4, those who saw the power and authority of the beast cried out, "Who is like the beast and who can fight against it?" To oppose the beast was hopeless. And yet it wasn't. And this multitude following Jesus,

this 144,000, this number symbolic of completeness, they prove otherwise. Rather than bearing the mark of the beast, these are marked on their foreheads with the name of the Father and of the Lamb. These are those who had been baptised into Jesus.

The heavenly orchestra accompanies them as they burst into a new song in the presence of the Lord. And it's a song that they and they alone can sing. Why? Because this is a unique people. Who are they? In addition to being marked out by God, John says that these "have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins". This is symbolic language. It doesn't mean that they were all men. It doesn't mean that they were literally all virgins. It's a symbolic picture of faithfulness. In Old Testament imagery, Israel was depicted as a pure virgin and, of course, the Lord was the groom. This was the ideal that Israel repeatedly failed to keep. Over and over she prostituted herself to foreign gods. And so this group of people stands in contrast both to unbelieving Israel, but more immediately, they stand in contrast to the nations from which John says they have been redeemed. The nations had become drunk on the wine of Babylon—on the wickedness of Rome and her false gods. In contrast, these have kept themselves pure. "It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes," John writes. And they followed even to death. Jesus called to them, "Follow me," and they followed him. They followed him through rejection, through persecution, through tribulation, even through death, because Jesus had already died for them and they had no reason to fear and every reason to be faithful. Tribulation. Perseverance. Kingdom. That's what Revelation is about and we see the kingdom bit here. John draws often on Psalm 2. These saints stand on Mt. Zion with Jesus. The Psalmist writes, "I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill" (2:6). This is the king who will "break the nations with a rod of iron and dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel" (2:9).

This is the same Psalm that Jesus used when he gave John the letter to the Christians in Thyatira:

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father. (2:26-27)

As messed up as some of those churches were, John also sees them here having stood firmly for Jesus. They have “conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name,” he writes in the next chapter. They have followed Jesus in faithfulness and they now share in his reward. They have been “redeemed from mankind as *firstfruits* for God and the Lamb”. If you’ve been reading ahead, these are that special group who make up the first resurrection of the dead that we read about in Chapter 20. The beast built his world on a lie, just as the devil did in the beginning. These are they who refused the lie for the truth of God. These are they who took the mark of the Lamb rather than the mark of the beast, even though it meant they would stand out, ripe for persecution. Brothers and Sisters, that’s what it means to follow Jesus.

Now that the saints have been marked by God, judgement on the wicked is finally unleashed. From here to the end of Chapter 18, John describes the Lord’s judgment as it was to fall on the Greco-Roman world. Look at verses 6-13:

Then I saw another angel flying directly overhead, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth, to every nation and tribe and language and people. And he said with a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come, and worship him who made heaven and

earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

Another angel, a second, followed, saying, “Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great, she who made all nations drink the wine of the passion of her sexual immorality.”

And another angel, a third, followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God’s wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name.”

Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and their faith in Jesus.

And I heard a voice from heaven saying, “Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.” “Blessed indeed,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow them!”

John draws on the prophecy of Isaiah now. The middle part of Isaiah was written to Israel in exile, to Israel on the verge of losing hope. The Babylonians had defeated Israel, they’d destroyed Jerusalem and the temple, and they’d taken all but the poor back to Babylon and into exile. “Where is our God?” the people asked. By all accounts the Lord appears to have been defeated by the gods of the Babylonians—and that made him a god not worth following, not worth worshipping. And so Isaiah prophesied. He prophesied about the covenant faithfulness of the Lord. He reminded Israel that the Lord is the one who created heaven and earth and that he had not and will never be

defeated by the false gods of the nations. He had no more been defeated by the gods of Babylon than he had been defeated by the gods of Egypt a thousand years before. When the time was right, the Lord would, as he had in the past, manifest his power and authority. He would deliver his people, renew his covenant with them, and set all to rights. And the Lord, Isaiah prophesied, will do all of this through his servant—the servant whom we meet in the New Testament as Jesus. Babylon will fall—and Isaiah has no shortages of oracles about Babylon falling. And this is where we read that well-known passage about the beautiful feet of him who brings good news. That’s the imagery and language John is drawing on here when he writes about this angel, this herald carrying an “eternal gospel”—good news.

Brothers and Sisters, what is the gospel? We too often have a narrow and truncated view of the gospel. We often make it very self-centred: God loves me, God forgives me, God saves me. All of that is true, but the gospel is a lot bigger than that, too. Think of St. Paul writing in Romans. There the gospel is about Jesus’ the king descended from David and recognized as the son of God in his resurrection. It’s about the fact that he is lord of all and that he will not only set us personally right, but that he will set all of creation to rights. The gospel is big—far bigger than we often give it credit. And so, drawing on Isaiah, especially Isaiah 52, John has three things in mind when he writes about the preaching of this gospel.

First, the Lord reigns. However things may look, the God of Israel is in control—over the gods of Babylon, over Israel’s defeat and exile, and over everything—which means it will be okay (52:7, 9). Second, Isaiah reminds the people that the Lord will return. The temple was destroyed, the Lord’s presence was no longer there, but he will return and everyone will

see and know it (52:8). And, third, the Lord has rolled up his sleeves—he’s “bared his arms”—to deliver his people and all the world will see it (52:10). And yet, when Babylon eventually did fall and Israel returned to the land and rebuilt the temple, the Lord remained conspicuously absent. The glory cloud never returned to the temple. Not until Jesus did the Lord return to fulfil these promises once and for all.

John also draws on lengthy passages of judgement from Jeremiah. Jeremiah, too, experienced the defeat of Israel by Babylon, the destruction of the city, and the aftermath of exile. The last seven chapters of his prophecy are announcements of judgement on Egypt, Philistia, Moab, Ammon, Edom, Syria, and finally Babylon. These were the nations that fought and oppressed God’s people and Jeremiah announced the judgement that was to come on them. And that sets up the judgement John writes about. The gospel is good news on two fronts. It’s good news that the Lord is setting this fallen world to rights *and* it’s good news that this also means the enemies of God and his people will finally be judged and dealt with—their corrupting influence removed and the saints they oppressed vindicated. The angels announce, Babylon who forced her immorality on the nations and made them drunk, has fallen, and in verses 9-11, the Lord’s judgement will be both just and thorough. It’s not just the beast; it’s not just Babylon. Those who have drunk her wine will drink the full cup of the Lord’s wrath. John borrows this image from Isaiah 34, where the destruction of Edom is compared to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Again, the Lord’s judgement on the wicked will be just, it will be thorough, and it will be complete. And, note, John describes this judgement and destruction as happening in the presence of the Lamb. First, Jesus does not turn away and leave others to carry out justice.

Second, it’s also a reminder to us that justice on the wicked—however much it may grieve him—is also pleasing to the Lord. The Lord is just and bringing justice to Creation reveals his glory.

But here’s the key: this announcement of judgement once again becomes a call for the endurance of the saints, just as we saw in the last chapter. Hold fast to Jesus! “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord,” John is told to write. Here they are, standing with the Lamb on Mt. Zion having endured and overcome. For the saints, death is not the end. The wicked fear death. It is their final wage. But for those who belong to Jesus, death has been defeated and is no more to be feared. Now verses 14-20:

Then I looked, and behold, a white cloud, and seated on the cloud one like a son of man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. And another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to him who sat on the cloud, “Put in your sickle, and reap, for the hour to reap has come, for the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.” So he who sat on the cloud swung his sickle across the earth, and the earth was reaped.

Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. And another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over the fire, and he called with a loud voice to the one who had the sharp sickle, “Put in your sickle and gather the clusters from the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.” So the angel swung his sickle across the earth and gathered the grape harvest of the earth and threw it into the great winepress of the wrath of God. And the winepress was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the winepress, as high as a horse’s bridle, for 1,600 stadia.

The vision shifts from the lamb and his people on Mount Zion to one like a son of man seated on a cloud. This is an image from Daniel 7 of the coming Messiah and his crowning as God’s king. But the imagery of the harvest and the winepress is from Joel 3:

Let the nations stir themselves up and come up to the Valley of Jehoshaphat; for there I will sit to judge all the surrounding nations. Put in the sickle, for the harvest is ripe. Go in, tread, for the winepress is full. The vats overflow, for their evil is great. (Joel 3:12-13)

In his resurrection and ascension the Messiah has taken his throne, he has judged Jerusalem, now he judges the nations. The image of the wine and winepress highlights the justice of the Lord’s judgement. In verse 10 John wrote that the worshipers of the beast would drink the wine of God’s wrath and now we see that it is their very wickedness that angels tread in the Lord’s winepress. The wickedness of the nations is poured back on them. The measure they have given is pressed down, shaken together, and running over is measured back to them. They reap what they have sown and once again God is glorified because his faithfulness is revealed.

And that’s the message we need to hear. I want to be clear that John was writing to a specific people in a specific time and specific place about specific events that were about to take place. All of it, at least so far, is in our past. It happened long ago. And yet what we see in Revelation about these themes of tribulation, perseverance, and kingdom reverberate down through the ages to us. John reminds us, as he writes in the prologue to his Gospel, that the light has come into the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Just the opposite, in fact. You and I bear that light today. The

darkness still hates the light, but still, the darkness has not and will not overcome it. God will vindicate his people. He always has and he always will, and in that we find out faith and our hope. We look to the cross and know that we are forgiven, we look to the empty tomb and see that death has been defeated, and then we look up and see Jesus ascending to his throne and know that he reigns and always will. That's the good news and the world needs to hear it. So we go out and we proclaim Jesus. We proclaim the cross. We proclaim the empty tomb. We proclaim his ascension. We proclaim the mighty and saving deeds of God to the world. And the light drives the darkness away. Sometime fast. Sometimes slow. But the light drives the darkness away. And yet we know it's not always easy to be that light. The darkness will not overcome it, but that doesn't stop it from trying. And so we need John's words of encouragement and exhortation in our own age. And again that points us to Jesus. The light shined its brightest when the darkness thought it had snuffed it out. And sometimes so too with us. Tribulation, opposition, persecution, and even martyrdom are part of the Lord's plan to bring salvation to the world. There could be no empty tomb without the cross. There could be no ascension if Jesus had not first humbled himself. And so with us and with our life, mission, and ministry, Brothers and Sisters, as he entrust ourselves to Jesus and give ourselves for the sake of the gospel. That 144,000 stands today in the heavenly throne room, praising the Lamb, and witness to us that it is worth following Jesus. He truly is the good shepherd. He is faithful to his promises and he cares for his sheep. We can trust him. For Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will surely come again.

Let's pray: Gracious Father, by the death and resurrection of your Son, you have made us an Easter people. Keep his cross and empty tomb and

throne ever before us that we might follow in faithful obedience wherever he leads, and fulfil the good purpose you have for us, through him who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.