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THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Chapter 7-8

Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Direct, O Lord, we beseech you,
all our actions by your holy inspirations,
and carry them on by your gracious assistance,
that every prayer and work of ours
may begin always from you,
and by you be happily ended.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Source Material

- *Revelation*, Peter S. Williamson
- *Revelation, Sacra Pagina*, Wilfrid J. Harrington, OP
- *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger
- *The Antichrist*, Vincent P. Miceli, SJ
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- *New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)*
- *Douay-Rheims Bible*

Summary

- We left off in chapter 7 with the first of two visions of heavenly worship before God's throne
- This chapter represents a "break" from the graphic and foreboding images of chapter 6 containing the opening of the first six seals of the scroll given by the Father to Jesus the Lamb
- The first vision from last week detailed the sealing of the 144,000, representing the spiritual protection given to the faithful before the upcoming tribulations
 - *As we said, the 144,000 is not a literal number but signifies the multitude of the faithful of God living on earth*
 - *They are "marked" by God as belonging to him, in contrast to the "inhabitants of the earth," who are not among God's people. We will see this phrase several more times in the coming chapters*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

- The previous vision of the 144,000 happened before the “great tribulation,” for which that great number of God’s people was sealed with strength and fortitude and the assurance of God’s presence before their trials began
- The great multitude in the current (second) vision jumps ahead in time to a point after that tribulation and depicts the triumph of the faithful in heaven
 - *We can imagine that for the original readers (and for us), this second vision is particularly reassuring and strengthening for the trials ahead.*
 - *It served to bolster their faith (and ours), helping them to remember the rewards of faithfulness*
- To use older Church language, the first vision depicts the ‘Church Militant,’ preparing for spiritual battle. The second depicts the ‘Church Triumphant,’ alive and victorious and standing before the throne of God, never to suffer again.

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

- "Every nation, race, people and tongue"
 - *A true picture of catholicity, referring to the 'universal-ness' of salvation offered through Christ. No group of people is excluded.*
 - *This diverse multitude would have shown the original readers the remarkable reach that the Gospels was to have in the future.*
 - *At the time, the faith was brand new, barely stretching into Europe. In centuries to come, it would indeed find believers in every land, something amazing and gratifying to John's first century audience*

- "White robes"
 - *Like the white robes given the martyrs in 6:11. White is a symbol of victory and resurrection (like our Easter vestments), which this countless multitude has achieved in Christ*
 - *They hold palm branches, another symbol of victory*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

- “Salvation comes from our God...and from the Lamb”
 - *A cry of joyous praise from the victorious faithful of God, directed to the Father and to Christ, in thanksgiving for the gift of salvation, which the faithful have now received, never to lose.*
 - *In response, the heavenly host cry out, “Amen.”*
 - *The redeemed are leading the worship of God in heaven*
- “Who are these...?”
 - *It is not unusual to see these types of curious rhetorical questions in scriptural visions, providing a means for further explanation*
 - *The identity of the great crowd of victors is twofold:*
 - *They are the faithful of God, who remained steadfast through the great trial and have emerged victorious*
 - *They are the ones who “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb,” referring to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.*
 - *Think of the robes as their souls – they were washed clean of evil and sin through the saving death of Christ.*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

- Notice that, “they washed their robes”
 - *An important point*
 - *The gift of salvation in Christ was given them, but they themselves, in their freedom of will, chose to accept that gift*
 - *It may be likened to receiving a present on Christmas morning and then choosing to open it*

- How did they wash their robes? That is, how did they accept the gift of salvation?
 - *By their faith, by believing, being baptized, repenting of sin, conforming themselves to the Gospel and persevering in faith despite hardships*
 - *Such was their confidence in God’s word and promise that, come what may, they remained faithful, and here we see them enjoying their reward!*
 - *A glorious vision and encouragement to John’s listeners (and to us!)*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

- How is heaven described in this scene? Three points...
 - *Ceaseless worship of God*
 - *An end to suffering*
 - *God's gentle care*
- Because these faithful ones “washed their robes”
 - *They have the privilege and indescribable joy of standing before the very throne of the Most High to worship him*
 - It is continuous
 - It is also a priestly function (worship), which the faithful now enjoy, standing in the very sanctuary of God
 - *They are preserved from every type of suffering, symbolized here by hunger, thirst and the heat of the sun. Never again will any suffering afflict them*
 - *Not only this, but all sorrow and pain of loss suffered while on earth will be removed by the gentle hand of God himself, who will “wipe away every tear.”*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

- It is a picture of absolute peace and joy, total vindication and victory, complete rest without the slightest fear or worry – all of which will last forever and can never be lost!
 - *John is telling his people that he saw all the words and promises that Christ made to his people utterly fulfilled for those who remain faithful*
 - *This is what John wants his people to keep in mind and cling to – not only as the rest of the book unfolds, but more importantly, throughout their lives as earthly difficulties and temptations increase.*
- We begin to see the hope that the Christian faith offered to the pagan peoples, who had little concept or hope beyond earthly life
 - *We also begin to understand Paul's words to the Romans: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed for us." (Rom 8:18)*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

Reflection

- This vision begins to answer the great ‘question of evil,’ i.e., why does God allow evil to exist and even appear to thrive, and why must the faithful suffer?
 - *The vision shows us that all these sufferings are temporary and will come to a definitive and permanent end.*
 - *Those who unite themselves to Christ, “washing their robes” in the blood of him who shared our sufferings to the fullest extent, will enjoy unimaginable and unending joy in his presence*
 - *They will share in his victory over death forever and never again suffer any pain, loss or the slightest suffering*

The triumph of the elect (7:9-17)

Reflection

- We must likewise choose to “wash our robes”
 - *Turning to Christ and embracing his Gospel completely, being absolutely converted and united to him, leaving behind all sin, trusting and bearing witness to him in this life, with the confident expectation of his fidelity to his word*
- Perhaps this is one reason why God (temporarily) allows the faithful to suffer...so that they may bear witness to others of their faithful endurance and their trust in God’s promises
 - *The witness of the faithful is THE most powerful means of spreading the Gospel and bringing others to Christ!*

End of Chapter Seven

■ But wait, there's more...

- *This second vision depicts the victory of the faithful, but we have yet to see the fullness of what they will enjoy*
- *The final two chapters of Revelation (21-22) show us how the faithful will live in a new heavens and new earth and will reign with Christ in his Kingdom forever.*
- *Stay tuned...*

■ Back to the narrative

- *After this beautiful 'pause' in chapter seven, in which we heard of the joys and triumph of the faithful, we return to the narrative and the opening of the seventh seal.*
- *This means that the scroll, the symbol of God's salvific plan, can be opened and read, but we won't get to that quite yet*

Introduction to Chapter Eight

- The breaking of the seventh seal brings forth seven angels with seven trumpets. As each trumpet is sounded, more calamities will befall the earth, this time in the form of natural disasters and as portents of the end
 - *God remains in control throughout, a continual theme that we will continue to see in the book*
- But something else comes first – the prayers of the faithful on earth
 - *These rise up to God in the form of incense*
 - *This reminds us that the Church on earth is not a mere passive observer of what's happening*
 - *Rather their prayers are ascending to God's throne and hasten the coming of the Kingdom*

The seven trumpets and the gold censer (8:1-6)

Silence in heaven

- After the thunderous sound of the countless multitudes singing in worship, this silence must have been deafening!
 - *This calls to mind the 'liturgical silence' during certain times in Mass and required in celebrations such as those during Holy Week*
 - *The silence here prepares the reader for something big that's coming next.*

Trumpets

- Another prominent mention of trumpets in Scripture is in Joshua 6, when the people Israel crossed the River Jordan into the Promised Land near the city of Jericho
 - *God commanded the Israelites to sound seven trumpets on seven consecutive days against the walls of the city*
 - *On the seventh day, the walls came down and they took the city, establishing themselves in the Promised Land*
 - *Here, the seven trumpets herald the people of God entering the true Promised Land of heaven.*

The seven trumpets and the gold censer (8:1-6)

The Gold Censer

- Incense is still used today to symbolize, in part, the prayers of the people. Just as the fragrant smoke rises into the air, so too do we envision our prayers rising to God
- Here, the “great quantity of incense” represents the great number of prayers of the faithful on earth, which are depicted as a “pleasing aroma” to God, who receives their prayers and responds most dramatically
 - *This tells us that our prayers are heard by God, who is pleased by them, and that we are participating in the coming of the Kingdom, lending our prayers and praises to God as he carries out his will*
- The act of hurling the censer down to earth, with the accompanying signs of thunder, lightning and an earthquake, are all signs that God is preparing to respond to those prayers
 - *As we have seen, atmospheric and seismic phenomena are biblical signs of God’s presence and/or impending action – this is a good example of that*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

- What follows may not seem like the answer to anyone's prayers, but it is another sign of God bringing about the destruction of evil, calling sinners to repentance and establishing the fullness of his reign
 - *This is of course at the heart of our prayers: "Thy Kingdom come."*

In general...

- In contrast to the first four seals (Rev 6), which brought about man-made calamities (war and its effects), the first four trumpets bring natural calamities, affecting all parts of the earth – land, seas, rivers and the sky
- Notice that the calamities are intensifying
 - *The four horsemen were given authority over one-quarter of the earth (6:8)*
 - *Here, the disasters strike one-third of the earth*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

In general...

- The natural disasters depicted are reminiscent of the ten plagues of Egypt (Ex 7-11): hail, water turning to blood, undrinkable water, darkness, etc.
 - *And more to come in chapter 9*
- We learn in v.13 that these disasters were aimed at the “inhabitants of the earth,” those who are against God
 - *Peeking ahead a bit, we will see in 9:21 that, like the plagues of Egypt, these calamities were meant to bring evildoers to repentance*
 - *Perhaps we will admit that calamities in our own lives have led us to repentance ourselves, and these disasters are intended, in God’s mercy, to call sinners to conversion*
 - *But just like in Exodus, it doesn’t work, as we will see...*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

Signs of God's judgment upon the wicked

■ Fire (first three trumpets)

- *Fire is a common biblical sign of God's judgment (Isa 4:4, 29:6, 34:9, 66:16; Amos 1:14, 2:2, 7:4; Jer 15:14, 51:58; Ezk 28:18, 30:8, 38:22; Zech 12:6, 13:9; Joel 2:3; 2 Pt 3:10, etc.)*

■ Blood (first two trumpets)

- *Reminiscent of the plague of blood against Egypt in Exodus 7, and in general serves as a foreboding sign of doom.*

■ Wormwood

- *An extremely bitter herb, here symbolizing the bitterness of sin and the consequent judgment of God*

■ Darkness

- *A perennial sign of divine judgment (Deut 28:28, Job 5:13, Joel 2:31, Isa 47:5, Ezk 30:18, Ezk 32:7, Na 1:8, Am 5:18, Zeph 1:14, Zech 14:6, Mt 24:29, Acts 2:19, etc.)*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

“Woe, woe, woe”

- Before the fifth trumpet, we hear a warning message directed to the “inhabitants of the earth,” those not belonging to God’s people.
- It will get worse, yet God in his mercy still allows time for repentance
- As the book progresses, we will see how incredibly far God extends his mercy
 - *God respects human freedom, and he will not force us to turn to him*
 - *As before, every person must “open the gift,” choosing to receive the grace of eternal salvation in Christ offered to all*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

Interpretation

- Recall that the first four seals related to war and other human-caused events, which God allowed to occur
 - *Such things have happened in virtually every century and every place*
 - *They are a result of human sin and will intensify towards the end*
- In the same way, we can approach the first four trumpet blasts as “acts of God” that have happened in many times and places
 - *These are also seen ultimately as a result of human sin (as we will see in 9:21), allowed by God as a call to repentance to the wicked*
 - *These will also intensify towards the end*
- One-third
 - *While the calamities are escalating – from one-fourth in chapter 6 to one-third in chapter 8, the destruction is not total*
 - *The judgments of God are measured and softened by mercy in order to allow the ungodly “inhabitants of the earth” to repent.*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

Reflection

- The thoughtful (and prayerful) reader might look at the history of the 20th century (not to mention the 21st so far) and consider the signs of the times
 - *The effects of natural disasters (earthquakes, famines, tsunamis, epidemics, etc.) have been devastating*
 - *Worse could be said of the results of war and government action in the last 100 years*
 - *Are these things escalating? Are they consistent with the scriptural signs we have thus far studied?*
- It is difficult to conclude that a particular disaster or war is a specific judgment against that specific people or place, and the Church never makes such a conclusion
 - *It is likewise difficult to conclude that individual calamities that befall us are the result of our own sin*

The first four trumpets (8:7-13)

- *Recall what Jesus said about the blind man he encountered, when the disciples asked him whose sin it was that caused his blindness (Jn 9:1-7)*
 - *Or the lesson that Jesus taught about the 18 people killed in an accident in Luke 13:1-5*
 - *Sin is the ultimate cause of all evil, but not necessarily the immediate cause of individual suffering.*
- Rather, as we have hinted, and will see in chapter nine, all such things are a call to deeper conversion (of the sinner and the saint alike) and perseverance in faith
- *and to put all our trust in Christ, who is the triumphant Lamb (Rev 7:11-13), the conqueror of death (Rev 1:18), and the one who promises, “he who believes in me, even if he dies, will live.” (Jn 11:25)*
 - *The heavenly visions we have seen so far prove the trustworthiness and faithfulness of God to those who belong to him.*

Next week...

- Class next Wednesday, January 27
- Coming up...
 - *The remaining trumpets*
 - *The scroll*
 - *The two witnesses*
 - *The Woman and the Dragon*

- Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.