

Revelation 21:1-6 Between the Prayers
John 13:31-35
May 15, 2022

It has been said that Albert Schweitzer, the great medical missionary of the last century, refused to allow anyone to so much as kill a cockroach crawling across his operating room floor. It seems to us that a set of sanitary conditions that involves cockroaches is substandard, and any medical professional would seek to remedy them, at the expense, no doubt, of the lives of the bugs.

Let us remember, on the other hand, that Dr. Schweitzer served in Africa during the first World War, when at home in Europe, the fatalities would be counted by the tens of millions, and people were living in sanitary conditions impossible to describe.

His prohibition may not seem so extreme when seen as a response, a protest of sorts, digging in his heels and saying, “enough,” by refusing to kill *anything*, in a world where the prohibition against killing had been completely set aside.

Context matters, and, as we are trying to understand better in my Sunday School class, the context of the Apocalypse of John matters. The Book of Revelation *means* something different to the young and strong, living out the prime years of life in affluent conditions; always plenty of good food, a safe place to sleep, a community that protects and serves its people, than it does for a relatively weak person in a war zone,

perhaps, or in poverty, or in a society that is suspicious of its people, not protective of life and humanity.

For the person who has things pretty good, there is little impetus to change anything, or to seek the end of things, to dream of a heaven of peace and joy, the absence, at least, of tears. I have mentioned before, you may remember, the Kenny Chesney song, you know the one:

“Everybody wants to go to heaven
Have a mansion high above the clouds,
(get their wings and fly around)
(beats the other place, there ain’t no doubt)
But nobody wants to go now.”

At the end, he says he speaks for the crowd, which is full of people having much too good a time to worry about the next life, much less seek it. But when things are not going well, the vision of the 21st Chapter of Revelation has added meaning:

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

We know enough about history to know that the same person may feel the one way about things at one point in life, and the other way at other times. Periods of war, or poverty, or disease, and also personal strife, times when life hurts, painful times that leave the scars of trauma and can wound a person in ways that

last a lifetime, are set against good times, of summer and beauty and earthly delights; vocational success, and romance and pleasing things too many to name.

Most people live between these two contexts and thus prone to gravitate between two prayers: “Come, Lord Jesus, quickly, how long, this is intolerable?” and, “Thy Kingdom come *on earth*, expand my territory, bless my grandchildren?” Or in the words of the song, “The next time you get the good Lord’s ear” the songwriter says to the preacher, “say I’m coming, but there ain’t no hurry, I’m having fun down here, don’t you know that? Someday I want to see the streets of gold in my halo, but I wouldn’t mind waiting at least a hundred years or so.” Everybody wants to go to heaven, not everybody wants to go now.

Generally speaking, how we feel about life in the old order of things and life in the new depends a great deal on how things are going, and on how much hope there is, of things continuing to go well, or even get better. It takes a lot of pain over a long period of time to produce in people the prayer, “Thy kingdom come . . .” and, “quickly.” Human beings are pretty tough. A little hope goes a long way.

The dream of a new heaven and a new earth, being what it is and coming not only at the end of the bible, but also in its middle, in the prophet Isaiah, offers a strong hope of a world without death and grief, and pain and tears. But even that only sinks deep in us when conditions in this life are so dire for so long that we give up on this life.

And either way, in good times or bad, with greater or lesser hope for heaven, we find ourselves here, *now*, and in the present conditions, in-between the contexts, where most of life is lived. What shall we do? How shall we be known?

The answer comes from the other great text from the body of literature associated with John. In the Gospel of John we read about Jesus giving some general instructions to his followers about life after his departure, and his words are well-known. They have been often read and sung, by the religious, and not so religious alike;

“A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this, everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

That is the testimony in times when we dig in our heels and say “enough,” like Dr Schweitzer, when we long for heaven and pray the Lord quickly come, and in times when the country music song makes more sense because we are having much too good a time.

The Apocalypse is often treated like a warning, the end is coming, be ready, or else. There is a sense of doom for the world, but that is not actually what the message is.

Instead, we find a love letter from God, who is actually saying that it is *not* time for the consummation of the age, because God loves this world and all its people,

and is willing to patiently await a turn in their hearts towards him, and towards the things of God. In the meantime, believers are asked to display patient endurance, when the times are hard, and when they are good, to give the world an example to follow. I think we can do better.

“Love, and joy and peace,” Paul writes to the Galatians, “*Patience*, kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” that tells us how to live, in-between the prayers, the one for the end and the one for the present, and assures us that God is working in us to make it happen.

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