

The Bride, the Wife of the Lamb

In the name of him who has overcome the world, dear friends in Christ: From time to time during Jesus' earthly ministry, his disciples would express some frustration that his normal method of teaching involved the use of parables and figures of speech. They complained that they didn't always understand what he was talking about. We get a glimpse of this in today's Gospel in which we hear the disciples rejoicing that Jesus is finally speaking to them in plain terms. The funny thing is that though he is speaking clearly, they still don't understand him—they only think they do. But despite the disciples' complaint, the fact is that teaching by parable or analogy or metaphor or any other figure of speech is a highly effective method of communicating ideas because these techniques paint word pictures in the mind of the hearers that are able to impress concepts upon them more deeply and thoroughly than plain words alone can do. They add levels of color and insight. It's like the difference between having someone describe to you a black and white photograph of your favorite dessert and actually having a dish of it in front of you where you can see it and smell and taste it, and feel the texture of it in your mouth. An effective figure of speech can do something like that for you—if you have the key to unraveling what stands for what in the image. The disciples didn't always have that; at first, anyway. That's why they often didn't understand what Jesus said.

But, fortunately, as we heard Jesus say in last week's Gospel reading, he would soon be sending his disciples the Holy Spirit. The Lord explained that when the Spirit came, he would lead the disciples into all truth. Before the time of his passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus knew very well that the disciples couldn't understand everything he was talking about; but he assured them that with the Spirit's help they would be reminded of the things that he had said while he was with them, and further that their minds would be spiritually enlightened to understand what they couldn't before. And one more thing: Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would reveal to them certain things that are yet to come.

All of which leads me to this morning's rather fantastic reading taken from the Lord's Revelation to the Apostle John. In it the beloved disciple of Jesus is given a vision of the future glory of the Church. It is described to us (not surprisingly) in a style rich in the use of symbolism called "apocalyptic"—which can be thought of as sort of an extended figure of speech. That is to say the things John describes that he sees and hears convey truths about other things entirely. So what I propose we do this morning – with the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit – is to unravel the mystery of John's vision so that we too can understand plainly what the Lord Jesus is teaching us through this extended figure of speech.

But before we do that, I need to mention briefly what is the overarching theme of the entire Book of Revelation so that you can see where this particular part fits into the big picture. Recall that John was given the series of visions we call the Revelation while he was in exile of the island of Patmos. He'd been sentenced to that desolate strip of sand in the Aegean Sea as punishment for proclaiming the Gospel. The enemies of Christ's Church were trying to shut him up. It didn't work very well. But anyway, at this point John is an old man. All the other disciples of Jesus have faced martyr's deaths – as have so many other faithful Christians who endured torture, crosses, lions, and being burned alive rather than renounce their trust in the Savior. And throughout the Roman world the persecution was continuing. Everywhere God's people were suffering for their faith – and now with the last of the disciples taken from them in exile, they were beginning to give in to doubt and fear.

It's in this context that Jesus gives John the revelations he recorded for us. The main thrust of them is that God is in complete control of all human history, and he's driving that history for the sake of his chosen people – the people he loves and whom he's called out by the Gospel of Jesus Christ to live with him in glory forever. Collectively these people are called the Church. And what we see throughout the Revelation is that the Church has to endure various kinds of hardships and trials and setbacks and even betrayals by some within its ranks (just like Jesus did); but not to worry: God knows it. His plan is proceeding as it should. He's got us covered. So hang tough because those who endure in the faith till the end will be given the crown of life. No matter how bad it gets; don't give up: God wins in the end. And you will too if remain faithful to the Lord Jesus. *That's* what Revelation is all about.

Okay, with this in mind it will also be helpful to know that the symbols used to describe the Church keep changing throughout the Book of Revelation depending on what ideas are being conveyed at any given moment. So, for example, early in the book the Christian Church is on earth is represented by seven golden lamp stands with the glorified Lord Jesus walking in the midst of them. The picture there is that in this dark world the Church is split up into little, individual points of light. Each congregation – wherever the Word of Christ is proclaimed and his Sacraments are faithfully administered is like a lamp in the darkness where the Light of Christ shines, and where he who is the Light of the world is present. It also shows that though there are many points of light, Jesus is the one Lord of them all.

Later in the Revelation, the Church is pictured as a woman who is heavily pregnant with child. She's having painful contractions because the time of her delivery is near; but she can't stop and rest because she's being pursued by a terrifying dragon. This dragon sees her desperate situation and hopes to be on hand when she has her baby because he plans to make a meal of it. (Hey, I didn't say it was a pretty picture.) Anyway, it's a description of how Satan is always after the Church and how he wants to destroy and devour first Christ himself, who is the Firstborn of God, and then also all those who are made God's children in the Church through the rebirth of Holy Baptism into Jesus. As the vision continues, the woman gives birth to a son – and just when it looks like all is lost and the dragon is about to get his snack, God intervenes and catches the child up into heaven. He also gives the woman a safe place to hide. Again, it's a picture of how the children of God are rescued by him, and also how the Church, though it must remain in the world till the end, is kept under God's protection.

Good. If you're still with me, the whole thing comes to its climax at the end of Revelation where a lot of these pictures and themes that describe the Church all come together. That's the part we heard today in which St. John is taken in the Spirit to a great, high mountain. From his vantage point on the heights he is blessed to see into the future and shown what glories lay ahead for the Church of Jesus Christ. The scene reminds us of how Moses was taken to the top of Mount Pisgah and was allowed to look across into the Promised Land. He was shown what the people of God he had been leading all those years in the wilderness were soon to inherit. The big difference is that whereas Moses was prohibited from going in himself, now the Promised Land comes down out of heaven directly to John. He doesn't have to cross over and take possession: the point is that the City of God comes right to us by the Lord's mighty power.

Interestingly enough, the angel serving as John's tour guide doesn't call what John is about to see a city; but instead he calls it *the Bride and Wife of the Lamb* – which itself is a rather strange mix of metaphors. The Lamb, of course, is Christ; but by referring to him as the Lamb, what's being emphasized is his role as the Church's Savior. He is the Lamb of God who was slain to take away the sins of the world, the Lamb who even now gives his body and blood to cover her sins and to sustain her in the saving faith. That the Church is called the Lamb's

Bride and Wife speaks of the intimacy and supreme closeness we will know with Jesus in the life to come. The Church has grown up, so to speak. She is no longer a little child under discipline in her parents' house. That's her life in this world. Then she could only dream of the freedom and joy she would have when her Prince took her away. But now she's come of age, and she is beautiful—absolutely stunning in her wedding gown, and from this day forth she's going to live with her husband in a sacred union for all eternity.

And so John looks, no doubt expecting to see a woman like the Church appeared to him before – but now it's not a single individual, but instead an entire glorious city, the New Jerusalem, made of precious, sparkling gems. The idea here is that the individual points of light that represented the scattered Church on earth have all come together into a single, sacred community in which all the inhabitants have perfect fellowship with Christ and with one another. And this city is surrounded by a high and mighty wall. It represents the safety and security of those who dwell inside. They are protected by God forever from anything that might harm them.

Then John goes into some detail to describe the gates of the city. What's remarkable is the large number of them. In ancient times walled cities usually had a relatively small number of gates. That's because they were hard to defend and they wanted to limit access so they could keep close tabs on the coming and going of strangers. But now *twelve* gates, three on each side open to the four cardinal directions of the compass, suggest that the city is open to all – people from all over the earth, people from every race are streaming in to take up residence. There are no strangers here. In fact, the gates are inscribed with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, suggesting that everyone who comes in, regardless of their race is nevertheless one of God's chosen people. They are the True Nation of Israel not by natural birth; but by rebirth into the saving faith and family of God.

This is emphasized by the angels that are posted, one for each gate. Sometimes they are thought of as guards for the city; but the important thing to remember is that an angel is primarily a *messenger*. That's what the word *angel* means. So the idea is that entrance to the city is achieved by hearing the message of the Gospel that comes to us from the agents God sends to speak his Word. It's by hearing the message of Christ's death for our sins that the Holy Spirit works faith in people – and that's what makes the people of every nation on earth citizens of the city who are free to come in. No matter where they come from or what language they speak, the Gospel message they hear is the same. This is further highlighted by the fact that names of the twelve Apostles are laid as the foundations of the walls and gates. Elsewhere in Scripture the Church is said to have as its foundation the teaching and doctrine of the prophets and apostles. So what we are to understand is that the Gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed by the angels at the gates stands on the whole revealed Word of God. It's in the entirety of Christ's teaching and the fullness of the Church's doctrine derived from Genesis to Revelation that the gates are kept open for people to come in. There is perhaps an implied warning for us here too. The walls and gates are supported by Christ's teaching. The suggestion is that if you undermine the doctrine of the Church you make its entry points unstable and its overall sturdiness doubtful. Some people think that in order to be more open the Church should relax some of its teachings. Today's text would suggest that the opposite is true. Finally of the gates we are told that each one is carved from a single pearl. This, of course, speaks of the beauty and priceless worth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ that God's messengers proclaim. (I suppose it also gives some indication about the enormous size of the oysters in the life to come – and though it would probably be a mistake to take this image too literally, I hope you like seafood.)

(You see, there is a real danger in taking the symbolic images in Revelation too literally. The important thing to capture is the meaning behind the symbols.) And that leads me to the last thing described in today's text: how the glory of God fills and illumines the City in such a way that it has no need of an external light source like the sun or moon. It glows with God's Light – the Light of Christ – from within. This isn't so much a statement about how we're going to have light to see by in the next life – that's not what it's talking about. You see the true glory of God is not how bright he appears or how many lumens he is able to radiate. No, his true glory is his love for us in Christ Jesus. This glory was revealed most clearly on a dark day, when Christ our Lord was crucified; but that's where God revealed his immense and limitless love for us. *That's* the glory God's people will share: God's perfect love *for us, in us, and through us* to one another. And that's why too everything that does not exhibit God's love will be excluded from the city: all that is detestable and false, all that is sin and selfishness, all that is in us now that fails to radiate with the love of Christ—all that will be left outside, and we will live together with God and one another in perfect peace and harmony forever.

All whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life – as was yours written on the day you were first brought to Jesus and made part of his Church by the cleansing and rebirth of Holy Baptism. Now we wait with hopeful expectation for that endless day to dawn like a bride anticipates the day of her wedding. And what a day it will be. So may Christ our Lord, the great Bridegroom of the Church, who has for us already overcome the world, bring us safely through every tribulation to his endless life and his perfect peace. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!