

Easter IV 2019 Year C
Sermon Preached at St James King Street, Sydney
Sunday 12 May 2019
Dr Murray Harvey, Bishop of Grafton



The Arrival of the Mystical Lamb. Ghent Altarpiece, Belgium. Hubert van Eyck, 1426-1432

A few weeks ago my mother died, aged 93, after suffering from Alzheimer's Disease for about 5 years. You may know someone who has dementia of one kind or another, and if so, I'm sure that you'll agree that it's not a nice thing to have to face at the end of your earthly life.

Some accept it, or at least tolerate it, or simply live with it quietly. This will vary a lot depending on the exact diagnosis and also on the personal characteristics of the individual.

My mother fought against it all the way. The early days, when we knew something was wrong but weren't sure exactly what, were uncertain and difficult. We struggled to support her (she was still living alone at home at that time) and she became increasingly insecure and confused: wanted company, support and help, but not too much: she wanted her independence too.

At age 87 when the formal diagnosis was made, it was hard for her to accept: what a huge burden to have to bare at that vulnerable age after a long, independent life. While I found her denial frustrating at the time, I can now understand that this suffering was so enormous that she had to partly shield herself from it (by denying it at one level) mentally and emotionally, because its onset was so difficult to face. For the following 5 years (most of it spent in care) there were daily struggles (medication, unhappiness, falls, difficult behaviour) – such that it was difficult, if not impossible, to see any positives at all.

Looking back now, I can start to see back to the time before her dementia, to the 86 or so years – a long life – that we can be thankful for.

Nevertheless, the suffering was there for those last few years, and had to be confronted and lived through.

The reading from the Book of Revelation that was our second reading today (7:9-17), is part of the author's revelatory experience proper (1:10b-22:5) from the first cycle of visions (1:10b-11:19). The long section about the scroll with the seven seals is interrupted by this inserted vision. The other vision is about the 144,000 in Chapter 7:1-8. In the portion read to us this morning we hear the second inserted vision, the salvation of a multitude.

In the words of an angel (sometimes called an "elder") we hear who the worshippers in the vision (the multitude) are. They are victims of oppression who have survived not because of their *strength*, but because of their **suffering**, and because of the suffering of Jesus. "They have washed their robes [of their blood] and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (v.14b). In their context, they have withstood the suffering of their day, probably the torture and abuse of their Roman oppressors, and have remained strong and faithful.

Notice too that they are here because they have come **through** the great ordeal, not because they managed to get around it.

"For this reason they are before the throne of God" (v.15a). And the result of their victory is that they will never again experience hunger, thirst, and scorching heat. The Lamb will be their Shepherd, guiding them to living water, and God will wipe away their tears.

At first it's not obvious why this passage was chosen on Good Shepherd Sunday.

The Good Shepherd is also the Lamb that was slain—he is both shepherd and sheep: "for the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:17).

It's an image with liturgical overtones, it reveals the consummated reign of God in material terms. We fragile humans seeking safety and comfort can relate to this: no more grief; no more tears. The "great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (v.9) are the scattered sheep brought into the fold—restored, reconciled, healed, forgiven.

They no longer thirst or hunger. They no longer face the scorching sun. Instead, they have been freed from the curse of death. The Lamb of God shepherds them toward the springs of life giving water, even as the Shepherd leads the sheep toward the green pastures (Ps. 23) and God wipes away their tears.

This liturgical tone is also evident in the Psalm for today, Psalm 23 in the Revised Common Lectionary, which renders the scene Eucharistic: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies" (v.5). We're so used to reciting this Psalm at funerals, we can miss the good news it foretells: The good shepherd brings all into the fold—friend, stranger, outcast, enemy—and when we feast at his table, barriers are broken, hurts are healed, divisions are overcome, enemies become friends.

Death can consume us. Like the dementia that sometimes precedes it, death can define our lives. And yet, the message of Easter, the message of resurrection, calls to us. Easter says that God is the source of life, the restorer of life, and the protector of life. In the words of the Psalmist: "Even though I walk through the darkest valley (the valley of the shadow of

death), I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff – they comfort me” (Ps. 23:4). Such words of assurance enable us to push through the suffering and the tragedies and find hope for the days to come.

And so today’s passage from Revelation helps us understand suffering in the light of Easter. But it also is a wonderful message about **inclusion**.

The vision we have before us this morning is the second inserted vision of St John (7:9-17). It is far more inclusive than the first one (7:1-8) where the people are meticulously numbered (to 144,000); commentators suggest that the use of numbers, while not to be taken literally, at least suggests that a *limited group* is meant; whereas the in the second they are *innumerable*. The first come from *Israel*, the second come from *all nations*.

The scope of the victory won by this multitude is inclusive of all nations. All nations, languages, tribes and peoples are represented before the throne of God, and that of the Lamb. They cry out: “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb” (v.10).

Importantly, their presence derives from what the Lamb has done¹, not from what the community has done. It also does not derive from membership of this or that politically, geographically or ethnically defined group, whether Israelites or any other, but is composed of people from *all groups*.

Almost exactly 48 hours after my mother’s funeral, 50 people were massacred in the NZ city of Christchurch while they were attending Friday prayers at their Mosque. Our prayers remain with the community of Christchurch, especially the Muslim community and the families of the victims. The alleged gunman was from the city of Grafton. This has led to much soul searching and grief in Grafton. When I returned to Grafton the day after the NZ shootings, there were journalists and TV crews there from all over the world. Stopping people in the street, asking if people knew the perpetrator and his family, asking about Right Wing Extremism and so on. I’m pleased to say that despite this, the Grafton community has come together because of this, rather than being torn apart. Over 300 people attended a Prayer Vigil in the Cathedral three days after the tragedy. We’ve reached out to the small but friendly Muslim community and offered them friendship and support.

It's also been encouraging to have received messages of support and prayer from further afield, such as the Primary School children from the Pilbara who sent some messages like the ones depicted.

The children of
Nullagine wish to
send messages to
the people of
Grafton Township.

from Weston
It is not your fault.
Still love your town

from Sonia
try to feel better and take
care of each other.

from Riccira
look after yourselves

This vision in Revelation Chapter 7 is a wonderfully inclusive vision that our world today needs to hear.

In its context this vision was an encouragement to the early Christians who suffered under Roman persecution, but how does it relate to us today? As some suggest we might expand our imaginations here to be more inclusive of others who suffer.

[W]e need to go much further, bringing our own poetic imagination to play, recognizing that many today lack shelter and are martyred by diabolical forces beyond themselves: children sold into slavery to make clothing or perform sex acts; multitudes dying of starvation; elementary school children massacred at Sandy Hook; victims of terrorism and violence; and so forth. Will they have the opportunity to experience beauty and love? Will they receive the "justice" of divine healing and companionship?²

The conquering Lamb, whose wrath has been directed against evil powers like these and those who serve them, has shed his own blood (5:9; 12:11)³. To all who suffer, there is the promise that God is present in their midst. They will find that their tears are wiped away and they can join in praise of God.

For those of us who are Easter people, what are these passages saying to us today?

This imagery of the visions that we read about in Revelation might seem obscure and remote from our 21st Century lives. Yet they are nevertheless a reminder of the centrality of the person and work of Christ.

His shepherding ministry speaks directly to our suffering. Like sheep we tend to wander. We fail to walk within the shepherding care of the Great Shepherd. How do we allow Jesus the Good Shepherd to speak to us, to guide and comfort us on our journey? When we are diagnosed with dementia or some other crisis comes our way, do we still hear and respond to the Shepherd's voice?

The presence of the Lamb who is seen in the centre of the throne reminds us that this person Jesus Christ is one with God in his lordship over this world. What does it mean to live under God's protection and what is our part in that? In the 1920s William Temple spoke about the Lordship of Christ over the world, including over the authority of the State. The

State's responsibility was to remember that its citizens are also children of God.⁴ In our post-Christendom context we would want to express this differently, perhaps using Justin Welby's approach that sees citizens influencing the values and character of society as an outworking of the commands and nature of God.⁵ What does this mean for the way you live your life, and the way I live my life today?

There is much in our world today that is over the top, materialistic, false and untrustworthy. The white robes of the multitude seem plain and even stark in contrast. Yet the white robes are symbolic of the inner or spiritual state of the person. Like the white Baptism gown or the plain dress of the Puritan: the plainness allows the inner beauty – God's grace – to shine through, unadorned. How does this inner beauty, God's grace, shine through in your life and in my life?

+MA Harvey 2.iv.19

Good Shepherd of the sheep,
by whom the lost are sought
and guided into the fold;
feed us and we shall be satisfied,
heal us and we shall be whole,
and lead us that we may be with you,
with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

From A New Zealand Prayer Book, 2002

Notes.

1. Their transformation from soiled (sinful) to clean (holy) (verse 14) is the result of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice (cf 1:5; 5: 6, 9). Collins (1989) writes that the fundamental allusion here seems to be to the Christian journey of repentance, conversion and Baptism.
2. Bruce Epperly <https://www.patheos.com/blogs/livingaholyadventure/2013/04/the-adventurous-lectionary-the-fourth-sunday-of-easter-2/>
3. John Gaden, *A Vision of Wholeness*, 1994, p55.
4. William Temple quoted in *Christ in All Things*, 2015, p80.
5. Justin Welby, *Reimagining Britain: Foundations of Hope*, 2018, p266.

Artwork.

Eyck, Hubert van, 1366-1426 ; Eyck, Jan van, 1390-1440. Altar of the Mystical Lamb - The Arrival of the Mystical Lamb, from **Art in the Christian Tradition**, a project of the Vanderbilt Divinity Library, Nashville, TN. <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/act-imagelink.pl?RC=48726> [retrieved April 1, 2019]. Original source: www.yorckproject.de.