

Reclaiming Our Birthright ~ This Is the Feast of Victory

Harry Maier writes his church...

My sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before God's throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of rulers on earth (*Revelation 1: 4-5*).

Christian worship is a revelation. Sunday by Sunday we gather to hear revealed to us who we are, whose we are, where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. We gather regularly because we know how easy it is to forget. The trials and vicissitudes of our daily lives, as well as the seemingly insurmountable difficulties facing our world, regularly tempt us to give up hope or lose our focus. In worship we confess and sing and speak and thereby overhear ourselves caught up in the peculiar intonations and grammar of Christian witness. Thus do we remind ourselves who we are and what we are called to be in the world. In doing so we discover afresh the truth about ourselves and our world, and the fierce truth of God's passionate love for us whoever we are and wherever we are. We go forth to be a continuing revelation of God's presence in the world.

Never far away in our worship are the metaphors and images of the Book of Revelation. This is right, for there is no other book in the Bible so saturated with the language of worship. In Orthodox traditions The Divine Liturgy with its careful construction of altar and iconostasis, its repetitious chanting, and its ritualised actions is designed to be an earthly shadow of the heavenly forms of worship and praise and service represented in John's visions from Revelation. The western Latin rite is more Spartan, but here, too, we discover John's Revelation in our midst. When John catches a glimpse of the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4 he sees 24 elders and terrifyingly wonderful creatures situated around. He overhears their song of praise which he tells us "day and night they never cease to sing." They sing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" Their hymn, "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created" (*Revelation 4: 8,11*). So it is that when we on Sunday morning in our Eucharistic liturgy sing, "This is the feast of victory of our God," with language drawn directly from John's vision of the heavenly throne room, we join, as the hymn of praise confesses, in "the hymn of all creation." The verb is important: "*join* the hymn of all creation." A little later in the liturgy we are again raised in worship to join the heavenly chorus of elders and creatures and saints who surround God's throne, when the presiding minister celebrates that it is right and salutary that we praise God together with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven "and *join their unending hymn*." It is, in other words, something going on all the time, which we, for a brief time, join up with, or —better— bring to conscious awareness.

The secular world has led us to believe that it is possible to cordon off religion, place it in a kind of stain-glassed ghetto, remove it from the public eye, wall it off in houses of worship, or keep it safe and sound in the private recesses of the human heart. But our liturgy tells us something quite different: when we publicly confess that in our worship we join in an *unending* hymn, there is no more room for such distinctions. There is no time and no place where the hymn ends or where it does not intrude. Christian worship simply makes manifest the worship that is going on invisibly around us all the time. When we gather to worship it is in this hymning and this celebration that we claim God's hold on the whole of our lives and our world. It is not that we are caught up for a moment in heaven, or that for an hour a week we long for the sweet bye and bye. It is that we fold the curtain back and discover that all that we are and do is framed and surrounded by an endless chorus of praise and thanksgiving. Worship on these terms is no longer how "religious people" use their private leisure time to pursue faith in God the way, say, hobby modellers use theirs to make toy aeroplanes. Such a vision of worship tells us that in our liturgies and rituals we are connecting ourselves with a fundamental claim on our lives and the life of all of creation. In worship we are meeting what is most real about everything we see around us.

This, were it all that is to be said, would be wonderful enough. But it is not yet the whole story. John's initial vision of the throne room in Revelation 4 is only the first part of a two-act drama, because it is still lacking the central character that will make the plot of John's Revelation complete. Only when he sees "a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain" is the vision of heavenly worship finished, for now the 24 elders and the four living creatures join their voice with "many angels, numbering myriads or myriads and thousands of thousands to sing, again in words our liturgical celebration joins along in singing, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" (*Revelation 5: 12*).

Some 1700 years of state-sanctioned Christian worship have blunted the razor-edged sharpness of this vision. The language John borrows to hymn the slain Lamb is precisely the ritualised court language that ancient pagan sources report was used to praise Roman emperors. If Revelation was composed during the reign of Domitian, then the language becomes all the more pointed, for it was he who claimed for himself the title used of God in Revelation 4:8, Lord and God. By applying the same terms of worship used for the Roman Emperor to the victim of Empire, Jesus of Nazareth, represented in Revelation as the most unlikely of imperial heroes—a slaughtered "lambkin" (*to arnion*, the diminutive form of the noun), John invites us into one of the most politically charged—indeed subversive—theologies of the New Testament. By choosing a setting of worship to do this, John reveals that worship is politics by other means—it is an invitation to a revisioning of our world,

of what finally really is "power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing" in this present age. Two powers collide in John's Revelation and John tells us that Christian worship can only find us on one side of that collision, a side running counter to all that this world judges to be power, wealth, and might and glory.

For 2,000 years the heart of catholic Christian worship has been the Eucharist. For us Lutherans, at least, at the heart of the Eucharist are two tiny words: "for you." "This is my body and my blood given *for you*." In Luther's instructions concerning Holy Communion, in the *Small Catechism*, it is to these words that he repeatedly returns. His final words on Communion are instructive, where he urges us to prepare ourselves for receiving the Eucharist by praying, "Lord Jesus, give me a believing heart that the words "for you" truly are for me. Amen." In these two little words all that counts in this world for power and wealth and wisdom and honour and glory and blessing is overturned. The words "for you" invite us to recognise, believe, and hold fast to a startlingly new reality.

"For you": if worship is a revelation, it is also an apocalypse. For clinging to God's promise in those little words "for you" quite literally turns our world upside down, uprooting and ending it, and calling us to walk in a new heaven and new earth expressing the surprise of God's realm at work in our world. Amongst the many important reasons for Christian congregations, especially North American ones, to celebrate a weekly (at least!) Eucharist is this: in it we find ourselves face to face with God's over-turning of the logic of domination and might that makes of us crueller, more tight-fisted, less humane creatures. As expressed by the citizens of the first world, such domination unleashes unfathomable suffering upon creation. But when it is the slain Lamb who overhear ourselves hymning, and when it is his welcome we receive in the words "for you" then, if only as a passing glimpse, we discover a new way of being in the world. We are given eyes to see ourselves anew – no longer greedy, acquisitive, frightened people hiding behind walls of military might, hankering after the latest thing, but as people for others, immersed in the suffering of the world for the sake of the world. We catch a foretaste of the feast to come in the open-gated city of Jerusalem. Here all the nations of the earth shall find healing and welcome (*Revelation 22: 2*), and all, in direct contradiction to the present economic powers that strangle the weak of this earth, will find "the water of life without price" (*22: 17*). We see ourselves with fresh eyes, as characters in a magnificent drama of God's welcome to creation.

So it is, most precious and beloved saints of God, my sisters and brothers in Christ, that I end where I began—where John's Revelation begins—expressing and hoping for the grace of God found in the slain Jesus of Nazareth acclaimed in Revelation 1: 5 as ruler of all the rulers of the earth in God's upside-down reign. Wherever else this reign is manifest it is most surely to be found at our Lord's table. For here we have the certain promise that our Lord brings healing to the nations and offers the water of life without cost. May we cling to this promise and live it in the world.

With warm regards,

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