The Book of Revelation: is it Relevant to our own Time?

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We live in a time of intense curiosity and anxiety about the future. This pre-millennial tension is expressed in the titles of some of the books on offer at international airports: *The End of the Future*, *The Foresight Principle*, *Framing the Future*, *Visions for the 21st Century*.

As we ponder the future we are also aware that the old order, established in that marvellously fruitful century the 19th, is coming to an end. For those with great investments in the old world order it is a time of anxiety and in some quarters there seems to be a deficit of hope as the future approaches.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that interest in the Book of Revelation has been rekindled in our own time. Over the centuries St John's work has tended to come into view at times of tension only to be eclipsed in more self confident periods. It has always been a controversial work and only secured an assured place in sacred scripture at a comparatively late date. In all periods there have been those who, like Luther the German Reformer, have said 'my soul cannot accommodate itself to this book'.

Despite the caution displayed by Church Authority, Revelation has always fascinated and attracted interpreters in times of anxiety. One of the major religious best sellers of recent years, Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth (*Marshall Pickering, 1970*)*, which draws heavily on the Book of Revelation has sold in excess of 15 million copies, and a genre of apocalyptic literature has flourished in its wake. A fascinating account of the cultural milieu which nourishes this apocalyptic enthusiasm can be found in Paul Boyer's book *When Time Shall Be No More* (Harvard University Press, 1992).

Apocalyptic sentiment is also expressed in some quarters of the ecological movement, which has transposed classic apocalyptic themes into rhetoric more accessible to a post-Christian generation. It is certainly salutary that we should be reminded of the judgement which falls on excess and irresponsibility and it is encouraging to be presented with a vision of a new world of sustainable equilibrium.

Occasionally, however, the bad news of pollution and other threats to the environment induce a rather triumphant gloom which is immobilising. Pessimism is often the luxury of the comfortable and it is a luxury which we cannot afford in the face of the real challenges to our life together on this planet.

Although 'apocalypse' has become a byword for unmitigated catastrophe, one of the most startling ways in which Revelation might have contemporary resonance is that in the last analysis it is not an 'apocalyptic' vision in the modern sense. Unfortunately it is commonly misread because we are sometimes more fascinated by the beast than by the lamb.

Receiving his visions in about 95 AD when the Christian communities in Asia Minor were suffering real and immediate persecution and danger, John unveils some terrifying scenes. Disasters are announced but they engulf only 'a third of the sea' (Revelation 11:13). There are always survivors, twice as many as those who perish. John's arithmetic is, like all his work, symbolic and needs to be read against the background of the Hebrew scriptures. In Isaiah and Jeremiah it is the small minority which is preserved. In John it is the majority.

For many modern people estranged from the tradition of the Church, these symbols are hard to construe. Revelation seems to be a happy hunting ground for individuals who have claimed the freedom to project their own fantasies onto John's text, undisciplined by any close knowledge of its context or allusions to the symbolic world of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Even without hidden polemical agendas, sheer ignorance of the most basic Christian symbols constitutes a formidable barrier to understanding the Book of Revelation. It is always salutary for a Bishop to be reminded of just how far much of the Western world has forgotten its Christian grammar. The Lamb is at the heart of the symbolic scheme of Revelation and the Good Shepherd is one of the most powerful Biblical pictures of Christ, endlessly reproduced in Christian art. I was walking up the steps of one of the churches

in my diocese when I was hailed by a lively and intelligent 10 year old. Seeing me in my cassock carrying a shepherd's crook in the rather unpastoral setting of the inner city he very reasonably demanded, 'Who are you?' I pointed to my shepherd's crook, which is formed out of a ram's horn, and said, 'What's this? If you can work it out then you may be able to guess who I am.' He looked puzzled and then, examining the smooth curved horn, his face cleared. 'I know, you're the Grim Reaper!' He was referring to a cartoon character who regularly features on children's TV on a Saturday morning. We have to realise that the symbolic world, for a large part of the rising generation, has been comprehensively Disneyfied.

Given expectancy and some disposition to take pains, however, there is a treasure to be found here and the very difficulty of construing the symbolic language can open us up to an engagement with the visions which is more profound than would be the case if we were able to read them quickly and without difficulty.

We live in a world where few people are reached by carefully textured rational argument and in which sometimes superficial symbols are used to massage and excite our cravings. At the same time it is undeniable that pictures can mobilise public opinion in a way that is hard for rational argument to achieve. It is perhaps significant that the threat posed by CFCs to our atmosphere has been appreciated by the scientific community for some time but it was not until 'the hole' was identified that it become possible to communicate the gravity of the situation to the newspaper reading public.

In such a time, the handing on of a symbolic tradition is a significant endeavour. St John's work explores our imaginative response to the world, which is at least as deep and influential as any intellectual notions we may have about the world. Symbols open the possibility of engaging with truth at depth and this notion is crucial to the understanding of how Revelation might offer a gift to us as we respond to the challenges facing our generation.

There are distracting and perennial attempts to find the relevance of Revelation in dogmatic prediction, identifying particular symbolic figures with specific world powers and personalities of today while treating the numbers as modern statistics. This kind of interpretation is of course an unwitting tribute to the prestige of the scientific method as a way of arriving at truth. Such is the authority of this method that fundamentalists are always tempted to pass over traditional Christian Biblical exegesis, which in a disciplined way embraces imaginative and symbolic elements, in favour of restricting scripture to a series of objective events that can be given a time and a date and in which the participants can be photographed and numbered. John writes and reflects in the first century and there are undoubted contemporary references, including coded condemnations of the Roman Empire, as well as symbols that already had a long history in his own time.

At the same time symbols assemble truths which are often only glimpsed in a fragmentary and fugitive way. They are not to be confused with signs, convenient shorthand for some defined phenomenon. Symbols are given in a tradition but they reverberate with the depths beyond consciousness. They can unleash dangerous energies and they deserve to be handled with care within a community and a tradition of interpretation which can guard us from private fantasy.

John specifically describes his work as 'a prophecy'. 'In the Spirit' he uses and transforms the symbols in his milieu to uncover some of the recurring patterns of human history. These patterns include the tendency of state power to deify itself and the havoc wreaked by military and economic élites, havoc which is not only visible in history but which also devastates the earth and the sea. There is behind the work a sense of the coherence of the divine creation but there is also a glimpse of the reality and activity of evil at work, marring and spoiling creation. At the same time the power of the martyrs, those who suffer for the truth, is revealed. This vision is especially eloquent in a century which has witnessed the martyrdom of more Christians than any century since the Resurrection.

At the heart of the Revelation there is the conviction that in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ a new range of possibilities has been opened up. Revelation helps us to see the life of the present in the light of the future. This future is understood not simply as a projection of present trends but is anticipated as the coming of the Alpha and Omega, the 'one who is and was and is to come'.

The vision is grounded in a realism about the power and the presence of evil. There are terrifying scenes of conflict and a sense of the battle that is to come. But the denouement is joyful and the horrors are mitigated

by visions of hope which intersperse the scenes of destruction. Again and again we look into a pit and then an angel speaks and draws our attention heavenwards. In particular we ought to note that the ultimate vision is one of the coming of the eternal world with people from 'every tribe and tongue and nation' participating in the reign of God. They shall not live as mere subjects but 'the Lord God shall give them light and they shall reign for ever and ever'.

It would be foolish to deny the authentic foreshadowing of the future in John, even if it is misconceived to view his work as dogmatic prediction with dates and times. More than that, prophecies which come from God have the power to make a contribution to bringing into being the future they envision. In the case of Revelation the plausibility of the hope revealed is enhanced by the fact that the posterity of the martyrs proved more enduring than the Roman Empire itself.

Although rooted in his own time, John exposes recurring patterns in a way that jolts the complacent but he also provides resources for encountering the future. These symbolic sketches, attunements and anticipations of the coming future can release energy in the present. Predictions easily induce complacency or hopelessness but John's eschatology opens up the possibilities of the future in which God, the first and the last, is coming to meet us.

It is easy to become immersed in our own time in a way which can cause us to miss the moment for decision. When we stand in the presence of eternity, as we do as readers of Revelation, the moment for decision is upon us. Profound change and energy rarely flow from analysis but more frequently from integrative vision. Revelation explores our imaginative response to the world which is at least as deep and influential as our intellectual notions about it.

The Church has often been frightened by this book. The caution is understandable if you see what wild spirits have made of it, but unless Revelation is taken seriously by the mainstream Christian tradition then it will be high-jacked by fanatics. Revelation opens up Christian faith to what God is doing in the future and it demands a response.

Revelation can make us sensitive to the transforming symbols which have been given to our generation. The growth of the environmental movement itself and the holistic aspirations which it embodies are hopeful symbols of a world which is learning that life depends on inter-relationships. Revelation helps us to appreciate that the web of interconnectedness ultimately depends on a relationship with the living God.

In conclusion, if I were to suggest that the Patmos Revelation is relevant in this or that specific way I would have falsified and neutered it. The historical situation in which we find ourselves is in many ways profoundly different from the circumstances of the first century. With the fall of the deified state, which was the paradoxical fruit of communism, we do not for the moment face in Western Societies a totalitarian ideology which claims a monopoly of the truth and seeks to suppress all rivals including the gospel. Instead, as Bauckman wrote in his recent *Theology of the Book of Revelation*, we face 'a relativistic despair about the possibility of truth and even more a consumerist neglect of the relevance of truth'. If churches are to have anything of value to contribute in such a time then they must, like the martyrs celebrated by St John, know a truth worth dying for.

Revelation warns us and it also diverts the pressure of this passing reality, to which we can so easily be confined, and opens up a future which is not simply a projection of present trends or a confirmation of present patterns of power.

For what it is worth, in reading and re-reading Revelation I feel my own agenda shifting, my complacency judged, my sense of urgency intensified and my hope enlarged of a world community in harmony with creation, assembled by the Spirit of God and flowing from the Resurrection of the One who spoke to John in a voice like the voice of 'many waters'.