

Easter 2
24/4/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 1:1-11
Psalm 148
John 20:1-18

Thomas and the other disciples

Sermon preached by Rev. Em. Prof. Robert Gribben

If the curiosities of calendars interest you, the latest date on which Easter ever falls would be tomorrow. This year we have coincided with Ramadan and with Passover. It's interesting that we now notice such things. But the two families of the Christian Church do not mark Easter on the same date, for reasons I won't give now; though this year we couldn't be closer – a mere week apart. Today is *Orthodox* Easter. In my ecumenical days, I often attended both Easters in the various cultures and languages. So, we join our Orthodox neighbours in the cry *Christ is risen!*

The descriptions of worship in the Book of Revelation often remind me of Orthodox worship. At the front of every Orthodox church there is the iconostasis, the icon-stand, a wall of portraits; the worshippers are standing on the floor of heaven, surrounded by the saints. There are vestments, candles, incense, and exquisite choral music – but no organ or other instruments. There are cultural reasons behind Orthodox liturgy, including living for centuries under repressive regimes (like the Ottoman and the Soviet) and it is true that Orthodoxy never had a Reformation.

Revelation chapter 4 paints us the picture:

‘... at once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on it!... around the throne are twenty-four thrones and seated on them are twenty-four elders, dressed in white robes, with golden crowns on their heads... and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches which are the seven spirits of God’ ...

In our own plain building, which has its own beauty, we may not have the furnishings of heaven (and we don't!), but we do take care that our liturgy is ordered and theologically true to our Church's doctrine; we take care in our preaching and in our prayers; we use space and colour and movement, and we even use ikons – in our own way. I'm sure that one reason for our weekly pattern of word and sacrament is that we add an action and symbols to the words. I'm glad we do: it is faithful worship. But I do wonder why no-one else in the Uniting Church wants to follow us?

It seems that John 'the Divine' (in the sense of a theologian) knew all these churches, all within 30 to 80 km inland from the island of Patmos. Many are close enough to be visible to each other across the plain of western Turkey. He names seven of them for whom he has a particular concern: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamon, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and the notorious Laodicea. They must have had tiny congregations and no buildings, and John's about to do a thorough presbytery review of them, but he sees them through the prism of the glory of God and the Orthodox created a tradition in that light. It is truly iconic.

This is what the Risen Christ said to them in John's vision:

'Grace to you and peace from Him who is and was and who is to come... and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the rule of the kings of the earth.'

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God.

His *vision* is of the Christ in majesty, to whom he gives several titles. The first is '*the faithful witness*' – that is, the witness which Jesus faithfully gave to the nature of God, of God's love and grace, 'for no-one knows the Father but the Son' – and the whole of the Gospel of John is built around that.

Then '*The firstborn from the dead*', by whom we have been 'freed from our sins by his blood' and who has opened the gate of heaven to all. This is expressed in the ikon on today's service order. The Risen Christ grasps Adam and Eve by the hand, and with them all humankind, and rescues them from the realm of death, into the kingdom of the Father.

The Greek word for him is the '*Pantocrator*', the All-powerful; but Easter has taught us again, that God's power is not as other users of power are: it is 'crucified power'.

Those of us mourning the death of our friend Wong Tik Wah, Methodist Bishop in Malaysia, five days ago, rejoice in this hope of belonging to the 'first born'.

I leave President Putin, Russian Orthodox Christian by his own claim, to ponder what it means that Christ Jesus is already '*the ruler of all the kings of the earth*' (1:5) as we pray that *God's* kingdom will come in its fullness. And the 'mighty will be brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up' (Lk 2:52).

Finally, is the calling to the church – the people of God – '*to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father*' (1:6). Here is the origin of that most characteristic of Protestant claims, that we, the baptized, are a 'priesthood of all believers'. John of Patmos did not know how explosive this biblical word would become in Christian history in the west! We have often arrogantly have used this as a weapon against churches with a different practice of priesthood.

It is hard for them as for us to take an old word and give it a new, or recover an old, meaning. All agree there is *one priest* in the Christian tradition and only one: Jesus Christ himself, the anointed one. Any other people with the title do so because all the baptized are priests. We all have ministries. That does not mean there are not formative tasks to be done in the church which might be characterized by the word 'priest' and by ordination.

A priest, biblically speaking, is a servant of God, who has responsibility for the true worship of God. It is not his own worship which is of importance, but that of the whole people with whom he stands. John of Patmos is precisely saying that our worship is shaped by the God we worship, and how we live our lives, and how we love our neighbour. There are gifts required for this task, which the Spirit gives for *every* part of the church's life. In the church, Edward Schweizer said, '*there is no superiority or inferiority, but only joy in one another's gifts.*' Some are called by the church to the building up of the body and the equipping of the saints (Ephes. 4:11).

The second element is of equal importance. The kind of God we worship also determines our mission or rather, God's mission. It too is a 'crucified' mission, not, as the Japanese theologian, Kosuke Koyama point out, a crusading one. It is self-sacrificial. It is service. In the mission of this God, every act of compassion and generosity, every act of justice, will express the love of God on the ground, as it were, giving God the glory.

'Grace to you and peace from Him who is and was and who is to come... and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the rule of the kings of the earth.'

'I am the Alpha and the Omega', says the Lord God.

May our worship and our lives always reflect his.

To Whom be glory in the church for ever. Amen.
