

Easter 3
1/5/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 1:1-8
Psalm 30
John 21:1-14

Apocalypse as Story

In a sentence:

As strange as the genre is, an apocalypse tells a human story: our story within the story of God

With the book of Revelation, we come to what looks to be the end of the story. We will probably think many things about “the end” over the next couple of months, but seeing the book of Revelation as the end prompts another question: where does this story start?

This is less straightforward than it might first seem. The obvious place to start anything is at the beginning, but this is difficult because *nothing* in time has “a” beginning which doesn’t have a “pre-beginning” before it. Where does the story of the current war in Ukraine begin? Few imagine that began two months ago with the first incursion. Perhaps it began with the end of the Soviet Union in 1991? Or in 1917 with the Russian revolution? Or with the writings of Karl Marx in the middle of the 19th century? In telling a story – a history – we have to *choose* a point at which to begin. We select some defining circumstance, and the story unfolds from there.

But there is another starting point of a story which is much less obvious. This is the perceived need for the story in the first place – beginning as *purpose*. The writer *wants* to tell a story. Even if this is merely to be paid and to eat, she will eat better if the story is a good one. Opinions about what makes a story good differ, but those which sell are stories which themselves justify being written and read; these are the stories which *engage* us.

Stories engage us by answering a question or – what is probably the same thing – by questioning answers we already have. All good stories have this in common, even though differences in genre make it less than obvious. The relationship between a Mills and Boon romance, a grisly murder-mystery TV series and a Marvel Cinematic Universe action blockbuster might seem tenuous, but they all treat the same basic thing. While the romance or the criminality or the spaceships mark them off from each other, each is deeply concerned with the actions and interactions of people *like us* in those very different contexts. Stories are always about *us*. And so Disney’s *Toy Story* movies are not about toys but about people who happen to look like toys but nevertheless do all things which people do. The children in the Narnia books do not interact with talking beavers and lions but with people who look like beavers and lions. A six-year-old knows that when Peppa Pig gets into trouble for being mean to Suzie Sheep, this is not farmyard ethics but schoolyard ethics. It means that she herself – the six-year-old – shouldn’t be mean to the other kids at school. The genre gives colour to the story but doesn’t change its essential purpose. Whether it is a dark indie dystopic tragedy or a mainstream children’s animated comedy, the story is *told* to tell us something about ourselves.

What we receive in the hearing or reading of stories, however, is no mere *information* about ourselves. Certainly, we learn what kind of world it is in which we live and what kinds of creatures inhabit it. But, more importantly, we learn how to navigate that space.

We are given instruction and warning: this is how it should be done, or not how it should be done. We learn what we are, what we do and what we can expect. Stories locate us in the world – they tell us the nature of the time in which we live.

The point of recognising here the human purpose of stories is to “locate” the book of Revelation. Its *genre* is 1st century Christianised Jewish apocalyptic. Instead of the safe combination locks of the great heist, it has scrolls and seals; instead of the superhero it has the archangel Michael; instead of the belligerent geopolitical superpower, it has a seven-headed, ten-horned dragon. Yet that’s just how you write a story *in that genre*. For all that is strange about it, this too is simply a story revealing something about human being.

If there is anything which distinguishes the book of Revelation (as a story) from other stories, it is only that it is explicit about its purpose. Most stories don’t tell us what they do *as stories*. This is implicit, but it’s also possible that the writer and the reader might not even be aware of it in the writing and the reading.

An apocalypse – as a kind of storytelling – is literally an unveiling or a revealing. It tells you what it does – with all stories – and what we are exposed to in hearing stories. This – declares an apocalypse – is what it means to tell or hear a story. And so the opening verses of Revelation declare that it will uncover what you are by uncovering what God is, in the uncovering of Jesus as the Christ. Revelation intends to tell us who we are, what we do and what we can expect.

But again, this uncovering doesn’t merely give us information, although the text of Revelation is often treated this way. Like those maps we find at a zoo or in a shopping centre, the story lays out the terrain and locates us with a glaring yellow arrow: “You are here”, the “here” being now not a location but a condition: you are like this, and you will likely do that, and this is what will happen to you.

The question then is not, Does the way Revelation locates us “make sense”? It makes as much sense as any other location a story might propose for us, whether it’s the bowels of a starship where we work out our daddy issues with a lightsabre or a garden party hosted by the Queen of Hearts.

The question to ask about Revelation is, *Is this true – in the way that stories try to be true?* Because stories – as accounts of how we are and act – have to do with the truth about us. And, while they propose to locate us, they can get it wrong. There is a story which says that if they are weak and we are strong, we can take what is theirs. There is a story which says that when the going gets tough, stay in bed. There is a story which says he cannot change. There is a story which says “The only way you can preserve peace is to prepare for war.” These are not good stories, at least from the point of view of Revelation.

The test of the value of a story – including the story Revelation tells – is whether it tells the truth about us, for better and for worse, in sickness and in health. Does it speak *truly* what we are, what we do and what we can expect? This requires honesty and careful reflection, which are not virtues to cultivate.

The apocalypse – the *revelation* – of Jesus Christ has at its centre the throne of God, around which the action of history flows and from which comes judgement of all that happens. The story places us in the midst of all this with a big cross and a declaration: *You are here*. This is the truth the book invites us to consider: Does this “You are here” – that cross on the map which is the very cross of Jesus himself – locate us truly?

We will have more to say about this in the weeks to come, but today it is enough to ask, What is the story which speaks the truth about us? Perhaps, “Life’s a bitch, and then you die”. Perhaps, “We *can* construct heaven, but the bricks will have to be made with bones and the mortar with blood.” Perhaps, “Fingers crossed...”

Or perhaps the story which matters is the proposal of the Apocalypse: “Behold, I am coming soon” (Rev 22.7). Blessed are those who read, and hear, and keep *this* story, writes John the Seer at the beginning of his apocalypse of the world in God (1.3), for this tells you where you will *finally* be found.

Regardless of where you find yourself now, you will find yourself with God, *your* story within *the* story.

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