

Easter 4
8/5/2022

Mark the Evangelist

Revelation 3:14-22

Psalm 23

John 10:22-30

Tomorrow, today

In a sentence:

Biblical visions of tomorrow are about how we should be living today

(Last week, we “located” the book of Revelation in the category of “story”, seeing it as a story like any other, simply of a particular genre. Today we take the story-character of Revelation a little further).

There is a certain kind of person who, before reading the first page, likes to jump to the end of a book to see how the whole thing will end. About such people we will make no judgements today!

Concerning our personal stories, of course, and the story of the human being as a whole, the end is not as easily accessible. Nevertheless, now and again the question is put to us or a protagonist in a story we’re reading: if you *could* know the day of your death, would you *want* to know it? Take a moment to hear that question, and answer it.

Some will say Yes, some No. We might say No because we fear death, and to *know* that we will die, say, on the 8th of May next year, will cast a shadow over every day between now and then, such that we die 365 times, rather than just the once. Here ignorance is bliss because knowledge would be torture.

Or perhaps implicit in the No is my being satisfied that I’m living the best life I can, and there’s nothing I would change if I did know the end. Knowledge of my death might be an inconvenient distraction from simply getting on with life.

Or maybe we’d risk knowing when we will die, hoping that it’s a long way off. If it is still distance, I can cut loose for a while and tidy things up closer to the date. The self-indulgent bucket list can be emptied, with time for righteousness later. Or, if the time is shorter than I thought, I could re-prioritise, go on the trip I’ve always put off, finally get around to writing a will, pray for forgiveness or call my mother.

There are doubtless many variations on these responses and rationales, but the point is that the silly question seriously tempts us to consider our present in terms of our future. If I knew that *that* is what is going to happen, then I might not do *this, now*. *Knowing tomorrow changes today*.

Of course, we already know this, although only in retrospect. If we had known 8 years ago that we were going to sell this property, we wouldn’t have spent all that time and money on trying *not* to sell the property. The link between now and our future becomes clearer when we look backwards from our present to our past.

This present-future dynamic is at the heart of Christian confession, not least in the book of Revelation. In the passages we heard the last couple of weeks, it was declared, “Look! He is coming with the clouds; every eye will see him, even those who pierced him; and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail” (Rev 1.7). That is, “all the tribes of the earth cried out”, “If only we had known, we wouldn’t have crucified him”.

Knowledge of the future is the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. In apocalyptic thinking, resurrection is not primarily the resuscitation of a dead person but an appearance of the end – a sign of the present times. The risen Jesus is the declaration, "This is how it ends". At least in the Palestinian context of the New Testament, the problem the resurrection presents is not merely that dead people don't usually stop being dead, but that *if one did*, we would have evidence of tomorrow, today. And, if the one who was raised had just been crucified by people who imagine themselves to be godly, then the news about tomorrow is simply *devastating*. "If we knew *that*, we would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor 2.6-8).

If there are those in the book of Revelation who wail because they hadn't seen what was coming – because they didn't see the truth of the story Jesus lived – there are also those who *did* see it. These are the "martyrs". The important thing about these for the moment is not that they might have been killed because of what they saw and believed, but that the word martyr itself simply means "witness". These ones saw the future and testified to it, and judged the present in its light. Their martyrdom – being killed for this testimony – was they themselves being judged and condemned because of that vision of the future.

Yet, none of this is merely how *ancient* people thought. In the middle of an election campaign, we know that the scariest candidates are those whose vision of the future is least like our present. Incumbent governments have to trade on what they have already done. They argue that tomorrow will be like today because today is the fruit of all the good work the Government has done and will continue to do, in the same vein. The gospel – the good news – of the Government is that the kingdom has come.

In contrast, those candidates who preach a revolutionary vision of tomorrow – perhaps socialist, or environmentally radical, or "freedom, freedom, freedom" in the mode of right-wing reactionaries – these are the scarier electoral options. They are to the electorate like the book of Revelation is to Paul's pastoral epistles: storms threatening the calm. These are the voices of martyrs – in the literal sense of "witnesses" – to different futures, wildly varying though those futures may be.

The real work of balancing the present and the future is that which Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition must perform. As the most likely alternative Government, the principal Opposition party has to appear conservative and radical at the same time. Perhaps it does not go too far to say that a failure to do this is why Mr Shorten is not Prime Minister. The Opposition has to argue that the kingdom has not yet come but is almost there – it needs just one more push.

Against the Government and the Opposition, the seemingly radical parties propose a secret hidden in today which will undermine the tomorrow we expect. This secret is the "true" tomorrow which doesn't arise naturally out of today but comes to meet it unnaturally out of a future only partially glimpsed.

There is, then, a lot in common between the political platforms of the radicals and the book of Revelation. The question is simply, which vision of the future is the true mystery of today – the secret, the hidden thing, by which today is lived appropriately. Revelation offers a vision of tomorrow for a revision of today. We re-vise – literally, re-see – today, as in a new light. Tomorrow has the crucified Jesus at the heart of all things, with the pressing question now being: if *that* is the case, how should we be living *now*?

There will be more to say of this in the weeks to come; it is enough for now to understand the dynamic. The fantastic imagery of Revelation is only the form of the substantial question, What is your personal and political tomorrow? In the case that you are unsure, *it is revealed in how you live today*.

You may have noticed that I haven't come yet to the particular reading from Revelation we heard this morning! This is because all I want to do with that passage is de-sentimentalise one traditional reception of it in view of the dynamic of tomorrow and today we have been describing. "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock", Jesus says in the that passage, "if any hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to them, and will sup with them, and they with me" (AV, alt). This is not about opening the door of your heart and letting Jesus in. The wider Revelation context of this image requires that the door-opening not be about enclosing Jesus in our hearts but about becoming enclosed within his own heart.

Jesus is not cast as our present possession but our calling into the future. Our testimony is not merely what Jesus might do for us, but what *will* be done, and the difference this will make for us now, "on earth and it is in heaven".

If tomorrow is the God-given resolution of all injustice, then today is to be coloured not by violent revolution but patient action, in which tomorrow might be glimpsed.

If tomorrow is the day of judgement of all guilt, today is to be a time of turning towards righteousness.

If tomorrow is reconciliation and forgiveness, so also is today to be.

Become then today then, what God promises:

become peace,
become reconciliation,
become justice,
become love.

The book of Revelation is a vision of the future given to change today.

In light of that future, let us *become that change*: tomorrow's resurrection life in a world yet shrouded in death.

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