

Revelation 6:1-11
Psalm 16
Luke 9:51-62

Dying to live

In a sentence:

The witness – “martyrdom” – of Christians is against the powers which dehumanise the world.

The book of Revelation is a *violent* book, deeply marked by antagonism, conflict, threats, and death.

It is the violence of God in Revelation which is the most problematic. God’s four horsemen of this morning’s reading “conquer”, take away peace “so that people would slaughter one another”, and are given authority “to kill with sword, famine, and pestilence, and by the wild animals of the earth”: not everyone’s idea of a God of love. While the violence of God catches our attention, less obvious is the violence which has preceded the blood-letting of the narrative: the violence against the people of God. We might return to God’s violence before we finish with Revelation; today we’ll look to the martyrs in the text.

In today’s reading, John identifies “those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given” (6.9). The word “martyr” doesn’t appear in our usual translation of the book of Revelation, although it is present throughout the text in Greek. The Greek word *marturia* means “testimony”, so that a “martyr” is “one who gives testimony”. The later notion of *martyrdom* extends from this root to understand the death of persecuted believers as being because of, or as giving testimony to, the truths of God. The original context of Revelation is still debated, but part of that context is likely to have been the persecution of Christians, even to death. It’s not always clear *why* they were persecuted. Just being different can be enough to cause the powerful to scapegoat a community, as Nero is said to have done when he burned a large part of Rome. Here, the sheer difference drives the persecution rather than the content of a community’s belief. Scapegoats can be politically useful.

But other times it is the belief itself which causes the persecution. We have a record dating from early in the second century (AD 112), which describes the test put by one Pliny the Younger – a local Roman official – to Christians:

*I interrogated them as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment; those who persisted I ordered executed.*¹

Pliny elaborates further, but the threat of execution in the interrogation was clear. Given that threat, are these believers themselves not being a little extreme, a little fanatical? What is lost if one softens a bit, especially if we keep our fingers crossed – if *God* knows we still believe even if we tell the Romans we don’t?

¹ The text of the letter can be found at <https://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/pliny.html>.

But we can't begin with this question until we see what Pliny describes from another critical angle. We might think it extreme to die for convictions and creeds about something which can't be seen. But we should also wonder: What is it about these "mere" beliefs which makes believing them reason to execute the believer? The death sentence reveals that what is at stake is not merely "religious" – not merely about what we might believe and others might reject. Pliny the Younger was sane and measured. He observed and investigated – if by torture! – and found only that Christians were deluded by "depraved, excessive superstition". But these were for him no mostly harmless late-afternoon nutters on public transport. Pliny held the delusion of the Christians to be utterly dangerous to the community, the temple and the local economy. And so the Christians were executed if they would not sacrifice in the temple or worship the emperor's image. Christian belief had consequences which threatened to break the social and political order.

In a decision to execute over "mere" belief, faith is revealed *not* merely a "belief" thing, as distinct from a political or social matter. Pliny killed Christians because the social and economic consequences they drew from their "deluded superstitions" were perceived to be positively dangerous. This is clear. But let us also see that if we consider the martyr to be a little unreasonable in her refusal to change her beliefs "a bit" under threat of death, we should also hold that it is unreasonable to threaten and execute her over such things in the first place. We might lament this clash of worlds and the blood it spills, but we should not do it too loudly, for Pliny might mistake us for Christians. No well-meaning "wish" that we could just get along better together is going to overcome the fact that, even today, people are killed because they see the world differently – often *rightly* – and such vision is dangerous. We might think here of those crushed in dark, faraway places by the interests of large corporations, or those who see the lies in despotic politics, or those who expose to us where we benefit from overlooking inconvenient truths. The history wars playing out in Australia are caught up in a similar dynamic; we're just not as bloody-handed about it (anymore). To say "it all happened so long ago" is not unlike saying "it's just something you believe".

There is a lot of blood spilt in the book of Revelation – the blood of the martyrs and the blood of the perpetrators. This is because there is a lot of blood spilt in the world. The witness – the martyr – says, against too-easy claims about peace, justice and life, *that* is not peace, that is *not* justice, that is not *life*. The need for wide-ranging judgements about life and death, peace, justice and life are not as distant as we imagine. How will we handle the needs of the millions living on low-lying coastlines when rising sea levels render them homeless? There is no technological solution to this question; solar panels don't float. How will we handle increasing hostility in the superpowers we don't like or understand? Will there be true peace or the more likely return to killing as a means of "peace"? What truths will require witnessing – "martyring" – in these contexts?

We "hope", of course, for less blood than more. By this, we usually mean that we have our "fingers crossed" because we know that the powers of darkness are very strong, for all our effort against them. We don't need the book of Revelation to tell us this but opening our eyes to the world around us should at least explain why Revelation is violently dark and red. Indeed, revelation tells the story of the God of love, but it is the story of God's love for *us* who are too familiar with blood.

For this reason, we gather around the table not merely to receive "the bread of life" and a "cup of salvation". Indeed, this language is appropriate, but it doesn't tell the whole truth, and here of all places, let us tell the truth. We are given what is named explicitly as tokens of the body and blood of Jesus because the very people of God – people like us – are capable of making a martyr of the Lord of life. "Bread of life" and "cup of

salvation” are Christ broken “for” us; “body” and “blood” are Christ broken *by* us. Salvation is salvation from this “having-broken” another. The mystery of Christian faith is that, without *justifying* the violence, God *uses* it for the revelation – for the apocalypse – of God’s persistent love for his enemies.

Christians do not “wish” for peace. We “hope” for it. That is, we confess a God who exceeds the possibilities of a world of predictable cause and effect – the cause which is violence and the effect which is more violence. To hope “Christianly” is to say that violence is not the only thing which can follow violence. The violence of denial does not have to follow the violence of dispossession or neglect. The violence of war does not have to follow the violence of escalation. Yet Pliny shows how, in a violent world, even such suggestions seem violent, a challenge to the prevailing order: depraved, excessive superstition. Christian hope – not mere belief – can be costly.

To hope Christianly is to live as if we have done the worst and been forgiven, and to relate to others who have done badly in such a way that we become the means by which they do better. It is in this that we “martyr” – that we give testimony to a truth which is not known until someone points to it by *being* it. “This is what truth looks like”, says the risen Son of the Jesus hanging on the cross.

In none of this is there any *revelling* in the possibility of martyrdom – that martyrdom which is dying. This corruption has certainly infected the church and many other movements at times, but it *is* a corruption. Death is never a means to an end with this God.

In reflecting on the martyrs, there is only the invitation to open our eyes to the violent ways of the world. This is not easy for those of us served well by violence. Nevertheless, testimony – martyring – in word and deed – speaking the truth about God and the truth about ourselves – is our purpose as a church and the expression of our faith. Violence might be the way of the world but it is not to be our way.

Let us, then, be willing witnesses to the peace of God, for the sake of all world, believing and not.

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