

The Importance of the Apocalypse

There are two reasons why I would like to talk to you about the importance of the Apocalypse: firstly because I believe this book is extremely important for the Faith of the Church today, and secondly because I believe that this importance is greatly underestimated in the Church. I will start with the second of these reasons before returning to the first.

I think you will agree that the importance we attach to a particular document depends mainly on the significance it has for us, which in turn depends on the way we interpret it. The Apocalypse is not an easy book to understand (possibly the most difficult in the whole of the Bible) and we do not all have the time, or the inclination, to study it and interpret it for ourselves. For this understanding we naturally depend on the work of Biblical Scholarship, and the particular interpretation which is favoured by the majority of scholars is called the historical or 'preterist' interpretation: so called because it presents the greater part of the Apocalypse as a description of the historical situation facing the Early Church - that is to say the Church persecuted by the Roman Imperial Authorities during the first three centuries AD. The Imperial Authorities are identified with the 2 beasts of the Apocalypse, and the Imperial City of Rome is identified with Babylon. This interpretation has found its way into most of the commentaries on the Apocalypse – including those printed in the Bibles more commonly used by Catholics (i.e., The Jerusalem Bible, The New American Bible, and 'La Biblia Latinoamericana').

The first point that needs to be said about this interpretation is that it presents the Apocalypse as a book primarily addressed to the Early Church and mainly concerned with the long-distant past. Under the influence of this interpretation we naturally come to think of the Apocalypse as a book which only indirectly concerns us now, in the early 21st century. We are diverted from thinking that it may have a literal significance for our Church nowadays, or for that matter at any time in the future.

The second point about the historical interpretation of the Apocalypse is that it is simply not true: there is no historical evidence to indicate that the Apocalypse was understood by the Early Church to refer to its contemporary historical situation. In the first place, there are relatively few references to the Apocalypse in the contemporary literature. One would expect the text to have been quoted much more frequently by the churchmen of the time, if it had indeed been understood to refer to the historical circumstances of the Early Church.

In the second place, biblical scholars of the Early Church do not seem to have interpreted the Apocalypse as a description of the contemporary situation. In fact, two of these scholars, namely St. Jerome and St. Dennis of Alexandria, openly confessed that they did not understand the Apocalypse at all. Those scholars who did comment on it, understood the greater part of the text as an eschatological prophecy awaiting a literal historical fulfilment in the future

(Justin Martyr, St. Irenaeus and St. Hippolytus).

In the third place, the Apocalypse was not received as quickly or widely as one would expect if it had been generally understood to refer to the contemporary situation. In fact, in the Eastern Church, the text was not accepted into the canon until at least the 6th or 7th century, and although it was included much earlier into the canon of the Western Church, its acceptance was by no means unopposed (by Marcion, the Alogi, Gaius of Rome). H.B. Swete, a Cambridge Scholar at the turn of this century, remarked that "no book in the New Testament with so good a record, was so long in gaining general acceptance".

Far from confirming the historical interpretation, then, historical evidence actually indicates that the Apocalypse remained largely incomprehensible to the Early Church as a whole. With the possible exception of the first three chapters, which contain the messages for the seven local churches in Asia, the Early Church did not understand this text to refer to her contemporary situation - as is presently claimed by the majority of modern commentators. The reason for this is probably quite simple: apart from the first three chapters, the early Church was unable to find a convincing correspondence between the text and contemporary historical events.

By attributing to the text a meaning which was not apparent at the time of its composition, but was the product of a later development, the historical interpretation can not be considered the result of sound *exegesis*, but rather an example of what is called *eisegesis*, or accommodation, or in other words, imposing on to a text a meaning which is foreign to it (cf. New Jerome Biblical Commentary 71:78-79).

Underlying this interpretation is the false assumption that the greater part of the Apocalypse refers to the situation that prevailed at the time it was written. To be more specific, the Apocalypse has been falsely identified as an example of 'historical apocalypse' - a human literary invention which described events which were past or present at the time of writing, but presented them as if they were still in the future. The Old Testament model of this kind of apocalypse is to be found in the book of Daniel (ch. 11).

However, if the Apocalypse were really an example of this kind of apocalypse, one would certainly expect to find a better correspondence between the text and the events it was supposed to describe - a correspondence that would have been obvious to those in the Early Church who first heard its message. Since there was no such correspondence, I suggest we abandon the historical interpretation of the Apocalypse, together with all the presuppositions it may have given us about the book. Having done that, we can return to the problem of interpreting the Apocalypse, and to its significance for the Church today.

'Apocalypse' simply means 'revelation' and the revelation we are considering is introduced by the author in the first two verses of his book, as follows: "*The Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must happen soon, and he made it known by sending his angel to*

his servant John, who bears witness to the Word of God and the witness of Jesus, to the extent of all that he saw " (Rev 1,1-2).

In order to understand this book correctly I am going to suggest we start with mystical theology instead of Roman history. Mystical theology teaches us that divine revelations of the kind witnessed by St. John in the Apocalypse do indeed occur, and are worthy of belief – if considered to be authentic by the Church, as this one most certainly is. In fact, the Bible itself is full of references to revelations of various kinds.

The Apocalypse, therefore, is not just the product of inspired human reason and reflection. Above all, it is the account of what appears to have been a very profound and informative mystical experience. From the text itself we learn that the author was fully conscious although totally passive - like a dead man, he says (Rev 1,17). He received visions, heard locutions, and experienced sensations, which touched all five senses in a spiritual way. He also experienced ecstasy, rapture and spiritual transport; he received revelations concerning the whole world and its people up to, and beyond, the end of the present age, and he recorded all this in obedience to a command from the Lord (Rev 1,19).

If we accept and believe that St. John's book is based on a genuine revelation from God, as I am sure the Church is asking us to, then we should begin by believing what the text says of itself; and if we really believe what the text says of itself, then sooner or later we may begin to wonder if this is not the most important document ever written in the history of mankind. As we have just heard, the Apocalypse presents itself as "the Revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave to him", and contains "the Word of God and the witness of Jesus Christ" (Rev 1,2.9). It is the only message addressed to the Church as a whole by the Lord, after his Ascension to the throne of God. Its words are faithful and true (Rev 19,9; 22,6), and those who contemplate them are blessed (Rev 1,3; 22,7). It is a prophecy (Rev 1,3; 22,10) of what must take place in heaven and on earth up to, and beyond, the Second Coming of the Lord, and it concerns the fulfilment of the entire Mystery, or Plan, of God for mankind (Rev 10,7). There are serious consequences for those who add to, or take away from, the words of its text (Rev 22,18-19).

However, our sense of the importance of the Apocalypse is seriously impaired by difficulty in understanding the rest of the book. So I would like now to propose a simple framework on which to build an understanding of the text. This framework, in fact, is derived from an outstanding feature of the text itself- its literary structure.

Most commentators agree that the Apocalypse can be divided into two main parts: the first three chapters which describe its social and historical setting in the first century AD, and the rest (chs. 4-22) which speak about the future. Closer study of this second part reveals an orderly sequence of events represented by three consecutive series of symbolical actions: the breaking of a series of 7 seals leads into the blowing of a series of 7 trumpets which ends with the outpouring of a series of 7 golden bowls. Furthermore, it is clear that these

actions correspond to a sequence of events on earth, starting with the Ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, and extending up to and beyond the fulfilment of God's Mystery at the End of Time. Since this sequence can easily be defined, and has the character of a narrative directed towards the future, I would like to call it the 'baseline prophetic narrative'.

A close look at this 'baseline prophetic narrative', however, reveals that it is interrupted at several places by quite large sections of text whose meaning is far from clear. The largest of these interruptions occurs at the centre of the book (one could indeed call it the central message of the book) and runs from ch. 10 to the start of ch. 15, and begins with the author's preparation and instruction to "prophesy again". The prophecy that follows concerns events which are closely related in time to the blowing of the 7th and last trumpet (Rev 11,15). Since the blowing of this trumpet, we are told (10,7), is the signal for the eschatological fulfilment of God's Mystery (i.e., the fulfilment of the Plan of God at the End of Time), we can conclude that this section contains a prophecy which stands apart from the baseline prophetic narrative, represents the central message of the book and concerns the final or eschatological period of history. Since the two other interruptions in the baseline prophetic narrative (at ch. 7, and at chs.17 –19,5) contains verbal and thematic connections with this central eschatological prophecy, they can clearly be considered to belong to it.

The significance of these observations from the literary structure of the text will be missed if its symbolical language is not translated at the same time. The fact that the text has a close affinity with the Old Testament, and contains multiple allusions to specific passages, indicates that the meaning of the Apocalypse should be sought by comparison with these passages. One could say that the dictionary for understanding the symbolical language of the Apocalypse is the Old Testament itself, especially those passages which are alluded to in the text itself (e.g., the beasts of Daniel).

Comparing the Old Testament and the Apocalypse in this way also reveals an important typological correspondence concerning the Temple and its liturgy. Stated briefly, this correspondence depends on the fact that the heavenly Sanctuary seen by St. John and described in the Apocalypse, is the very same as that revealed to Moses as the plan for the Tabernacle he made in the desert (Ex 25,8-9) and later for the First and Second Temples that were built at Jerusalem. The Tabernacle and the Temple are therefore "types" of the Sanctuary revealed to St. John. By means of this correspondence the liturgical activity represented in the Apocalypse can be identified and interpreted, and this, in turn, confirms the eschatological character of the main part of the text (chs. 8-22).

So, in summary, by reapplying critical methods to clarify the precise meaning of the Apocalypse we find that, far from describing the historical circumstances of the Early Church, the greater part of the text actually refers to the situation of the Church at the End of Time, since it contains (as its central message) a prophecy for the eschatological period of history, which has not, as yet, been fulfilled.

This brings us back to why we believe the Apocalypse is so important to the Church now and in the future. The short answer is that it contains a prophecy – a Word from God – for the Church at the End of Time. By taking this to heart now, the Church knows what lies ahead, and can indeed celebrate her prophesied victory in advance. Above all, though, she is divinely prepared by this prophecy, for the most difficult situation she will ever have to face in her entire history.

At this point some of you may object that the prophecy of the Apocalypse should not be understood literally, to refer to an actual historical situation in the future. However, the Apocalypse identifies itself strongly with the Old Testament prophetic tradition (it actually shows how Jesus Christ fulfils this tradition), and in this tradition the main criteria of authenticity is literal fulfilment (see Deut 18,21-22). The inescapable conclusion is that if a prophecy is not literally fulfilled it can not be considered authentic. Our belief in the Apocalypse as true prophecy, as our Lord's prophecy (cf. Rev 1,1-2), urges us to expect it will be fulfilled literally. Exactly how, and in what way, it will be literally fulfilled - that is the real challenge facing those who are engaged in its interpretation.

There is another aspect to the significance of St. John's prophecy for the Church, and this is to be found in the text itself, in a passage which bridges chapters 10 and 11: *"And they say to me, you must prophesy again about many peoples and nations and tongues and kings. And I was given a cane similar to a rod and was told 'get up and measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those who are worshipping there'"* (Rev 10,11 – 11,1).

We interpret the passage as follows: after St. John was told to prophesy again we assume he was given a new prophecy to write. The text does not say this, however, but instead it says that he was given *"a cane similar to a rod"*, and was told to *"measure the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those who worship there"*. This change in the language of the text can be explained by the use of metaphor to describe St. John's renewed prophetic activity. The *"cane similar to a rod"* is simply a metaphor for the prophecy given to St. John, *"measuring"* refers to the action of writing or witnessing this prophecy, and *"the Sanctuary of God, the altar and those worshipping there"* represent the parts of the New Temple which is being built. The language is metaphorical so we must not think, as do the fundamentalists, that this Temple is built of concrete and stones or any other inert material, for as in other parts of the New Testament (cf. Eph 2,19-22; 1Pet 2,4-10; Heb 12,22-24; Rev 3,12) the Temple here refers to the people of every time and place whom God has reconciled to Himself through Jesus Christ, and who are called the 'Universal Church'. Comparison of this passage with the Old Testament passage to which it alludes (Ezek chs. 40-44) reveals that the metaphorical building in whose construction St. John is asked to participate represents the New Temple of God foreseen by the prophet Ezekiel.

Returning to the Apocalypse, we are now in a position to interpret the metaphorical language of the passage we are considering - in which the prophecy describes itself metaphorically as a *"cane similar to a rod"*, to be used

as a rule, or measure, in the construction of the New Temple of God. In plain language the prophecy describes itself as a '**rule of faith**', or canon, for the edification and perfecting of the Church.

In conclusion, the prophecy witnessed by St. John in the Apocalypse not only has an important role in informing and preparing the Church for future events, but it also proposes itself as an authentic '**rule of faith**' for the Church. The community which is built up and perfected on the basis of this 'rule' is the true Temple of God. Such a role clearly has enormous ecumenical implications, and leads on to a careful examination of what follows in the text. This is the subject of another talk.