SHORT WRITINGS FROM TAIZÉ
20

Brother John

Does the Book of Revelation have something to say to us today?

The Bible ends with an enigma. Its final writing, the Book of Revelation or the Apocalypse of Saint John, is undoubtedly the most difficult text in the entire New Testament, and one of the most puzzling in the whole Bible. Some people even wonder if it should be considered a Christian book at all: containing so much violence and horrible images of vengeance and destruction, it seems a world away from the Gospels with their depiction of a peaceable Kingdom ushered in by a humble Messiah. As a matter of fact, the Book of Revelation took a long time to enter the canon of inspired books, the ones Christians deemed worthy to be read during their liturgical celebrations. In the West, centuries

passed before it was accepted without question, and in the East the hesitations were even more persistent.

Although the Christian Church as a whole found it hard to accept this book with no qualms, for some people it has become the most important writing in the entire Bible. Down through the ages, small groups on the margins of the historical Churches have found in the Apocalypse a key for their understanding of world history. And they infallibly interpreted it as a scarcely coded description of events that would soon come to pass to bring about "the end of the world." In their minds, it is as if God threw into the sea 2000 years ago a bottle containing an essential message, which floated on the waves of history until it was found by people finally able to decipher its language, to solve the puzzle. Such interpretations flout the entire biblical and ecclesial tradition as well as ignoring the book's historical and literary context. Their proponents apparently never stop to ask themselves why, after thousands of years, they are the only ones to have understood the message correctly. All the more so, since every attempt to find a one-to-one correspondence between apocalyptic images and events of profane history has always failed. "The end of the world" still lies before us, offering an open field to new sects anxious to control the flow of time and to anathematize their opponents.

It is important, then, to affirm unambiguously from the outset that the Revelation of Saint John is not a literal description, more or less veiled, of the end of the world. The exegetical method that tries to correlate parts of the text and historical events or individuals in an exclusive

manner must be rejected out of hand. The symbols and images found in the book, while rooted in a particular context, shed light on a host of human endeavours. For this reason, discussing their meaning with certain believers turns out to be a useless enterprise, since the underlying presuppositions of both parties are too far apart to lead to a fruitful exchange.

So this is our question: if we exclude any "literal" interpretation of this book, are we required to set it on the shelf of mere historical curiosities? Or can we draw from it a teaching valuable for our present day? In the following pages I will attempt to answer this question, first of all by explaining how we should approach the book, and then by indicating some aspects of it that seem particularly relevant to the situation of believers in our contemporary world.

How should the Book of Revelation be read?

The first step in understanding such a difficult work is this, which incidentally is also valid for every Biblical writing: we must beware of separating its content from the global message of the Scriptures. The Bible tells the story of a God who is self-giving, who loves creation to such an extent that he wants to offer it a full share in his life and his happiness. For Christians, this becomes manifest in the cross – the definitive gift of self – and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Starting from this

incandescent centre, the entire Bible acquires meaning and consistency. If we come upon words and stories that seem to contradict this essential message, then rather than seeing incoherency and contradiction from the outset, the only productive attitude is to begin by telling ourselves that most probably we have not understood the text correctly. Brother Roger, the founder of Taizé, liked to compare the Scriptures to a letter received from a dear friend in a language in which we are not fluent, or we could also say whose handwriting is scarcely legible. Instead of being offended if we find passages that seem strange to us, we tell ourselves that we have probably been led astray by our lack of familiarity with the language, or our inability to decipher the handwriting; understanding it better would undoubtedly have allowed us to see what the writer wanted to communicate. This is particularly true for the Book of Revelation.

What is the basic purpose of this book? The first words of an ancient text, the equivalent of our title, provide important information: *Apokalypsis Iēsou Christou,* the unveiling or revelation of Jesus Christ. We are immediately confronted with an enigma, one of the first of many in this book. Is this an objective genitive, in other words is Jesus the one who is revealed, or rather a subjective genitive, referring to Jesus who reveals something? Both meanings are possible, and in the present case it seems best to keep them together, in conformity with the overall style of this work. It wants to offer an answer to two related questions: "Who is this Jesus?" and "What does he tell us about God's identity and the meaning of our life?"

Upon reflection, it is obvious that these two questions lie at the root of the entire New Testament and of the gospels in particular. At the very centre of Mark's Gospel we find a twofold question which Jesus asks his disciples: "Who do people say that I am?... Who am I for you?" (Mark 8:27,29). And knowing Jesus means discovering the truth about God and about humanity (cf. John 18:37). In the gospels, this truth is revealed by telling stories about the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth and recalling his words, whereas the Apocalypse, for its part, makes use of other means.

A first step in understanding the Book of Revelation is thus the awareness that this book has the same objective as the rest of the New Testament while using a different method to achieve it. It wants to show us the truth of Jesus by means of visions and symbols. Apocalyptic is a literary genre with its own rules, as different from historical narrative as dreams differ from waking life. That explains in large part the difficulty we experience in reading the book; we are not used to this kind of literature. The confusion that some feel when approaching this work can be compared to that of someone who opens a science-fiction novel in the belief that he is reading the daily newspaper!

If the form of this work is problematic, there is nonetheless a consolation: almost all the symbols we find in it are drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. This fact confirms a double truth essential to the Christian faith. First of all, no understanding of Jesus and his message is possible if we neglect their rootedness in the history of the people of Israel. The Gospel

did not fall from the sky ready-made; it recapitulates the thousand-year journey in the course of which God manifested himself to humankind through the events recorded in the Scriptures. At the same time, in the eyes of his disciples Jesus revealed the true and full significance of these events, eliminating all ambiguity and closing off dead-ends. That means that in order to understand the New Testament we need the Old, and to understand the Old we need the New. The Book of Revelation illustrates this twofold truth in a particularly cogent way.

Let us examine a concrete example of this. One of the principal symbols found in the Apocalypse is that of the *lamb*. In chapter 5, we glimpse in the midst of God's throne "a lamb, standing, as if slaughtered" (5:6). In the Old Testament, lambs are often used for symbolic offerings to God, known as sacrifices. In particular, during the great feast of Passover a "spotless" lamb is offered to God by each family in Israel, slaughtered by the priests then given back to serve as the main course of a ceremonial meal. This "fellowship offering" or "sacrifice of communion" thus expresses a deeper bond created between God and the faithful. In addition, during the Exodus from Egypt, the blood of the Passover lamb placed on the doorposts protected the Israelites from death (see Exodus 12). The lamb thus represents unity restored between God and humans as well as liberation from death.

But the lamb has other associations as well. The prophet Jeremiah, persecuted when he proclaims God's Word to people unwilling to listen, compares himself to

"a gentle lamb led to the slaughter" (Jeremiah 11:18). And a generation later, an anonymous prophet in the land of captivity takes up this image. He speaks of a mysterious "Servant" who gives his life for his fellows: "He was oppressed, and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to the slaughter... he did not open his mouth" (Isaiah 53:7). The Lamb of the Apocalypse, obviously a way of referring to the dead and risen Jesus, thus condenses a host of meanings within itself. If we knew nothing of the Hebrew Scriptures, we would not comprehend this figure in all its density. At the same time, Jesus in his Passover shows us the quintessential reality indicated by these Old Testament images – the gift of a life to reconcile humanity with God.

At the beginning of the book, the author calls it a *prophēteia* (1:3). In spite of a widespread misunderstanding, a prophecy is not a statement predicting the future, but an application of God's Word to the present situation of the hearers. People do not pay enough attention to the fact that the Book of Revelation is structured as a letter, with an address and a greeting in due form (1:4). John sends it to "the seven Churches of Asia." These are small Christian communities spread out in seven cities of the Roman province of Asia – our Asia minor, today Turkey. It is true that seven is a number that stands for the totality of something – the Book of Revelation is full of sevens – and so the book is also, in a wider sense, addressed to the whole Christian Church. This is to be expected, since a prophecy always has meanings that go beyond its immediate context; God's Word is inexhaustible, able to shed light on the present existence of each

generation. But to grasp its message correctly, we should begin by placing ourselves as far as possible in the original situation of the hearers. The book was not meant for unbelievers, to frighten them or to lead to their conversion. John writes to women and men who believe in Christ Jesus, to strengthen their faith and to give them new hope. To the extent that we are familiar with the original context, we will understand better the response which the visions offer and thus the authentic message of the book. That will enable us to take the further step of seeing what light this writing sheds on our current situation.

Surprisingly, one can argue that the situation of the Christian Church, in many places today, is not as different from the communities we meet in the Apocalypse as we might imagine. In other words its message, after centuries in which it could seem fairly irrelevant to the concerns of believers, is perhaps in the process of finding a new relevance. Let us now consider three aspects of the situation of Saint John's hearers that seem close to our present circumstances, to see how the response of the Apocalypse can illuminate our attempt to live the Gospel in our day.

1. How can we remain faithful to Christ in a minority situation?

The "seven Churches of Asia" were in fact small groups of believers in Jesus as Messiah and Savior, living in an indifferent and sometimes hostile environment. Towards the end of the first century of our era, Christians formed a tiny minority in the Roman Empire, a movement seen by some as a splinter group of Judaism and by others as one more mystery religion from the East. The authorities were interested in their gatherings only as possible hotbeds of dissension.

Over against these few men and women stood the imposing Roman Empire, the unrivalled ruler of practically the entire *oikoumene*, the inhabited world, in other words the Mediterranean basin. Roman civilization was very impressive; signs of its glory were visible everywhere, particularly in the outlying parts of the Empire. Treasures of art and architecture, magnificent temples with lavish ceremonies, a matchless legal and political organization, all this protected by a huge and mighty army, proud of its victories.... It is easy to understand that a great danger for the Christians of the time was to doubt the well-foundedness of their faith. In the face of such a imposing and well organized society and culture, was the vision expressed in the Gospel realistic, or simply a wild dream? Perhaps, after all, it was a mistake to leave a "normal life" behind to follow this itinerant preacher, put to death by Roman justice in a faraway corner of the Empire.

The Book of Revelation explicitly intends to counteract this temptation. It employs visions to describe an alternate reality, that of faith. These visions show that, in spite of misleading appearances, the God revealed by Jesus the Christ is truly the Sovereign Lord of the universe and of human history. As in one of Jesus' parables (see Matthew 7:26-27), all the magnificent achievements of the surrounding society, attained without reference to God, are like a majestic palace build on sand, destined to collapse in the tempests of history. This is the same truth revealed by Jesus to his disciples, when they were impressed by the new Temple built by Herod in Jerusalem:

> As they were leaving the Temple one of his disciples said to him, "Teacher, just look at these stones and these buildings!" Jesus said to him, "You see these impressive buildings? Not one stone shall be left standing upon another." (Mark 13:1-2)

To an infatuation with illusory appearances, Saint John opposes "the perseverance and faith of the saints" (13:10; cf. 14:12). Faith is what enables us to come into contact with reality, beyond what strikes and pleases the eye here and now, and perseverance or patient endurance (*hypomonē*) is the means by which we cling to it and remain faithful come what may. By listening to the visions of Saint John being read aloud in their assemblies, the Christians of Asia entered by their imagination into another reality, one more real than their daily lives. In this respect one could say that the book was a kind of "therapy" for believers who were in danger of being blinded and deafened by the environment in which they

lived. This goes far to explain the dramatic and sometimes frightening language of the Apocalypse: drastic measures are necessary to heal timorous spirits, prey to hopelessness because of the contrast between their commitment to Christ and the lack of visible "results".

There is a term that expresses in shorthand the vision of history found in the Book of Revelation. It is a favourite title for God in this work: *ho pantokratōr*, usually translated the Almighty (1:8; 4:8; 11:17; 15:3; 16:7,14; 19:6,15; 21:22). Nowadays, many believers are not particularly fond of this title, which evokes for them a tyrannical or warlike deity; they prefer to emphasize God's kindness and mercy. If we place this title in the context of the Book of Revelation, however, it becomes clear that it is not a simple borrowing from pagan religions, nor does it represent in the least an alternative to a gentle and compassionate God. It is, in fact, a paradoxical title: John is saying that in spite of appearances, the true power at work in the universe and in history is the power of love and truth. In the world seen from here below, it may seem that cunning and violence are triumphant, but viewed from heaven, in other words from God's eternity, things look different. What will be manifested to all one day, namely that light has the upper hand over darkness (cf. John 1:5), is already revealed to the faithful to fortify their trust and hope. God's life, however ineffective it appears to the "realists" of this world, will prove in the end to be stronger (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:23ff). In the graphic language of the Apocalypse, the lamb is more powerful than the dragon.

This perspective enables us to understand as well the

true meaning of the images of violence and destruction that abound in the pages of this book. In the apocalyptic outlook, in order for "new heavens and a new earth" to arrive, the old ones have to disappear. When Saint John makes use of these descriptions of cosmic convulsions, he does not intend to describe "the end of *the* world" in the common meaning of the term, but rather the end of *a* world, in other words of a society based on the self-glorification of human beings, who close their hearts to God and to others. Divine wisdom at work in the universe ensures that in the long run evil is inevitably self-destructive. In the first chapter of the Bible, the creation of the material universe can be compared to the construction of a theatre needed to put on a play. The Apocalypse affirms that, with the coming of Christ, this comedy, or rather tragedy, is over, and so the set must be struck so that a new and finer one can appear. The cosmic cataclysm in 6:12-17, which John calls "the great day of the wrath of the Lamb", is in fact a coded description of Christ's death on the cross (cf. Matthew 27:51ff), the true beginning of the end of the old world. God's "wrath" or "anger" is a shortcut to denote his response to evil: Jesus, however, responds to evil by taking it upon himself and by loving in return, thus putting an end to the spiral of violence once and for all. We could thus say that his gift of his life is violence done to violence, "the destruction of those who are destroying the earth" (11:18).

– *What causes me to doubt my commitment to Christ?*

– *What makes it possible for me to persevere?*

– *In what ways are we "neither cold nor hot" (3:15) today? How can we rediscover enthusiasm and vitality in our faith, both as individuals and as communities?*

2. Is it foolish to give one's life for one's beliefs?

This theme appears at different times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Believers begin to have doubts especially when they see the apparent happiness of those who live with no reference to God, and who even show contempt for his commandments: "It is vain to serve God. What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy; evildoers not only prosper, but when they put God to the test they escape" (Malachi 3:14-15; cf. Psalm 73). For the early Christians as well, forced to face the incomprehension and even the hostility of the surrounding society, this question must have at times been an agonizing one, especially when they were victims of discrimination and even persecution. Seeing their brothers and sisters experiencing imprisonment, torture and even martyrdom for their faith, believers must sometimes have asked themselves what was the point of following Christ.

In the Book of Revelation, this question is expressed in traditional Biblical terms:

> I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered on account of God's Word and the testimony they gave. And they cried out in a loud voice, saying: "How long, O holy and true Master, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" (6:9-10)

First of all, we must look more closely at the verb

translated here as "to avenge" (Gr. *endikeō*, Heb. *naqam*) The words "revenge" or "vengeance" generally imply the wish to hurt those who have hurt me, and even to take pleasure in their suffering. It is admittedly hard, if not impossible, to reconcile this attitude with the Gospel. Is it not another proof that this book is an aberration in the pages of the New Testament, a throwback to a barbarian and bloodthirsty God?

If we take a closer look, we will discover with surprise that here too, the Apocalypse undertakes a radical purification of the notion of retribution. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the verb *naqam* has two components which can and must be dissociated. If the idea of vengeance is not absent, more basic still is the desire on the part of the victim to see her rights restored. To signify this, incidentally, the English language employs a verb with the same root, "to be vindicated". From its first pages, the Bible affirms that God takes seriously this demand of the wounded innocent: "Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!" (Genesis 4:10). God for his part does not enjoy making anyone suffer, but he does want to restore the rights of those who have been cruelly mistreated. But how does God vindicate the innocent? Once again, and in an utterly unexpected fashion, the life and death of Jesus gives us the key. Instead of justifying the victims of injustice by exacting a punishment upon evildoers, in the Lamb that was slaughtered and then put back on his feet God takes the suffering into himself and responds with the gift of life, in other words by forgiving. This is the act that puts an end to a world based on the law of revenge and inaugurates a world

of authentic justice. Jesus, the Innocent One par excellence, thus recapitulates in himself all the suffering of the innocent throughout history and transforms it into the happiness of a justice fully restored.

In his visions, then, Saint John reveals that the suffering of the innocent, far from being merely unfair or absurd, is the true motive force of history. The torments of the martyrs for the cause of God, the pain of all the victims of injustice, the trials of those who attempt to remain faithful to their faith, all this ends up as part of the victory of the Lamb (cf. 17:14). This victory is foreshadowed by the robe the colour of heaven (6:11) given to the faithful, a garment "made white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14) and showing that they belong to the "huge crowd" that praises the Lord for all eternity (7:9ff). God's armies do not wage war with the weapons of violence and human power, but by giving their life to the end (cf. 2:10), since "they follow the Lamb wherever he goes" (14:4). In Christ nothing is lost: God "collects [our] tears in his wineskin" (Psalm 56:8) in order to wipe them away for ever (see 7:17; 21:4).

– *Are there things more important for me than a comfortable life? Are there things more daunting than physical death? Is it really possible to be faithful "until death" (2:10-11)?*

– *As believers, which compromises with the societies in which we are living should we refuse? Which are unavoidable?*

3. What should our attitude be with respect to the surrounding society?

After 2000 years of existence, Christians in the Western world do not usually feel like a group apart, living in society as "foreigners and sojourners" (Hebrews 11:13). At the same time, it is obvious that the Christian outlook is becoming more and more marginal in our globalizing civilization. As this minority status becomes more prevalent, those who give their life to Christ will naturally ask themselves what attitude they should have with regard to the wider society and culture. Despite the great differences of time and place, can the Book of Revelation help us to reflect on this question?

The final part of this book is structured as a tale of two cities. They are not in fact cities as such; the city here is rather the symbol of an urban civilization, in other words the manner in which people live together. The first city, called "Babylon the Great" (17:5), is described as a gorgeous woman, adorned as a queen (17:4). The initial impact of this person/city is thus attractive, and even seductive. John's audience would have had no difficulty in recognizing in her the impressive civilization of Rome. We should not, however, limit this symbol to only one incarnation: "Babylon" appears and exercises her allurements throughout history.

In the description given by Saint John, there are at least two things that mar this splendid vision. First of

all, the woman is in the desert and is mounted on a terrifying beast, today we would call it a monster. In the prophetic and apocalyptic literature of the Old Testament, the image of a wild animal is used to evoke the world empires that reign by violence and terror (see Ezekiel 29; Daniel 7). The image expresses well the mixture of cunning and brute force characteristic of political power when it has overstepped its bounds. Here it shows in a dramatic way that the impressive attainments of a developed culture are in fact based on much less noble realities such as military conquest, slavery and the subjugation of foreign populations, which ends up by turning God's creation into a desert. In this respect, can we say that things have improved over the last millennia?

In addition, this woman is a prostitute – not a poor streetwalker, of course, but rather a high-ranking courtesan. That means that her attractions are illusory; the enticements she uses to impress her admirers in the end lead nowhere, giving at most a fleeting pleasure that leaves behind a bitter taste. Promising a true encounter between persons, her behaviour is in fact based on commercial interests. Her beautiful appearance is a snare; there is nothing behind the mask. In reality, it is cold metal, gold and silver, that sparkles in her eyes.

The visions of Saint John help tempted or demoralized believers to understand that Babylon, apparently so powerful and attractive, is not the summit of human history. Chapter 18 of the Apocalypse is a haunting lament bewailing the fall of that civilization, which disappears "in a single day" (18:8), or even "in one hour" (18:10,17), like the house build on sand mentioned

above (see Matthew 7:26-27). Her place is taken by another city, New Jerusalem. Coming down from God, that city is described not as a prostitute but as a bride, "God's dwelling with human beings" for ever (21:1-2). Such an existence in common offers stable relationships, built on love and faithfulness, and promises lasting happiness.

How should believers relate to Babylon? The Book of Revelation borrows an expression from the prophets of Israel and urges them: "Go out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins and share her misfortunes" (18:4; cf. Isaiah 48:20; 52:11; Jeremiah 51:6). Now emigration would be possible if we were talking about a geographical city. But the Babylon of the Apocalypse is not a specific place, since the book is addressed to people in seven different cities, and one does not have the impression that the author is asking the Christian communities to migrate into the wilderness. And what could we say about our contemporary society in the process of globalization? Even if we wished, could we really get away from its values by leaving home and settling in a different land? And is that in fact what we are asked to do?

It seems clear, if we enter into the logic of the text, that the author has in mind not physical emigration but rather a spiritual or inner exodus. He is encouraging the followers of Christ to detach their hearts from the spurious values of a civilization doomed to disappear and to "hold fast to what [they] have" until their Lord's return (2:25). In other words, they are urged to remain faithful to their basic identity as citizens of New Jerusalem while

still continuing to dwell in the midst of Babylon. This is possible because New Jerusalem is not only a future reality: if Saint John describes its definitive manifestation after the destruction of Babylon, we should remember that those faithful to Jesus have already received their passports – the promise to be marked with the name of the holy City (see 3:12). With the death and resurrection of Christ, the old world is already on its way out (cf. 1 Jean 2:8), even if that is not yet fully visible to our eyes of flesh.

In the face of an imposing society and its totalitarian claims, then, the Book of Revelation fights against the twin dangers of suicidal assimilation and demoralizing discouragement. It proposes neither flight, nor revolt, nor compromise. It encourages believers instead to hold fast to Christ's word and not to deny his name (see 3:8), and to translate his message into their personal and community life. In doing so, they show that they are citizens of "a better homeland," of "a city whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:16,10). By offering their lives as a concrete alternative to a soul-destroying culture with no future, they make the City of God visible on the surface of human history, sometimes only for a brief moment. But these moments are enough to trace a path of light and to open a way beyond the convulsions of a disintegrating world: "The Lamb in the middle of the throne will be their shepherd and show them the way to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:17).

– *Can the image of a luxurious woman sitting on a monster (17:3ff) be applied to our society today? What image of what it means to be human does this society offer us? How does faith in Christ change our priorities?*

– *What does it mean to "come out of Babylon" (18:4) while still being part of society? Do I know people who are living as citizens of New Jerusalem in the midst of Babylon?*

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