

Sunday, April 17
Fourth Sunday of Easter

Revelation 7:9-17

⁹After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

¹¹And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²singing,

“Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom
and thanksgiving and honor
and power and might
be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

¹³Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” ¹⁴I said to him, “Sir, you are the one that knows.” Then he said to me, “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵For this reason they are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple,
and the one who is seated on the throne will shelter them.

¹⁶They will hunger no more, and thirst no more;
the sun will not strike them,
nor any scorching heat;

¹⁷for the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of the water of life,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

Dear disciples of the Risen Christ:

Grace and peace from God.

The gift of new life, of eternal life, is the gift of the risen Christ. It is the promise of Jesus.

“The scene of worship in Revelation is in many ways a familiar one: waving palm branches, wearing white robes, singing jubilant praise to God. Yet the picture contains one element that is unusual in North American churches—those participating hail “from all tribes and peoples and languages” (Rev. 7:9). A 2013 article in the *Annual Review of Sociology* stated that the average congregation is only one-tenth as racially diverse as the neighborhood in which it is situated.”¹

During the reign of terror of the Roman Emperor Domitian many Christians were martyred, today’s Gospel lesson presents that those martyrs are now added to the heavenly court. Here is also a temple, although at the final end there will be no temple in heaven (Rev. 21:22). White robes signify victory. Robes are made white by being washed in blood, and the Lamb is the shepherd. Jewish apocalyptic describes the blessed dead as having transformed bodies, for example they can see and live, yet not experience hunger. The visionary’s use of the future tense (vv. 16-18) means to comfort those now facing persecution.²

Martyrdoms and other “great ordeals” and tribulations continue in the twenty-first century.

Nowadays we can remember the martyrdoms of many Christians believers under the terrorist rule of antichristian groups in the Middle East and Africa.

1 <https://members.sundaysandseasons.com/Home/TextsAndResources#resources> Theological Reflection.

2 Idem

We need, for this reason, to remember that the suffering of the Church of Jesus is a mark of the life of discipleship of millions of Christians around the world.

As part of the same universal body of believers we need to continue praying for our brothers and sisters that today are suffering systematic persecution and genocide in many places of the planet today.

We, Christians, want to imagine that God's job is to keep us and our loved ones safe from all harm. This misguided belief causes more lives of faith to crumble than any other belief that I have known. Today's vision from the revelation to John clearly let us know that pain and suffering will be part of any Christian life. Those standing "before the throne and before the Lamb" have "come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb". They are in need of shelter. They have known hunger and thirst and scorching heat. They have tears in their eyes. God never promised that we would not suffer. Suffering has always been part of Christian history, and we are not immune. However, that is only a part of the story and never the end. This passage moves through its important message about suffering to a vision of how victory is finally won.³

In contrast to Greek philosophy, where existence after death is wholly disembodied, both Jewish and Christian apocalyptic describe the new creation as embodied, albeit perfected. It is this embodied life that we now experience and treasure.

Every person in this passage of the book of revelations has come through a great ordeal. Every robe needs washing. For this reason, the people described in the vision experienced suffering in different ways, but now they are worshiping and

³ Feasting on the Word. Year C. V. 2. P. 438

celebrating victory. When we read this passage we might well wonder how we are also being prepared for the challenges that will come to us, both individually and in community.

The *white robe* worn by the blessed dead is recalled in the contemporary albs that we use for worship, which means not clerical status but baptismal identity. Many artists depicted Jesus as wearing a white robe. This imagery is symbolic, as Jesus shines with the light of God.

Today's images, like the one that is described in the book of Revelations are the expression of how first century Christians represented the challenges that they were experiencing and, at the same time, were symbols of their faith.

Christians, for example, have interpreted the "springs of the water of life" as baptism. Today Sunday, as we gather around the table, we are singing with the martyrs' songs of praise. The Lamb at the center of the throne is the bread and wine we share.

Maybe we are preparing ourselves for a new journey, a new job, a new medical treatment for an illness, a new change in family, a new diet, a new training. We are always experiencing change in different degrees, and change affects our body, soul and spirit. We are never the same person we are always changing.

One of the saddest days of my life was the day when on Christmas Eve in 2010, I received a phone call from one of my sisters in Peru to inform me that our mother was in the ER and that the diagnose was terminal cancer.

I confess that that night during four Christmas Eve services my mind was not in California but with my mother in Lima. I was absolutely sad and broken but at the same time I was serving the Eucharist in four services to many people.

In the image of a baby Jesus coming to Earth to die and to rise again, I could see that what God offers to us is salvation and eternal life that is powerful and meaningful when we confront the reality of the tribulation.

A week later when the Christmas lights were still shining, I could finally fly to Peru and visit my mother and stay with her during her time in the hospital. After the first challenging and sad days and conversations with doctors and specialist, I finally accepted that that week would probably be the last week that my mother and I would see each other face to face.

The last day with her before I took my flight back to California, I read to her the text of the book of Revelations that we read this morning:

“there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

“Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

I read my mother what I am sharing with you right now. I told her: “Mom you and I are in this crowd from every nation robed in white with palm branches praising God and Jesus.”

John had a vision of the Christians from all ages praising God at the end of times, and you and I, and grandma, and all our beloved people from the past and

the ones who will come in the future are together in this vision praising God and celebrating God's victory.

We are there in the same way that we are here now. And after we say good bye today we need to remember that we are together in this vision, because this vision is ours in the same way it was for the Christians in the first century.

When my mother passed away four months later, I read this passage again and again, and I remembered the words of Jesus to Martha, the sister of Lazarus:

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

And, like Martha, I answered yes; I believe you Lord and I believe that mom and I are now together like in the vision described by John in the book of Revelations. We are praising you dressed in white robes of victory with palms in our hands!

John saw our future.

He saw that his brothers and sisters from all times and nations one day would be praising God and Jesus dressed in victory. He saw our future, my future, your future. We are here together, and we will continue together beyond this time and this world.

These words of victory were a powerful consolation for the lost of my mother, because I understood that we still united, together in the vision of the book of Revelations, praising God and celebrating the victory of the Lamb of God.

For me, this is the power of the resurrection acting today. The resurrection changing all our perspectives and our understanding of time and space. We are not anymore trapped in time and space. By faith we overcome the limits of time and space and we can see ourselves united celebrating this victory in a future that is not here yet for our physical eyes but that is here now through the eyes of faith that the Holy Spirit has planted in our hearts.

Suffering is real but victory over suffering is also real.

As Christians we work together to define our path in the midst of so many other paths offered by our society and our world.

John's words of revelation can serve as water pouring freely over us during the parched times of our lives.

We can help our congregation and our friends to distinguish between reality and illusion, between what God has promised and what God has not, without imagining that our lives will be free from suffering but trusting that in God we will find strength, courage, and solace enough to sustain us until that time when we also become victors over death.

We need to learn to experience the power of the vision of the book of Revelations today in the same way that the Christians in the first century experienced those visions. They trusted that the persecution and cruelty that they were experiencing were not the end, because the real ending of their journey was the great manifestation of the whole people of God celebrating the victory with Christ in glory.

That powerful vision gave the first Christians the courage, the strength, and the ability to overcome suffering, persecution, illness and to experience in the

middle of the great ordeal and in the middle of the great tribulation the salvation from God in Christ Jesus.

We need to capture and share the immense joy that is the fruit of the extravagant love of God. John's testimony provides us with a splendid opportunity to appoint all our visions and expectations to the Lamb and the Good Shepherd.

Easter raises the question of how the resurrection event is celebrated in all times and places. Easter is our invitation to celebrate the victory of life day after day trusting in the power that raised Jesus.

Whatever is your challenge and tribulation, trust in the power of the victory of Christ and you will experience the good news of the book of Revelations that conforms that you are one:

“who has come out of the great ordeal; washed your robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵For this reason you are before the throne of God,
and worship him day and night within his temple.”

Peace be with you.

He is risen! He is risen indeed!