

## Reflection for the Fifth Sunday of Easter

During the Easter season our second readings are taken from the book of the Apocalypse also known as the Book of Revelation. Rather than the usual homily today I thought I would say something about what many regard as a very difficult and mysterious book.

The book of the Apocalypse is the very last book of the New Testament and so of the whole Christian Bible. It could be said to focus on the last things “death, judgement, heaven and hell”. It is written in Greek and gets its name from its very first Greek word “apocalypsis” which translates as “revelation”. The opening words of the book are: *“The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.”* This revelation was made known by God *“by sending his angel to his servant John”* who had been exiled to the island called Patmos on account of preaching the gospel and bearing witness to Christ. The book of the Apocalypse appears to have been written around 95AD, sixty or so years after the resurrection, when the church had spread around the Mediterranean and Middle East. It was sent to seven churches, with which John the author appears to have been familiar, and in the opening chapters a word of congratulation and criticism is addressed to each of these churches in turn.

A picture is then created of God enthroned in all his majesty attended upon by spirits, angels and elders presiding over the judgement of all the earth. One after another strange beasts with multiple heads and eyes, horns and crowns appear and are unleashed to bring punishment upon the earth and cosmic battles ensue. The description of these beasts and the torments they unleash makes up the bulk of the book of Revelation. Within the descriptions there is a great focus on numbers which, very often but not always, are multiples of twelve which is a significant number, there being twelve tribes of Israel and twelve apostles of the lamb. *“The lamb who has been slain and has come back to life”* is presented as being the one closest to the one who sits on the throne and he acts in his name. The text contains many canticles which are used in the liturgy of the Church to this day and which John might have learnt as the earliest hymns of the Church. It’s a complicated, even bizarre read and many think it is written in a special code and have sought to see symbolic meaning in every detail, every eye, every crown, every number. Indeed, this is encouraged by the Revelation itself especially in respect to its most infamous sentence which concerns the number of the beast. There we read: *“This calls for wisdom: let the one who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man, and his number is 666”*.

Finally, there is a vision of heaven, some of which we heard in today’s second reading. Heaven is presented as the new Jerusalem, the holy city where there is no temple because God dwells in the midst of his people and there is no sunlight or moonlight *“for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb.”*<sup>2</sup>

In summary, the book of the Apocalypse may be a baffling read but it’s well worth a look at!

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<sup>1</sup> Rev 13: 18

<sup>2</sup> Rev 21: 23