

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Revelation 7:9-17

NRSV

When Revelation was written, people were concerned about what would happen at the end of time. It was also a time of persecution: some died for the faith. This book tells of John's (see 1:1) visions of the future. He sees thrones and courts – part of the culture then but not of ours today, but we still ask: *what will happen at the end of time?*

In his dream, John sees the heavenly court where God sits enthroned and from which he rules the universe. Those around him praise him as Creator and Lord of all. Present too is “the Lamb” (see 6:1) through whom redemption from sin was achieved: Christ has brought victory by his own sacrifice. As a result of his triumph, he, in God's name, directs history and brings it to its conclusion. In a cosmic liturgy, the whole of creation proclaims the dignity of the Lamb as he is enthroned. In 7:1-8, the “living God” commands that earth and living creatures not be destroyed until the “servants of our God”, the faithful, have been marked with a seal – in ancient times, a monarch marked his property with a signet ring. First many people from each of the tribes of Israel receive this mark. Then follows our passage, in which members of the Church are *sealed*.

“Palm branches” (v. 9) are a sign of victory and thanksgiving: they were strewn on the road during victory parades. In vv. 11-12, the whole court of heaven join the “great multitude” (v. 9), the elect, in praising God, in triumph. Humankind is on the same level as “angels” (v. 11). (The “four living creatures”, representing what is most splendid in life, were identified earlier as a human being (for wisdom), a lion (for nobility), an ox (for strength), and an eagle (for swiftness or over-view) – later adopted as symbols of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John respectively.) Then v. 14: the elect are the members of the Church who have remained faithful through the final testing (“great ordeal”) by the Antichrist, the devil; they have received the gift of Christ, (purity, sinlessness), through his death (“made them white in the blood of the Lamb”). For this reason, they ceaselessly celebrate a celestial liturgy in God's presence, protected by God (“shelter them”, v. 15). Vv. 16-17 tell of their happiness, using quotations from previous books of the Bible. Christians will no longer suffer.

Psalm 34:1-10,22

NRSV

The “humble” (v. 2, dedicated, committed believers in God, who hence have a claim on God's help) will be delivered from “fears” (v. 4). They will be delivered, rescued (v. 7): at the Last Day, their faces will be “radiant” (v. 5) in God's presence; God will help them to overcome evil. He will protect those who hold him in proper respect (“fear him”, v. 7). “Taste” (v. 8, experience), God's inherent good-

ness and the joy of trusting in him! Hold him in awe, you “holy ones” (v. 9), you who are set apart for God, elect, chosen by God – for your needs will be fully met. But avoid “evil” (v. 13) and “deceit”. God listens to the godly but he shuns those who do evil, cutting them off from his blessings (vv. 14-17). Then v. 19: though the godly suffer much, God will rescue them from their afflictions, but the ungodly (who hate the godly) will be condemned (to damnation). Despite onslaughts by the ungodly, the integrity of the godly will be maintained (v. 20). Unlike the fate of the ungodly, God “redeems” (v. 22, restores the fortunes of) the godly, so they will not be condemned at the end of time.

1 John 3:1-3

NRSV

The author emphasizes that through our kinship with Christ, son of God, we “should be called children of God”. This has arisen because of God's gift of love: his gift of his only Son as Saviour of the world. We are God's children now (“that is what we are.”) Then v. 1b: most people did not listen to and understand Jesus (“did not know him”), so it is to be expected that few will listen to us, his emissaries. Then v. 2: being his children is happening now, and will be at the end of time, but we have not been shown in what way this will be; however, we do know that we will be like Christ: we will see the Father fully, in all his glory. “All who have this hope” (v. 3), this expectation of the future “in him” – i.e. Christians – consider it required of them to live a virtuous, ethical, life (“purify themselves”), emulating the essential goodness, purity, of God.

Matthew 5:1-12

NRSV

4:23-25 say “Jesus went throughout Galilee ... proclaiming the good news of the kingdom ... great crowds [including Gentiles] followed him ...” He speaks to his disciples, but the crowd is not far away: per 7:28, they too hear.

“Blessed are” (v. 3) can be translated as *Happy are those who*. The “poor” (v. 3) are the many who were literally impecunious and therefore suffered subservience to the will of the wealthy. Those of them who place themselves in God's hands will enter the kingdom of heaven. Those who have no worldly joy because life is hard on them (“mourn”, v. 4) yet turn to God for help will be comforted, renewed, strengthened. Those whose lives are God-centred (“meek”, v. 5) will enter the kingdom (“the earth”, figuratively, the Promised Land). Those who seek ardently to live in unison with God (“righteousness”, v. 6) will know the privilege and joy of loyal response to God's will. The compassionate (“merciful”, v. 7) will receive compassion. Those who are single-minded, in their very beings, in complete loyalty to God will live in God's presence (v. 8). Reconciliators (“peacemakers”, v. 9) will, because they share in what God does, be his “children”. Those who are “persecuted” (v. 10), ridiculed, denounced, ill-treated, in maintaining a right relationship with God (through Christ) will receive a “reward” (v. 12), God's blessing: they will share in the kingdom. Disciples in Jesus' day are like the prophets: they suffered persecution from their own people (v. 11). (Some of the beatitudes overlap.) The Beatitudes present a paradox; they overturn the conventional values of society; they constitute a moral revolution, which continues today.