

April 25, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This Sunday is traditionally called "Good Shepherd Sunday" because we hear the Gospel passage found in *John 10* where Jesus reveals Himself as like a good shepherd who leads and guides his sheep to everything that is good for them and protects them from all harm. It is a very appropriate day for our First Communicants to receive Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament for the first time. Jesus feeds us with Himself and protects His divine life within us so that we will ultimately arrive safely in the peaceful pastures of heaven. Jesus, our Good Shepherd, please protect and guide all of our dear children who receive you for the first time today and never let them be separated from you! May Jesus bless our First Communicants and their families with His Eucharistic Presence today and every Sunday of their lives until they meet the Risen Lord in His glory in the resurrection to come!

During this Easter Season we are reflecting on the Risen Lord who is described as coming in His glory in and through His Church and in a final victory at the end of time in the Book of Revelation. Last week we explored the first part of St. John's vision in that Book in which He saw the 7 churches of the ancient church and had a prophetic message from the Lord for each of them. We also mentioned that the best way to interpret this book of the Bible is to decipher its meaning at the time it was written, what it says to us now, and what it is communicating about the future. God's word does all three because God always was in the past, He is now, and He will be (and so will we) in the future.

The next section of the Book of Revelation includes a lengthy vision of St. John showing him God and the Lamb, Jesus Christ, our Lord in Heaven. St. John sees what heavenly worship looks like around God's throne in heaven. It is good to remember that the worship of God in the Liturgy (the Holy Mass) is actually an image of the heavenly worship of God by the angels and saints. In fact, it is also good to remember that heaven and earth come together in our churches. (The nave and the sanctuary represent heaven and earth in our church architecture. The choir loft represents the angelic choirs that are always praising God around His heavenly throne. Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, becomes present on the altar which then becomes, in a very literal way, the heavenly throne of God on earth in the Mass.) If you would like to go deeper in understanding how the visions of St. John with regard to heavenly worship become reality in the celebration of the Mass, we highly recommend Dr. Scott Hahn's book "*The Supper of the Lamb*". In that book, Dr. Hahn explains how all of the symbolic language found in the Book of Revelation describes not only the true heavenly worship, but also the worship of the Lamb in the Holy Mass. The description of heavenly worship in the Book of Revelation helps us to understand what we are doing, and what God is doing at Mass, and helps us to participate in this great mystery in a more conscious way. In the Letter to the Hebrews, St. Paul also mentions the type of heavenly worship that Christians enter into by Jesus' saving grace through our Baptism and subsequent participation in Holy Communion during worship at Mass. We truly join the angels and saints in being united around the heavenly throne of God:

You have not approached that which could be touched and a blazing fire and gloomy darkness and storm and a trumpet blast and a voice speaking words such that those who heard begged that no message be further addressed to them, for they could not bear to hear the command: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned. Indeed, so fearful was the spectacle that Moses said, "I am terrified and trembling". No, you have approached Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and countless angels in festal gathering, and the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven, and God the judge of all, and the spirits of the just made perfect, and Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently * than that of Abel. *Hebrews 12:18-24*

With all of this as a background, please place the image of heavenly worship found in *Revelation 4* in your mind's eye:

After this I had a vision of an open door to heaven, and I heard the trumpet-like voice that had spoken to me before, saying, "Come up here and I will show you what must happen afterwards." At once I was caught up in spirit. A throne was there in heaven, and on the throne sat one whose appearance sparkled like jasper and carnelian. Around the throne was a halo as brilliant as an emerald. Surrounding the throne I saw twenty-four other thrones on which twenty-four elders sat, dressed in white garments and with gold crowns on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder. Seven flaming torches burned in front of the throne, which are the seven spirits of God. In front of the throne was something that resembled a sea of glass like crystal. In the center and around the throne, there were four living creatures covered with eyes in front and in back. The first creature resembled a lion, the second was like a calf, the third had a face like that of a human being, and the fourth looked like an eagle in flight. The four living creatures, each of them with six wings, were covered with eyes inside and out. Day and night they do not stop exclaiming:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty, who was, and who is, and who is to come.”

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to the one who sits on the throne, who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before the one who sits on the throne and worship him, who lives forever and ever. They throw down their crowns before the throne, exclaiming:

“Worthy are you, Lord our God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things; because of your will they came to be and were created.” *Revelation 4:1-11*

This image describes God sitting on the throne in heaven. A throne symbolizes God's power and authority to rule over the universe. His appearance is like jewels symbolizing His glory and divinity. The 24 thrones and elders are the 12 patriarchs of Israel (the Twelve sons of Jacob who began the twelve tribes of Israel.) They were the bearers of the first covenant with Abraham through the Old testament. The other twelve thrones and elders represent the 12 Apostles chosen by Jesus to be the bearers of the New Covenant through the Blood of Jesus with all those who are their descendants in Faith in the Church. The Lamb has saved them all and now they worship Him around His heavenly throne. The number 7 represents the fullness of God's nature and the seven churches that bear the Holy Spirit to the world. God is fully present in heaven on His throne and is fully present in the whole Church on earth. The four living creature represent the creatures on earth who are noblest, strongest, wisest, and swiftest in creation. The eyes are said to represent God's knowledge and concern. In traditional Church art, the four creatures represent the four Gospel writers. Many times you will see Mark depicted as the lion, Luke as the calf or ox, Matthew as the human, and John as the eagle.

In Chapter 5, St. John sees the Lamb, who is Jesus also being worshiped with God the Father around His throne and all the creatures of God giving the same honor to Him that they give to God. They also recognize Him as the one who shed His blood to save us and they give Him praise and honor for what he has done. The Lamb is recognized as the heir to the throne of King David who will reign forever and that He was born from the tribe of Judah confirming the prophecies of the Messiah. The Lamb again has seven horns and seven eyes representing the fact that He is also fully God, has the fullness of divinity. He has sent His divine Holy Spirit to the Church throughout the world to share His Divine Presence with those who follow Him. A scroll which has seven seals is presented to the Lamb to open. In later chapters, that scroll, which has seven seals, will be used in the process of judgement of humanity and the earth to recognize the righteous and to release justice to those who are opposed to God. Only Jesus is worthy to begin the judgement because He is both God and has conquered human sin and death by His blood. We may recall here the creed: He will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Here is the prelude to the opening of the scroll and its seals by Jesus the Lamb:

I saw a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. It had writing on both sides and was sealed with seven seals. Then I saw a mighty angel who proclaimed in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth was able to open the scroll or to examine it. I shed many tears because no one was found worthy to open the scroll or to examine it. One of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. The lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed, enabling him to open the scroll with its seven seals.” Then I saw standing in the midst of the throne and the four living creatures and the elders a Lamb that seemed to have been slain. He had seven horns and seven eyes; these are the [seven] spirits of God sent out into the whole world. He came and received the scroll from the right hand of the one who sat on the throne. When he took it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each of the elders held a harp and gold bowls filled with incense, which are the prayers of the holy ones. They sang a new hymn:

“Worthy are you to receive the scroll
and to break open its seals,
for you were slain and with your blood you purchased for God
those from every tribe and tongue, people and nation.
You made them a kingdom and priests for our God,
and they will reign on earth.”

I looked again and heard the voices of many angels who surrounded the throne and the living creatures and the elders. They were countless in number, and they cried out in a loud voice:

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain
to receive power and riches, wisdom and strength,
honor and glory and blessing.”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, everything in the universe, cry out:

“To the one who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honor, glory and might,
forever and ever.”

The four living creatures answered, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped. *Revelation 5: 1-14*

Chapters 5 and 6 meaning at the time when St. John had the vision was for God to remind us that His Son Jesus is the Lamb who is God, and is worthy to judge the living and the dead and all those who were faithful and part of the covenant are worshiping God in heaven. Now: We are drawn up into the heavenly worship of the Lamb in the Mass today. It is the same Jesus present who calls us to worship, praise, and thankfulness, and to recognize Him as the one who offered His life for us. Future: The Lamb will come to Judge the living and the dead, therefore, be prepared by following Him now. And, we will be drawn into the eternal worship of the Lamb if we remain faithful to the Lamb now.

Next week we will consider the continuation of the same vision with the opening of the scroll with its 7 seals, 7 trumpets, and 7 plagues.

In the Victorious Lamb who was slain for us,

Fr. Derda, Fr. Steve, Deacon Russ & Deacon Ed