

**4<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY OF EASTER – C (April 25, 2010)**  
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You may have noticed during these Sundays of the Easter season that the second reading has come from the book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible. In fact, that will continue throughout this season—in this Year C of the three-year cycle of readings we hear on Sundays, the book of Revelation is featured. In our excerpt for today, we hear of St. John’s vision of the huge multitude who worship before the Lamb—the Lamb, of course, being the risen Christ. This multitude consists of those who remained faithful to Jesus in their earthly lives despite all kinds of trials and tribulations, and who now share in that heavenly glory forever.

This is a good opportunity for us to look more closely at this book of Revelation, surely the most mysterious, confusing, difficult-to-understand of all 73 books of the Bible. It has been the focus of so much speculation and endless fascination over the centuries, perhaps no more so than in recent years and decades. We read of things such as Armageddon, the seven angels blasting the seven trumpets, the seven bowls of God’s wrath, the Beast with ten horns and seven heads, the number 666 (‘the mark of the Beast’), the battle between Michael the Archangel and Satan...it is all pretty sensational stuff, isn’t it? It sounds like it could be a fantasy film out of Hollywood; in fact, there have been various movies based on these Revelation themes.

But what does it all mean? Countless books and articles have been written, attempting or claiming to unlock the secret meaning of this mysterious book. Back in the 1970’s, I read a popular book titled “The Late Great Planet Earth” by an evangelical author, Hal Lindsey. He thought he had Revelation all figured out, chapter by chapter, and was convinced that the end of the world was just around the corner. That mentality is still held in some quarters; we saw a resurgence of that belief as we approached the year 2000. But the world obviously did not end; we didn’t even get the Y2K computer breakdown that some had predicted. Others over the centuries, especially if they had an axe to grind against the Catholic Church, have tried to claim, for example, that the pope is the Beast or the Anti-Christ—the great enemy of Jesus who would ultimately be destroyed at Jesus’ second coming. Let me hasten to assure you: we would disagree with that claim most strongly...

To attempt an accurate approach to the book of Revelation and what it is really all about, we first need to understand a few basic facts. First of all, it was written near the end of the first century, some 50 to 60 years after the time of Jesus’ earthly life, death and resurrection. The author names himself as John, and he is traditionally believed to be St. John the apostle and the author of the fourth gospel. Although the scripture scholars differ on the matter, there are good reasons for accepting the tradition of the apostle’s authorship. Verse nine of chapter one sets the stage: “I, John, your brother, who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God’s word and gave testimony to Jesus.” The person of Jesus, especially in his risen glory, is definitely the central focus of Revelation. In fact, many of the titles associated with Jesus come from this book: the First and the Last, the Alpha and Omega, King of Kings and Lord of Lords (those last two will sound familiar to anyone who knows the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel’s “Messiah”).

The book of Revelation contains a very particular style or form of writing. In this context, it may be well to remember in more general terms that the Bible is not just a single book, but rather a collection (or ‘mini-library’) of books with a variety of literary styles—law, prophecy, wisdom as well as outright history. Revelation is an important example of what is called apocalyptic writing; some of you may remember that the older name for this book was the book of Apocalypse. This name comes from a Greek word meaning ‘revelation’, and is in fact contained in the very first verse of this book: “The revelation of Jesus Christ.” So St. John is making it crystal clear that the message and contents of this book come from

Jesus and not just from him. Apocalyptic writing was a popular literary style in both Jewish and early Christian settings, especially between 200 B.C. and 200 A.D. The overall purpose or characteristic of apocalyptic writing was to assure its audience that no matter what evils or injustice one may face in this world, in the end good would finally triumph and evil would be destroyed. It also served to warn people about the dangers of sin and the rejection of God as well as the blessings and ultimate victory for those who remain faithful to God, especially in the midst of persecution and suffering. With that in mind, the historical context in which Revelation was written makes its meaning even clearer. At the end of the first century, when St. John wrote this book, Domitian was the emperor of Rome and demanded to be worshipped as a god. Those who refused to do so, especially the Christians who held to their faith in the risen Christ, were subject to the death penalty, often in horribly painful ways.

Remembering this, you will be better able to handle all the symbolism of images and numbers that is so prevalent in this book. The number '6', for example, represents sin or imperfection—thus, the number of the Beast is 666. Scholars seem to agree that the first-century emperor Nero, who initiated a vicious persecution of the early Christians, is who John was referring to. The number '7', on the other hand, represents perfection and completion; thus, Jesus is represented as the lamb with seven horns and seven eyes (symbolizing complete power and knowledge). Elsewhere in Revelation we read of battles between angels and demons, natural disasters, and wars and other human disasters. This kind of language is not intended to be read literally; rather, it is intended to represent the truth of Jesus' ultimate victory in the struggle with sin and evil and our call to persevere in following Christ no matter what trials we must bear.

Thus, the book of Revelation with its apocalyptic style was written to sustain and encourage those early Christians who faced persecution and death and urge them not to compromise or give in to emperor worship or other paganism. The message conveyed by this book: be faithful to Christ, he who by his resurrection has already won the ultimate victory over Satan, sin and death. The powers of darkness will always try to destroy the Church and the faith of Christians, but the Church as the bride of the risen Christ will always share in his victory. That is a message relevant not only for first-century Christians, but also for us and for Christians of all times and places. And the last chapters of Revelation assure us of this 'happy ending' or, perhaps better yet, the happy eternity—the final defeat of Satan and the last judgment, the proclamation of the new heavens and new earth, and Jesus' promise that he is 'coming soon' and will bring with him 'the recompense I will give to each according to his deeds.'

So...are we living in the end times? Yes, indeed—Jesus has already risen from the dead and has destroyed forever the ultimate power of sin and death. Also, Jesus clearly said that he is 'coming soon'. And...how soon is 'soon'?? We do not know, and it is not ours to know. The book of Revelation does not pretend to give us a specific historical timetable with precise dates and names. Besides, God's timetable is not our timetable; according to the book of Psalms, to God a thousand years are as a day and a day is as a thousand years. Jesus' second coming, the end of time could be ten billion years from now, or it could be later today. What we do know, from Revelation and from the rest of the Bible, is that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, he is King now and forever, and he calls us to follow him in loving obedience every day of our lives. We are called to live each day as if it is our last, for one day it truly will be our last...and that day is known to God alone.