

Revelation is a challenging word. An historically divisive book in Christian history, it was not initially included in the Biblical canon, not recognized as “orthodox” or consistent with gospel thought. It has led to division, fighting, violence, death, and polarization among believers. Usually this was over the correct interpretation of the mysteriously metaphorical writing and the understandings of how to live it. Written in the 1st Century of the Common Era it’s addressed to the churches of Asia Minor (current Turkey). Christianity was a mostly urban faith, practiced in the cities. During this time in the Roman Empire, Asia Minor was a region in which the Imperial Cult (worshipping the Emperor as the lone god) was promoted. It was also a time in which Jewish-Christians (like John) were no longer given the privileges extended to the Jews in the Empire such as the exemption from military service and from obeisance to the Roman religion.

There are three Greek expressions in verse 9 that characterize the theological and historical situation of John and his readers which are all very difficult to translate:

persecution:: βασιλεία [basileia] : The NRSV translates it as persecution. And it can also mean - agony, distress, ordeal, eschatological tribulation, suffering, oppression. The NRSV translates it as persecution. “With it, John insists that he shares with Christians in Asia Minor the tribulations of the end time, which consists of possible exile, imprisonment, social ostracism, slander, poverty, economic exploitation, violence, and the constant threat of judicial action.”

kingdom:: ὑπομονή [hypomonē] The NRSV translates it as kingdom. And it can also mean – empire, royal power, sovereignty, dominion. “John along with the church communities, both participates in the eschatological power of God’s and Christ’ royal reign and shares as a partner in God’s empire even in the present.... In Revelation power confronts power, empire confronts empire. Compromise is not possible.”

patient endurance:: θλίψει [thlipsei] The NRSV translates it as patient endurance. And it can also mean – “patience, loyal endurance, consistent resistance, steadfastness, perseverance, staying power. Rather than faith or love, becomes the main Christian virtue in Revelation. According to John, Christian existence is determined by the conjunction of oppressive eschatological tribulations with the Christian claim to share in the divine empire and royal power of God, which requires resistance and steadfast perseverance. This is the challenge facing Christians as representatives of God’s power and empire here and now.”

SCRIPTURES FOR SUNDAY 4.15.2018

Revelation 1:9-2:7
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁹ I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the **persecution** and the **kingdom** and the *patient endurance*, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ I was in the spirit on the Lord’s day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet ¹¹ saying, “Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamum, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.”

¹² Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands I saw *one like the Son of Man*, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. ¹⁴ His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, TWO-EDGED SWORD, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “**Do not be afraid**; I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades. ¹⁹ Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this. ²⁰ As for the mystery of the **SEVEN STARS** that you saw in my right hand, and the **SEVEN GOLDEN**

one like the Son of Man:: “this image is a literary reworking of the same image used in Daniel 10:5. The description of hair comes from Daniel 7 and the Voice from Ezekiel 1:25; 43:2. Here’ the Christ figure is clothed not in the linen of Daniel 10 but in the long robe of the Jewish high priest (Ezekiel 9:2; Exodus 28:4, 31). The TWO EDGED SWORD identifies Christ as judge of the communities and also as the judge of the nations (Revelation 19:15).

SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS :: “The seven-branched candleabara reminds one of the golden temple menorah which was a symbol of the Jewish people in the first century. Revelation 1:20 identifies it with the Christian community to whom the book is addressed. This image evokes the theological promise expressed in Leviticus 26:12 ‘I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.’”

SEVEN STARS....ANGELS: This image is difficult to identify as it’s not found anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. It may refer to the 7 planets that symbolized the universal dominion of the Roman Emperor. If that’s the case, then Jesus is lifted as the universal ruler of the world, like the emperor. And it could simply be an explicit extension of the 7 angels and the 7 churches to whom this pastoral letter are addressed. They symbolically represent the whole church in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). The angels are likely patron angels of the churches and their communication with God. They could also represent the prophetic communication with God of the leadership of each of the church communities. In either case, it’s the spirit of God who speaks through them to the churches.

SEVEN LETTERS: The so-called seven letters, which begin here and continue through Revelation 3:22 are individual messages to church communities that all follow the same rhetorical pattern, forming a unit in the opening vision expressed in Revelation.

WORKS: The idea is more of praxis (the way in which one works out, lives out faith in the duration of day-to-day life) than a specific good or bad deed.

Nicolaitans: We don’t really who these folks were. But obviously they live opposite to what John teaches. Along with those who subscribe to Baalam (Rev 2:14) and the followers of Jezebel (Rev 2:20) the seem to have promoted the doctrine of accommodation to the culture [Roman pagan] around them.

LAMPSTANDS: the **SEVEN STARS** are the **ANGELS OF THE SEVEN CHURCHES**, and the **SEVEN LAMPSTANDS** are the **SEVEN CHURCHES**.

2 ¹“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the **SEVEN STARS** in his right hand, who walks among the **SEVEN GOLDEN LAMPSTANDS**:

² “I know your **WORKS**, your toil and your *patient endurance*. I know that you cannot tolerate evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false. ³ I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary. ⁴ But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. ⁵ Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the **WORKS** you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶ Yet this is to your credit: you hate the **WORKS** of the *Nicolaitans*, which I also hate. ⁷ Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers, I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

- What grabs your imagination in this passage?
- How do we live in a time in which the power of the world confronts the power of God?
- How are you (we) invited to accommodate to the culture of our world which leads to the renunciation of doing the works born of love of God? How might the Spirit of God be today inviting us to repent, and do the works of our transformative love in Christ?