

LET THE PEOPLES PRAISE YOU

ACTS 16.9-15, PSALM 67, REVELATION 21.10-14, 22-
22.5

Introduction

In 1971 John Lennon scandalized a good number of people, including church dignitaries, when he wrote, “imagine here’s no countries... and there’s no religion too.”

Lennon was specifically speaking up for a world in which national interest and religious interest never favour one group over the rest of the world; a world where such things did not cause division, hatred and war.

Today I want to address Lennon’s imagined future.

But what can we do anyhow? Lennon sang, but we are just little people with little power or influence.

So come with me on a little journey among today’s readings and perhaps we can explore what a panorama of possibilities God puts before us.

Psalm 67 Blessing for the world

Let’s start in the middle with the Psalm.

The message of Psalm 67 is simple and direct. I will bless you. You will flourish. But my blessing on you is for the sake of the whole world.

The blessing too is simple and direct: The presence of the living God, God living with us in the broken world. This living God blesses us so that his way can be known among the nations.

What is this way his presence will bring? His saving power, his fairness, his love of equity, his longing to put things to rights for all, his longing for the flourishing of human beings and the rest of the created order in beauty and joy and productivity that leads to peace.

And further, this God's desperate pain when that does not happen.

Keep this thought: grace to one for the flourishing of the whole.

Now holding that let's take in another scenario. Let's turn to the book of Revelation.

Revelation 21.10-14, 22-22.1-5 Blessing is the goal

There are always three tenses in the Christian life; the past, the present and the future. But in the faith they are not a single straight line. They are intertwined together more like a lovely loaf of plaited bread, three strands braided and cooked so that any one slice gives you a piece of all three braids.

Think about the eucharist today. Here I come with my hopes and failures, joy and despair, my present and my past, my anxieties and my fears. I feast on the past of Gods story; I take a cross and resurrection into my being. In that present moment I and my story am in the presence of the future, the Alpha and the Omega. That is what John's beautiful picture of the great city tells us as it comes down to us.

John's sets his whole vision of the future in Revelation in worship. He begins on the Lord's Day and ends his work in the Eucharist with great weekly cry of Christians, "Maranatha", come Lord (22.20).

So, who comes into the city?

The city has open gates that never shut because there is no night. Through those gates come people like us from all down the ages and those who have given their lives for the faith.

But also, the nations and kings bring in their glory. That's unexpected.

Doesn't power delude and seduce the nations? Doesn't greed of nations tear the creation apart? Shouldn't they be in the Pit?

Well not in this story. Christ, suffering and risen, redeems them. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy. let the peoples praise you, O God. God will not abandon the world of creation or social life to the control of the demonic powers.

Instead, the risen Christ, violently disposed of by the nations, blesses the nations through his people who live in the Spirit. How?

Through their witness to the presence, the Alpha and Omega, the Lamb on the throne, the lifegiving power of the river of life and the healing power of the leaves of the tree

of life in their personal and common life; in your life and my life together.

In the new order individuals are transformed and renewed and nations are transfigured. In this picture of things our common life, however imperfect, is redeemable and has its place in the new heaven and the new earth, and the new Jerusalem.

What about now?

Given what I just said that is a very brave or, even better, courageous question. Do we really want to know? Because that is where John's Gospel lands us; right in it.

John 14.23-29 Blessing: The Spirit and the Word

This is a beautiful, comforting passage continuing the way the chapter started. "Don't let your heart be troubled."

What's there not to like? "My peace I give to you." Even better.

Well, there is a little problem. The passage is bookended by two little statements that add a little bite.

The first from one of the disciples named Judas (not Iscariot), “Master how will it be that you will show yourself to us and not to the world?” (22)

And the second, “The ruler of this world is coming.” (30)

Jesus is answering Judas’ question by saying I am going to display myself to the world through you. A motley crew will display Jesus. Truly? How?

You will live in the presence of the Holy Spirit. That presence brings the peace that Christ’s work fashions through the cross. That presence schools us to love the Christ and his word so we can keep that love, live that love between us and find in that love our sole resource for energy and renewal.

But there is that lurking, “The ruler of this world is coming.” Caesar and his minions and his successors to the present day and whatever spiritual forces they invoke will play their part. The love of God for the world now, God’s end for the world in beauty and peace is bitterly contested. Think Ukraine, think the bitter ongoing war with the natural order we humans conduct daily, think Sri Lanka.

Don't be afraid, motley crew. Don't let your hearts be troubled. Anxiety leads to fear leads to incapacity to act except in destructive ways, to passivity, to unfeelingness, helplessness and hopelessness.

No future there.

Acts 16.9-15 The blessing of Lydia

In the Acts reading we have one little vignette of this motley crew going about their business living in the presence of the Spirit just a few years later.

They listen to the presence, the Spirit. We know that because just before this little vignette they are at a loss to know what to do and they listen to the Spirit. They have listened to the Spirit's word and they are open to following and loving Jesus through obedience to the Spirit' word of Jesus' love.

They end up crossing the Adriatic into another Roman province and to one of its great cities. Today we know it as part of Europe. A momentous leap. Not strategy or tactics in the usual sense. Strategy and tactics in the unusual sense

of love of the world and careful attention to the strategic way Jesus loves the world. Listening to the Spirit.

And what sort of strategy is this that, in a world dominated by Caesar's power. Philippi is a Roman city, and Caesar's symbols, spiritual and material are everywhere. Power everywhere and overpowering.

So, what do these strange misguided people do? Listen to the Spirit, hand the future to a women's prayer group beside a river. Yes, one of them is wealthy and an obvious leader but the foundations of the world of power feel a shudder. It's too small for Caesar to worry about but a transformation that would become something called Europe has begun. It will be contested all the way until today.

And those powers can still feel it when the Spirit schools us in Jesus' cruciform love, when we are not afraid to seek and take guidance that leads to risk, that will be contested by the powers.

Conclusion

Where to from here?

There are no programs we can steal and apply. Shysters will say there are. But they have all the substance of a political promise.

Our forebears faced new social, political and social situations that made them rethink who they were. Our situation is that no one has ever faced and navigated such an extreme differentiated society before, whose core value is the fulfilment of personal desire. And as a result, at society's centre, control and authority is fragile and precarious.

Also, we are on the social margins and in terms of social trust we sit between the federal government and state government just above the bottom two of trade unions and multinationals.

We have a core value: bless the nations. We are not powerless. The future is not to be dreaded, because it belongs to the Lamb on the Throne. Worship must replenish our memory and our imagination, not disable them. We don't need one plan we need many. Education needs give us the skills to mine our resources. Pastoral

care is not for being nice or holding our hands to get us out of this vale of tears into heaven but to break our dependencies and anxieties so we can be free to love as Christ loved.

That's just for starters. Amen.