

East 4 All Saints Ponsonby, May 12, 2019
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Rev 7:9-17
John 10:22-30

Post Easter the lectionary turns to ordinary pre-resurrection stories about Jesus, but also the book of Revelation. That strange book of visions given to John, who must have lived after these visions as a man possessed on earth. We are probably meant to share some of that possession.

When the Ecology Group met over Lent it was hard to get people interested in the book of Revelation. You all preferred to get back to the business of what can we do. Which is understandable. Because what does this strange visionary book have to do with us anyway?

Salvation belongs to our God, and to the Lamb, seated on the throne. And there is talk of an ordeal. All very well, God, but how is that going to help us now, in the midst of the deepening ecological crisis. How IS this helping us now.

You have probably heard about this crisis in recent days and weeks as the state of the natural world is discussed first by a report about NZ 's ecological depletion, and later about the world by a United Nations Global Expert Panel. Millions of species about to go extinct. These bodies are predicting an **ordeal for the whole human race**, and a time when ordinary infrastructure and backups are overwhelmed. Hundreds of thousands of trees are already dying in North America. Plummeting numbers of birds and insects. It is all very disturbing. What is the Lamb seated on the throne doing about all this? What is this salvation?

Salvation is a loaded word
The disciples asked Jesus who are you. Are you the messiah. Tell us plainly. Today in this generation we have asked again and again "what is salvation Lord." Tell us plainly
Beneath the surface of everyday awareness there has been intense theological ferment, all to do with what on earth Jesus' death really means.
You may not have read the theological books, but if you did any comparisons of hymns and liturgies you would notice a huge difference in language from half a century ago or the time of previous generations.

We have been convinced that Jesus' death is not a transaction paid to God the Father or to the Devil, as some previous generations have sometimes thought. It is not just cosmic sacrifice, but what is it. We have become convinced that Jesus' whole life matters to salvation, and not just the point of death. We have been convinced that Jesus became flesh, became entangled with DNA, and life and matter of the cosmos, not just a human being. This entanglement continues and persists. So the present crisis is very close to God, who came as a fragile human being, a human in an ecosystem, and persists with us still.

We have extended enormously the scope of salvation in our minds. Reading Scripture from the point of view of the enslaved & oppressed, women, the poor. Of course God loves all people, but what about the natural world, the animals? We are beginning the conversion to understand salvation as encompassing the whole of creation. Note, for instance, that the gospels say It was winter? Did we ever notice that before?

And that is just as well, because it is the salvation of the whole ecological fragile network that needs urgent salvation today.

We are fighting for our very survival, though most of us don't like to think about that for more than half an hour a

day. Salvation is exactly what we are looking for. And if Christ has become enmeshed in matter and life, Christ cares about the ecological devastation of the planet.

At some level we shove to the edges of our minds because we know that someone higher up has to make some pretty important decisions. But while politicians should be the ones having high level talks and arranging for law to swiftly cure the planet—and in NZ we have made the first steps the other day -- we find instead that they are locked in battles over Brexit, or over the antics of a climate denying Trump. They must be aware that we are facing a threat to our very survival but they seem to have no choice, they are acting out parts.

It has taken a young girl to bring this to the attention of the world. The 16 year old Swede, Greta Thunberg.

Greta Thunberg says: where are the emergency meetings. She is the prophetic voice saying *do something*. She refused to go to school for many months until parliaments did something. Now she misses every Friday and has inspired world-wide student protests. A little girl has become our prophet.

Why are we like this? Aware there is a problem of almost insurmountable odds, a problem we have at least partially caused, yet instead of tackling it with all our reserves and capacities and strengths we are distracted and fumbling. **We are desperately in need of salvation.**

So this seemingly way off song from Revelation might not be so far off and far away. Salvation does belong to God. Which means it is beyond our strength alone.

There are so many clever solutions and possibilities out there, but we seem to be paralyzed in implementing them. Even though we know an ordeal is ahead, especially for the coming generations.

Scripture has many meanings. One of its meanings is found in the way the horizon of Scripture overlays our own horizons today. In this time that horizon is ordeal. This is not the first ordeal even in modern times, but it may be one that comes by stealth and is more universal.

We are all glimpsing this ordeal. An ordeal in which weather will overwhelm our infrastructure. In which plants and species will become extinct, just when we as a species are beginning to understand that we are deeply dependent on all of them. An ordeal which will

overshadow the earthquakes and tsunamis, the fires and hurricanes of recent years.

And yet we are told Salvation belongs to the Lamb So what can the Gospel tell us about the ordeal we are facing.

We are the ones who follow the Good Shepherd. We are the ones who believe in eternal life

As people of the the Lamb we find ourselves in an ambivalent space.

Apart from anything else that means we believe that humanity (and all creation) is not a mistake. Or a product of some chance fluctuation in a cosmic wave or vacuum. Morality is hard wired into our souls.

But to have that view, that we are expected and welcomed and there is a future is to follow the Good Shepherd.

But as people of the God, sheep of the Shepherd, we are also **tempted to passivity**, we are tempted to leave it all to God, to the Lamb, to the Good Shepherd. That is what sheep do. And that is certainly a mistake, a very Christian mistake. Others might not care, others might want to

leave it all to governments, or they might be suspicious of the science, but they are not tempted to leave it all to God.

It is a mistake because what else we see in this strange hymn from Revelation is also crowds of people. It seems it does matter what humans do. The humans are a part of this story of salvation as well, as martyrs or witnesses. So are the angels the mysterious elders and the four living creatures. All are involved. Revelation seems to demand that we must be involved too.

The Bible is after all full of this idea, that what we do matters:

Choose life, that you and your children may live, says Joshua.

And covenant. The bible is framed by covenants with God, God with us. That means God is in solidarity with us and we are acting with and on behalf of God. The incarnation perfects this solidarity but does not begin it.

We have to act, as the Lenten group knew. We do have to act. It all depends on us, as those who will with certainty go through the Great Ordeal. It also all depends on the Lamb.

If we survive this ordeal it will be because the Lamb, the Lamb's martyrs and prophets have come amongst us again and are guiding us through. But it also means that as people of the Lamb, the ones who know the voice of the Shepherd, we have acted and followed and chosen life.

It means we have companions on the way. Guides if only we will listen to them.

At the moment Greta is our guide, the 16 year old who can see what the rest of us can't see. She like prophets of old, is unexpected and unusual.

An image from the Narnia stories, If you remember from long ago when you read Narnia, the Pevensie children were given gifts as they started out on their journey. Something like a bow and arrow, a horn and a bottle of potent. Seemingly useless gifts it seemed at the time. But at a time of great peril somehow or other they were nudged to remember their gifts and to use them just in time.

This is the time. We are gifted by the Good Shepherd, we are gifted because we know his voice, and what we do matters. At the same time we can have confidence because salvation does belong to the Lamb.

We discussed in our group what we can do about climate change. It is always difficult because we don't have a God's eye view of the world. We don't know whether plastics matter more than meat, whether we should buy an electric car or use up our old ones. Some of our actions can be symbolic. We thought we should be growing gardens on this property and that would symbolize at least that we were caring about what is going on. A bike park would do the same. We thought we should add an ecological imperative to each newsletter. If we clean beaches or think ethically about fashion, these are all little bits of the puzzle.

But it also matters that as followers of the Good Shepherd we are constantly asking for help

Our prayer is for salvation in our time...Our prayer is that we too be a little possessed, like the apostle John. .Our guides and prophets will be unexpected people...And those who have started further on the journey tell us that it can be exciting to investigate what living lightly on the earth means. A Church is a good place for all of this because we have a wider perspective and because we understand conversion and repentance, both of which are needed for the earth to be healed.