



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 23 August 2006*

John, the Seer of Patmos

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the last Catechesis we had reached the meditation on the figure of the Apostle John. We had first sought to look at all that can be known of his life. Then, in a second Catechesis, we meditated on the central content of his Gospel and his Letters: charity, love. And today we are still concerned with the figure of John, this time to examine the Seer of the Book of Revelation. And let us immediately note that while neither the Fourth Gospel nor the Letters attributed to the Apostle ever bear his name, the Book of Revelation makes at least four references to it (cf. 1: 1, 4, 9; 22: 8).

It is obvious, on the one hand, that the author had no reason not to mention his own name, and on the other, that he knew his first readers would be able to precisely identify him. We know, moreover, that in the third century, scholars were already disputing the true factual identity of John of the "Apocalypse".

For the sake of convenience we could also call him "the Seer of Patmos" because he is linked to the name of this island in the Aegean Sea where, according to his own autobiographical account, he was, as it were, deported "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rv 1: 9).

It was on Patmos itself, "on the Lord's Day... caught up in ecstasy" (Rv 1: 10), that John had a grandiose vision and heard extraordinary messages that were to have a strong influence on the history of the Church and of entire Western culture.

For example, from the title of his book - *Apocalypse, Revelation* - the words "apocalypse,

apocalyptic" were introduced into our language and, although inaccurately, they call to mind the idea of an incumbent catastrophe.

The Book should be understood against the backdrop of the dramatic experiences of the seven Churches of Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea) which had to face serious difficulties at the end of the first century - persecutions and also inner tensions - in their witness to Christ.

John addresses them, showing acute pastoral sensitivity to the persecuted Christians, whom he exhorts to be steadfast in the faith and not to identify with the pagan world. His purpose is constituted once and for all by the revelation, starting with the death and Resurrection of Christ, of the meaning of human history.

The first and fundamental vision of John, in fact, concerns the figure of the Lamb who is slain yet standing (cf. Rv 5: 6), and is placed before the throne on which God himself is already seated.

By saying this, John wants first of all to tell us two things: the first is that although Jesus was killed with an act of violence, instead of falling heavily to the ground, he paradoxically stands very firmly on his own feet because, with the Resurrection, he overcame death once and for all.

The other thing is that Jesus himself, precisely because he died and was raised, henceforth fully shares in the kingship and saving power of the Father. This is the fundamental vision.

On this earth, Jesus, the Son of God, is a defenceless, wounded and dead Lamb. Yet he stands up straight, on his feet, before God's throne and shares in the divine power. He has the history of the world in his hands.

Thus, the Seer wants to tell us: trust in Jesus, do not be afraid of the opposing powers, of persecution! The wounded and dead Lamb is victorious! Follow the Lamb Jesus, entrust yourselves to Jesus, take his path! Even if in this world he is only a Lamb who appears weak, it is he who triumphs!

The subject of one of the most important visions of the Book of Revelation is this Lamb in the act of opening a scroll, previously closed with seven seals that no one had been able to break open. John is even shown in tears, for he finds no one worthy of opening the scroll or reading it (cf. Rv 5: 4).

History remains indecipherable, incomprehensible. No one can read it. Perhaps John's weeping before the mystery of a history so obscure expresses the Asian Churches' dismay at God's silence in the face of the persecutions to which they were exposed at that time.

It is a dismay that can clearly mirror our consternation in the face of the serious difficulties, misunderstandings and hostility that the Church also suffers today in various parts of the world.

These are trials that the Church does not of course deserve, just as Jesus himself did not deserve his torture. However, they reveal both the wickedness of man, when he abandons himself to the promptings of evil, and also the superior ordering of events on God's part.

Well then, only the sacrificed Lamb can open the sealed scroll and reveal its content, give meaning to this history that so often seems senseless. He alone can draw from it instructions and teachings for the life of Christians, to whom his victory over death brings the message and guarantee of victory that they too will undoubtedly obtain. The whole of the vividly imaginative language that John uses aims to offer this consolation.

Also at the heart of the visions that the Book of Revelation unfolds, are the deeply significant vision of the Woman bringing forth a male child and the complementary one of the dragon, already thrown down from Heaven but still very powerful.

This Woman represents Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer, but at the same time she also represents the whole Church, the People of God of all times, the Church which in all ages, with great suffering, brings forth Christ ever anew. And she is always threatened by the dragon's power. She appears defenceless and weak.

But while she is threatened, persecuted by the dragon, she is also protected by God's comfort. And in the end this Woman wins. The dragon does not win.

This is the great prophecy of this Book that inspires confidence in us! The Woman who suffers in history, the Church which is persecuted, appears in the end as the radiant Bride, the figure of the new Jerusalem where there will be no more mourning or weeping, an image of the world transformed, of the new world whose light is God himself, whose lamp is the Lamb.

For this reason, although John's Book of Revelation is pervaded by continuous references to suffering, tribulation and tears - the dark face of history -, it is likewise permeated by frequent songs of praise that symbolize, as it were, the luminous face of history.

So it is, for example, that we read in it of a great multitude that is singing, almost shouting: "Alleluia! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" (Rv 19: 6-7).

Here we face the typical Christian paradox, according to which suffering is never seen as the last word but rather, as a transition towards happiness; indeed, suffering itself is already mysteriously mingled with the joy that flows from hope.

For this very reason John, the Seer of Patmos, can close his Book with a final aspiration, trembling with fearful expectation. He invokes the definitive coming of the Lord: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rv 22: 20).

This was one of the central prayers of the nascent Christianity, also translated by St Paul into its Aramaic form: "*Marana tha*". And this prayer, "Our Lord, come!" (I Cor 16: 22) has many dimensions.

It is, naturally, first and foremost an expectation of the definitive victory of the Lord, of the new Jerusalem, of the Lord who comes and transforms the world. But at the same time, it is also a Eucharistic prayer: "Come Jesus, now!". And Jesus comes; he anticipates his definitive coming.

So it is that we say joyfully at the same time: "Come now and come for ever!".

This prayer also has a third meaning: "You have already come, Lord! We are sure of your presence among us. It is our joyous experience. But come definitively!".

And thus, let us too pray with St Paul, with the Seer of Patmos, with the newborn Christianity: "Come, Jesus! Come and transform the world! Come today already and may peace triumph!". Amen!

To special groups

I am happy to greet all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the pilgrims from Taiwan, Japan and the United States of America. May your visit to Rome renew your faith in the Church, the Bride of Christ, and may the Lord's definitive victory over all evil fill you with hope and courage. I invoke upon you God's Blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, as usual, I address a warm greeting to the *sick*, the *newly-weds* and the *young people*, especially those of Catholic Action from the Diocese of Altamura-Gravina-Acquaviva delle Fonti, accompanied by Bishop Mario Paciello. Dear friends, yesterday the liturgy invited us to invoke the Holy Mother of God as our Queen. I ask you to put yourselves and all your projects under the motherly protection of the One who gave the Saviour to the world.

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