

Ordination of a Deacon

October 31, 2008

Church of the heavenly Rest, Abilene, Texas

“Who are these, clothed in white robes, and whence have they come?”

This evening, this question might be asked at homes all over this country; however, I doubt that it has anything to do with heaven and everything to do with small children in white sheets wandering the neighborhood looking for treats. It is interesting to note that there are quite a number of folk here this evening in the Church of the Heavenly Rest who are also dressed in white robes. HmMMMM.

“These are they who have come out of the great tribulation...” And even though Art might think this applies to him, having completed his canonical exams for ordination, I doubt that is what the elder had in mind in his reply to the author of Revelation.

So. If this isn't a trick or treat session, what, exactly, are we up to this evening.

This evening I am doing something that I do very rarely, and Episcopalians in general do not do very often: I am preaching from the Book of Revelations. Now you might ask, “Why preach on a book so full of terror and destruction, whose imagery is so arcane? It's an awful book.” The reason to preach on Revelations is precisely to put to rest the idea that we ought to ignore this wonderful book of hope and joy.

When the early Church was assembling the books which would be included in the Canon of Scripture, there were many Christians who agree with the previously articulated sentiment. It is so strange and obtuse that we can never understand what the message is. In addition, from the earliest days, the imagery has been used to proof text a particular understanding of politics or theology or ecclesiology. The argument for including this writing is that tradition has it that it was penned by John, one of Jesus' closest companions and the brother of James while imprisoned on the Island of Patmos toward the end of the first century. Tradition also held that John was the caretaker of Jesus' mother Mary in her old age, they having been entrusted to one another by Jesus on the Cross. John is also the traditional author of the Gospel of John. With this traditional attribution, even with the strangeness of the language and images, and I would add with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Early Church Fathers decided that this book needed to be included.

A moment ago, I spoke of Revelations as being a work of hope and joy. I want to be the first to profess that the study of this work is difficult. We 21st century westerners want to read into the prophecies all of our technology and science, even if we are not technically or scientifically advanced ourselves. We want to see what we want to see, and not what the author, whether or not John the Apostle is trying to convey to us. We read of the horrors of cosmic war, of death and destruction and and mayhem and murder— sounds like the nightly news, doesn't it. Where is the good news in that? Some of our TV preachers point to current events, using the symbology of Revelations, as proof that we are living in the end times. I have even seen charts pointing out symbols that they claim relate to Russia, the US, Iraq, Iran, China and other nations. Is this what John, the Seer

intended, or is it just the latest in 2000 years of using biblical prophesy to insist that God really meant this age, this century, this year for the end of time. When I hear this use of Scripture, I am reminded of Jesus' exhortation to his disciples not to fret about the time or season. Look at Jesus' words just before his ascension in Acts 1: 7, "it is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority." Similar exhortations may be found in the Gospels as well.

Over the past 35 years I have led bible studies on Revelations several times, as members of the parishes I served wanted to know more about this strange book. What I discover each time I read through to the end and pour through the awfulness of what is truly there that at every juncture of devastation, God holds out hope, an open door, an opportunity to repent for even the most heinous of perpetrators of evil. The good news is that evil does not prevail in the end. God is still in charge. Our lives will be vindicated.

In our reading for this evening John the Seer is in the center courts of heaven and not only sees the throng but also hears their hymn of praise. He is told of the blessed peace that comes by the mercy and grace of God. He hears echoes of Isaiah's prophesy of hope for the downtrodden. "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." (Rev. 7:14-15)

What a glorious picture of the Kingdom of God. However, it does not sound much like what we see with our own eyes. Our communities are filled with those who are

hungry; children go to school to find the only substantial meal for their day. Homeless people walk our streets seeking safe, warm shelter and nourishment and for the most part are scorned as useless, shiftless bums. The glory of the coming kingdom rings hollow to those who have been abandoned or abused. In what purports to be a Christian country the neediest in our midst are ignored or spurned at every turn. If I remember Matthew's Gospel correctly, in the 25th chapter Jesus challenges us with a parable about feeding, clothing, welcoming, quenching thirst, and visiting the sick and those in prison. His final words to both the sheep and the goats are the same, "...as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me."

This evening we are setting apart one whose call it is to be an icon of servanthood in our midst. God has called Arthur to this vocation and we, the Church have validated that call. An icon is one who is a transparency of the kingdom of God for us to see clearly who and what we are to be. Art is not called to be the one who does servant ministry for us, but one who challenges, exhorts, cajoles, and shoves us to be servants where we are.