

WORSHIP AND TRIBULATION
A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Trinity, 2011
On the Text: Propers for the Day and Spilsbury's book on Revelation
By the Reverend Doctor Randolph Constantine

Not long after I was ordained a Deacon, Bishop Sutton told me that I should restrict myself to preaching from the Propers for the first two years of my ministry. That was back when Father Moncrief and I were in the team ministry, sharing Trinity Church here with All Saints' in Durango, which made it impossible to do that in a meaningful way. When I became your full-time minister in October of 2008, I began to do just that – that is, to preach from the Propers. Except for certain special occasions, I have preached from the Propers for almost three years. However, in the past few weeks, I have deviated from that course, not because I don't like preaching from the Propers or anything like that, but because I wanted to give you something I thought was important that the Propers for that day did not speak to directly.

The idea of what constitutes the Propers for the service of Holy Communion has changed in recent years within the Reformed Episcopal Church. It used to be that the Propers consisted of just the Collect, Epistle, and Gospel, for a particular day, and that was it. There were no Psalm or Psalms said or sung, and there was no reading from the Old Testament. That changed in the Reformed Episcopal Church sometime between 1932 and 2005, possibly in 1963 when there was a small revision of our PB. In the current REC PB, which is the 2005 edition, the OT lesson is optional, but the Psalm is required. What's more, if an OT lesson is used, we use one of the choices out of the Lectionary for the day, and we use the Psalm that goes with it. So I think it is safe to say that our understanding of the Propers for a service of Holy Communion, now consists of the Collect, the OT lesson, the Psalm(s), the Epistle, and then the Gospel. This is because part of our worship in this life is to learn more about our Creator and Savior, what He wants from us, and how he wants us to behave. One of the things we know He wants from us is worship, and that is partly what we are here for every Sunday.

As most of you know, I got many ideas from a set of four books entitled *The Sermon and the Propers* by Fred H. Lindemann, who, it seems got the idea for much of what he did in his books from a book by the Rev. Melville Scott, Vicar of Castlechurch in Stafford, England, whose book, *The Harmony of the Collects, Epistles, and Gospels*, preceded Lindemann by about 54 years; and from which Lindemann took several sections wholesale. However, Lindemann has much

material that is not in Scott's *Harmony*. Each of these two men is devoted not just to preaching the Propers, but to **teaching** them.

They agreed that the theme for the 10th Sunday after Trinity is Christian *Stewardship*. St. Paul's Epistle lesson speaks to us of the spiritual gifts we are given, gifts which we are the stewards of, and which we are to put to use in the furthering of God's Kingdom. The Gospel lesson shows us the example of Jesus' stewardship toward the nation of Israel, which He wept over, and toward the church, the Temple, which He cleansed. Jesus cleansed the church of His day of iniquity, and we must be on our guard not to let false doctrine sneak into the church of our time. Woe to those who call evil, good; and good, evil. Melville Scott saw the Collect for today as a prayer for the gifts of stewardship, when he said,

“God's ears are open only to prayers of humility and obedience. He will not listen if we ask in order to increase our pride, but only if we ask what we need in order to serve Him better. Only those who ask His mercy may expect His grace.”

We pray, we read, we listen, we learn, we teach others, we partake of the Eucharist, and we give thanks for all of this. In short, we worship. Some days we concentrate on God's grace; on others on His provision, and on others His power and glory. Today, we concentrate on stewardship. But there are other things we need to look at as well. It turns out that worship is part of my subject today and its relationship to tribulation.

I didn't mean for worship to be the part of the subject; it just happened that the subject of worship keeps turning up in the books I am reading. I had started in on this book a couple of months ago; but suddenly, a lot of other things took precedence, and I had to set it aside. Its title is, *The Throne, The Lamb, & The Dragon*. It is what I might call a low to mid level commentary on the Book of Revelation. Although it is not designated to be such, I think it would be a very good guide for Bible Study on Revelation. I think we should consider that for this Fall because Revelation is such a hard book for us moderns to understand; and the author, Paul Spilsbury, makes it much clearer. Let me give you a sample of some of Dr. Spilsbury's insights, of how they relate to our recent looks into Revelation, and of how he tells us some surprising things.

The first thing is the key to understanding Revelation, and that is to recognize that it has to be looked at for what it was when it was written. First of all it is a letter. Now it is not just an ordinary letter because it is a Revelation, a revelation from Jesus Christ to John that was meant to sent not only to the seven churches of Asia Minor, but also to many church leaders at the end of the first century. In a sense, it might be considered to be a bulk mailing. Secondly, it is an

apocalypse. Guess what? *Apocalypse* does **not** mean a great disaster or war of some sort. An apocalypse is simply a revelation. In the Greek of the first century, the verb **καλύπτω**, (*kalypto*) meant to cover or to hide [something], and the prefix **απο** (*apo*) meant **away from**. Well, to take a cover away from something that is covered is to reveal it so that it is no longer hidden from sight. So, the Book of Revelation is really a letter that contains an apocalypse, a revelation of something previously hidden that Jesus Christ wanted his followers to know.

The thing about apocalyptic literature of that time was that it almost always was full of metaphors and allusions to myths, and not just the Greek myths that we are familiar with; so that in order for us to understand it, we have to know, or learn, what those metaphors mean and what those myths were trying to communicate. I am not going to get into that today. I just want to give you a feel for the kind of things the book says so that we can understand something in Revelation that might previously have been hidden from us.

Look at the title of the book: The Throne, the Lamb, & the Dragon. These are three of the most prominent symbols in the Book of Revelation. The throne is simply the throne of God. The Lamb is Jesus Christ. Remember that John the Baptistizer first called Jesus that in John 1:29 [29 The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.](#) The Dragon is Satan, the devil; but the Dragon is described as having seven heads, which in Jewish symbology would mean that he is the perfection of evil, that there is nothing more evil than he is. The thing about the Dragon is that he wants the Throne, and that is what all the strife and battles are about. There are only two sides in this great battle because it is truly a battle between Good and Evil, it is fought in our lives as well as in the life of everyone else in the world.

Spilsbury does not say this, but in my opinion God now gives all people a lot of time to decide which side they will be on. As Joshua asked the Jews when he led them, in a passage that is one of the four possibilities for today's OT lesson, Joshua 24:15 [15 And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.](#) And if we choose to serve the Lord, we must do so in faith and diligence as did those who labored under Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem while wearing swords. We do so while wearing the "whole armor of God that is spoken of in Ephesians 6:13-17 that includes: Ephesians 6:16-17 [16 Above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. 17 And](#)

take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God: We need every bit of that to ward off the assaults of all the evil that is in this world.

The great thing that Spilsbury shows us is that Jesus wins by being defeated. When Jesus died on the Cross, Satan enjoyed three days of thinking he had won the first big battle in his war with God; but then Jesus walked out of that tomb, and the world hasn't been the same since that Easter morning. In Revelation, Jesus is portrayed as the sacrificial Lamb, the lamb that is described in Revelation 5:6, : "stood a Lamb as it had been slain," the Lamb of the Passover, yet his victory over evil is tied to His death.

I have tried to give you a taste of this book. I certainly cannot begin to cover but a tiny portion of it in one sermon, so let me give you one little, but important, piece in some detail.

In chapter 7, we read that John is shown an army all dressed in white that the angel tells him is 144,000 men made up of 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. After we are told of each of the 12 tribes individually, John sees something else that boggles his mind:

Revelation 7:9-15 9 After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; 10 And cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. 11 And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, 12 Saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen. 13 And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? 14 And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. 15 Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. Spilsbury says this great company is a company of martyrs, "They are the people of the slaughtered lamb."

These are people who actively washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. Those robes were not washed by the Lamb; the martyrs washed them in His blood. But note what they do: they serve God day and night in His temple. They don't play golf on the perfect course in their perfect resurrected bodies, or surf perfect waves in an endless summer. They worship God. We were shown worship in the throne room of heaven in Chapter 4, and now again in chapter 7. The

focus of Revelation is the Throne and him who sits on it. The first sentence of the second paragraph of Chapter 1 of Spilsbury's book puts it quite succinctly: "At its most basic level Revelation calls us to worship God." It calls us while also giving us a stern warning of the consequences of choosing any other course.

There is one other thing about what the elder said. He said, "These are they which came out of great tribulation,". What is this Great Tribulation"? Spilsbury tells us this way: "In Revelation it refers to the period from the opening of the First Seal [of the scroll with 7 seals] to the arrival of the triumphant Christ. In other words it refers to the time of Christ's Ascension (as the slaughtered Lamb worthy to open the scroll) to his return as the rider on the white horse [in chapter 19] It is the age we are currently living in. To be a follower of the Lamb is to live in a time of trouble"

I think we can pretty much agree that this time is a time of trouble and that it is pretty much universal in today's world. The riots in England are just one example of what happens when a nation loses its faith. Do you know that there are 60-some million people who claim to be members of the Church of England, but that on any given Sunday, there are only about 2 million in church? I could read you one of St. Paul's lists of sins and that would barely be a start on describing what is going on in the world nowadays.

One thing Revelation makes clear is God's adamant opposition to evil and disobedience. Nothing of the sort will be allowed in the New Jerusalem, which will be a true community that is a theocracy in the truest sense of that word, because it will be ruled by the one and only true God. We are told there will be no more death and no more tears. Spilsbury tells us that "no more death" doesn't just mean that there will be an absence of dying; it means that we shall be truly alive, and living with God as His children, as brothers and sisters of His only Son. This is a vision we truly cannot comprehend – to live with God in the holiest place, to drink the living water and eat of the fruit of the tree of life.

We know the path. Jesus is the Way. Come, let us worship Him and eat and drink at His holy table, that we may go and worship Him in that greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building.

AMEN