

Week 7 Worldwide Church (Rev 7 .9-12 Matthew 24 .9-13)

We are privileged to be part of the Church, Christ's body. Each of us is invited and made, by God's gift, to be a vital member. Wow.

"How wonderful to be a part of God's amazing plan."

The church, Our Church... What comes to mind when I say these words?

I suspect we are all a bit too small in our picture. I know I usually am. I tend to think of our parishes and what I should have done or how I have not called on a particular person, or worry about a drain not having been cleared.

The book of Revelation, in our reading, in a vision sent to a persecuted church gives a glimpse of something so very big. In ch 7 John the Divine sees a great apocalypse about to happen led by four terrifying destructive forces but an angel halts those forces until a seal of protection is made. He says (V3) "Do not damage the earth, or the sea or the trees until we have marked the servants of our God with a seal upon their foreheads". He starts local – 12,000 from each of the tribes of Israel but then he saw a great multitude that no-one could number from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, palm branches in their hands. All worshipping God. "Lord I want us all be in that number".

I want everyone to be in that number. It is only by Jesus, and what he has done, "Salvation belongs to our God and to the Lamb" to Jesus. What will he do, yes I pray through us?

We are part of something very big. Worldwide, the word Catholic has Latin roots and is actually bigger than world wide – it means universal, it may be even bigger than planet earth. It certainly involves the company of Saints who have gone before us, those who have been made perfect in Jesus, which is hard to imagine.

Let's try to picture the earthly bit. In 2022, Christianity has approximately 2.8 billion adherents (35% of the global population) and is the largest religion by population. It includes 1.3 billion Roman Catholics, a wide range of Protestants and those in the Orthodox churches. So Christians are in different nations, of different denominations, those who worship in their very best clothes of bright colour who walk miles, those who dance before God with all their might and main, and those who believe that you cannot dance anywhere on a Sunday,

and those who dress very simply and recite scripts they barely understand (e.g 25 million Coptic Christians who use the ancient Egyptian Coptic language).

Let's just shrink the field for a moment and think of the Anglican church. Are they High or low church, urban, rural? Hang on, the "average" Anglican is young, female, black and living in Africa. There are Christians in each part of globe, even in China where there are 68 million!

This is Good news - wherever we go there will be members of the family. Which is Big and exciting. Jesus is our head – so it will be always surprising. There is always more to learn - we can keep growing.

The Bad news? What happened to Jesus? Everywhere the church should expect to suffer. The vast crowd had "come through the great tribulation and washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb." We will suffer if we are following him...!? But this is not the end, rather: glory & new life, now and in the future, but we should expect and prepare for suffering.

Our Gospel reading makes this clear. In Ch 23 Jesus denounced the scribes and the Pharisees who wanted it all "just so", and to suit them. Jesus pushes the boundaries - Samaritans, tax collectors... So today? Does this mean war criminals, drug addicts, even paedophiles? Because all are invited to find new life and become part of the new Creation.

And it almost certainly won't look like we imagine. The church is often found at the centre of action for justice, health and education; often in places where it is very difficult to be a Christian and to be faithful to Jesus. We here are in many ways so comfortable and it is so easy to want to preserve our comfort. Recent history reminds us, that in Germany under the rise of Hitler much of the church did not stand up and object to what it saw happening.

How do we develop a holy courage and fortitude, flowing from Jesus?

- 1 We must make sure we are right with God.
- 2 Wean ourselves from worldly pleasures and comforts.
- 3 Understand our enemy. He wants to damage the church.
- 4 Develop a habit of remembering the presence of God.
- 5 Be careful not to use "prudence" as an excuse for cowardice.
- 6 Appreciate the inner effects of suffering especially for Christ.

7 At this All Saints-tide, think of other brave and persevering believers.

8 Remember the heavenly reward we are promised, better than anything in this life.

9 Love and forgive our enemies and persecutors.

10 Nurture our love for the Lord Jesus.

*Ben Phillips*