



The nature of true greatness and real power

Part 9¹

The lion and the lamb

Revelation 5.1-7

"And I saw in the right hand of him that sat on the throne a book written within and on the backside, sealed with seven seals. And I saw a strong angel proclaiming with a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?'

And no man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon. And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon.

And one of the elders saith unto me, 'Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.'

And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth. And he came and took the book out of the right hand of him that sat upon the throne

Introduction

Today's homily plays two roles. First, it is a follow up homily to our homily entitled "Praise is Comely," with Revelation 4.1-5.13 as the text.

After writing a brief introduction (1.1-3), a general letter to seven churches in Asia, or modern-day Turkey (1.4-20), and a follow up letter to each of these

¹ In this series of homilies, we will explore the topic of "The Nature of True Greatness and Real Power" through the following texts: Matthew 16.13-23; Matthew 16.24-26; Luke 9.28-36, 44-45; Mark 9.33-35 & Matthew 18.2-4; Luke 9.51-56; Mark 10.35-45; Matthew 21.1-5; and Philippians 2.1-11; Revelation 5.1-7

churches individually (2.¹-3.²²), John records his vision of God's heavenly throne room into which he was graciously invited (4.¹-5.¹⁴) in preparation to receive his apocalyptic vision (6.¹-22.⁷). In examining John's vision of the divine throne room, we focused on what John heard rather than what he saw. He heard a crescendo of increasingly large choirs singing praises to God and the Lamb. In today's homily, we will have a look at the one scene that is placed in the midst of these hymns, a scene that serves, really, as inspiration for the hymns.

This homily also represents the final installment in the series of homilies focused on Biblical texts having to do with the theme, "The Nature of True Greatness and Real Power."

Almost exactly midway through his Gospel, Matthew records Peter's apostolic witness, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," with his accompanying, telling, and satanic-inspired apostolic rebuke of Jesus due to the latter's radically divergent and unwelcome view of his own Messiahship and the nature of his greatness and power. From that event, the instruction Jesus provided his disciples focused heavily on correcting his disciples false and satanic views concerning the Messiah and the nature of true greatness and real power. Utilizing memorable events such as his transfiguration, his rejection in Samaria, his triumphant entry into Jerusalem, and, finally, his crucifixion—the greatest sermon ever preached on the nature of true greatness and real power—Jesus demonstrated what greatness and power look like.

the book

Upon entering the divine throne room, John had been captivated, naturally

enough, first by the very being of God, Himself, who sat on his glorious throne. Then, looking around, he observed the incredible sights, sounds, and beings that surrounded God. Now, returning his attention to God, John observes that God holds a scroll in his right hand. The scroll is covered with text on both sides. The scroll, however, remains rolled up, its contents unreadable, being sealed shut with seven seals.

John next observes a “strong angel” and hears his query, “Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?”

We should make a few observations. First, this is no ordinary angel, whatever an “ordinary” angel might be. This is a “strong” angel. This angel has extraordinary abilities. The angel is powerful and energetic. There is little he can’t do. But the angel is incapable of opening and reading the book. Nevertheless, the angel’s “query” is authoritative, as much proclamation as question, as if it already contains the answer in itself.

Second, although we do not yet know the contents, or even the topic of the scroll, we realize that its contents are of a peculiar, sensitive, and challenging nature. First, it is found in the powerful right hand of the most powerful Being in the cosmos. Second, the scroll’s text is heavily secured; perfectly secured, in fact, with its seven seals. Third, not just anyone can be trusted with the scroll’s yet unknown message. Its unknown contents require a certain character of any would-be reader. Any would-be reader must be “worthy.” They must be up to, equal to whatever high challenge the scroll’s text holds. They must possess an extraordinary trustworthiness.

an unmet need

We are dismayed as we read, in answer to the strong angel’s query, that “no

man in heaven, nor in earth, neither under the earth, was able to open the book, neither to look thereon." Perhaps I have an overactive imagination, or perhaps it is just my latent poetic side peeking through, but this is what I hear and see when I contemplate this distressing observation.

I imagine that I am there with John. In fact, I am in a long line. All humanity is in that line. It is mind-boggling in its immensity. Each individual is given an opportunity to try his or her hand at opening and reading the book. All fail. Every last one, myself included, of course.

Our hopes of having the book open raise and fall as each contestant tries his hand at opening and reading the book. They raise as Adam gives it a whirl, but are dashed when he returns the scroll to the hand of God, unopened. They raise as Enoch, Noah, Moses, Elijah, Isaiah each in his turn attempts to open and read the book. Each fails, dashing our hopes once more. Up step Peter, Paul, the sons of thunder. They too fail. We watch hopefully as Nephi, Alma, Moroni try their hand. Nada. Our once bright hope is now little more than a flicker.

Oh, wait, here comes Joseph Smith. If anyone can open it, surely he can. It is a heroic effort. Unlike those before him, he makes several attempts, refusing to accept defeat. But, finally, he places the book, sealed as tightly closed as it ever was, back in the care of God's powerful right arm. Here comes our last great hope. Russell M. Nelson steps forward. Maybe, since the keys currently rest on him, he can open and read the book. His entire ninety plus year old body trembles with the effort. But his attempt is as futile as everyone else's.

This book simply refuses to open and divulge its secrets. John is no less disappointed than the rest of us. John, in fact, "wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon."

I weep with John. We all weep. The heavens weep. The weeping is as

cacophonous as were the worshipping choirs.

Lion and lamb

But, there is at least one who has not given up hope. Though the final person in line has failed to open the book and make its message known, this someone looks off into the distance, waiting and hoping. Finally, he spots someone or something off on the horizon. His heart leaps with joy. He alerts John and all the rest of us.

“Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof.”

We all turn our gaze in the direction indicated by the lone watcher. We look, anticipating a bounding lion coming our way to save the day. A lion! Imagine it! Talk about strength! So powerful is the lion that nations place it on their flag as a signal and symbol of their power. Why, its effectiveness as a symbol of power is right up there with the mighty bald eagle.

But this is not just any lion. It is the “Lion of the tribe of Juda.” The Messiah! Yes, a lion, apt symbol for the flag representing the Kingdom of God.

But wait. Something is wrong. Did we hear right? “A lion is coming.” Are our eyes now deceiving us? That is not a lion standing upright and bold before the throne of God, but a lamb. A lamb that has been subdued and slain. Yes, it possesses, incongruously, seven horns, emblematic of power. But, it’s a lamb! Yes, it possesses seven eyes, emblematic of its insight, but it’s a lamb that was slain. What kind of national flag will this make? What nation puts a slain, bloodstained lamb on its flag. Why, might as well wave the white flag of surrender; a flag that says, “I am yours for the picking.” No, such a flag as this to represent the Kingdom of God is as bad as seeing the kingdom’s king

riding into town on a donkey and then suffocating on a cross!

Unless we are very much deceived, we will never be able to read the book or discover its secrets if our last hope rests in a slain lamb. So, we watch, awestruck, dumbfounded as the lamb takes “the book out of the right hand of him that sits upon the throne.” The wounded and slain lamb opens the book. We can hardly believe our eyes. As if discerning our doubt, our suspicion that our eyes deceive us, a choir sings to confirm in our ears the wonder of what our eyes behold,

“Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation.”²

Living, again, in Jesus’ topsy-turvy world

So what is this? What are we beholding? What are we to make of it? What is the revelator telling us? What Gospel is the slain lamb preaching?

Why, it is more of what we have come to expect from Jesus: more bubble-busting, turn-the-world-upside-down instruction, as is his habit at such impressive moments. The announcement of an approaching lion revived our dimming hopes of knowing what was in the book held by God’s powerful right arm. This, at least, made sense to us. A lion fulfilled our expectations of greatness and power. But our expectations are worse than meaningless. They are false, based upon false notions of greatness and power.

In its failure to meet our expectations, this scene is meant to surprise, to jar, to shock, to awaken. It is meant to expose our own false ideas of greatness

² Revelation 5.⁹

and power and remind us that true greatness and real power are not what we imagine them to be. National flags and symbols with their lions and bears and tigers, and coiled snakes and bald eagles are utter and despicable lies, indicative of the delusion in which the world willfully enwraps itself in spite of all the contrary evidence so easily observable and all the divine revelations to the contrary.

Divine greatness and power bear no resemblance to what the world thinks of when its thoughts turn to questions of greatness and power. True greatness and power are not evidenced through impressive displays of domination and aggression. They are found in humility, in service to others, in sacrificing one's desires and needs to benefit others. True greatness and real power are found in lambs, not lions. Jesus exhibited his greatness and reserved his ultimate exercise of power for the cross. The death of God was the most powerful act in cosmic history.

In mere verses, the lamb's revelation of true greatness and real power will be followed with the opening of John's apocalyptic vision. That vision will begin with an exposé of humanity's warped and twisted views of greatness and power and the consequences that follow. Opening one seal after another, the consequences of those warped and twisted views of greatness and power will be graphically and clearly portrayed in all their ugliness, in all their arrogance, in all their violence, and in all their destruction, and in all their death.

Conclusion

The planet we call earth is a violent place. The violence flows, in large part, from individuals' and nations' warped and twisted views of greatness and

power and the warped and twisted impulses that flow therefrom.

Jesus came to reveal his Father. He came to reveal his Father's greatness and power. He came to reveal the true nature of the divine greatness and power. This greatness and power looked nothing like that imagined by the world. He hoped to change the world through his divinely appointed mission as revelator-in-chief. He hoped his example of true greatness and the exercise of real power would be imitated, duplicated by millions. It was the only hope for survival.

Jesus' revelation was jarring and incomprehensible. It was met with extreme resistance. Even his disciples, adopting Satanic views of greatness and power, would resort to satanic resistance of that revelation. Jesus would have to be vigilant, clarifying over and over again the nature of his own greatness and power, the greatness and power of his Father, and the only true greatness and legitimate exercise of power that could save humanity from its own satanic impulses.

He offered his unwelcome instruction at the time of Peter's enthusiastic, if undiscerning confession that Jesus was Messiah. He unceremoniously let all the air out of the balloon: "You have misunderstood. I will be killed." He did it after the glories of transfiguration. He put a pin in it: "You've sleepwalked through the important part. I will be killed." He did it as Messianic King entering Jerusalem. Pop, goes the balloon: "I'll ride a lowly donkey rather than the white horse of dominance and victory." He did it for the final time in his earthly ministry from the top of the cruel cross. "Look! Understand! What you are witnessing is the greatest example of true greatness and real power that the world has ever known."

It is a sad and devastating critique of humanity that even this greatest of all revelations was not enough to control the insanity of its mad and false views of greatness and power. From his place at the right hand of God, Jesus was

under necessity of renewing the warning revelation of true greatness and power in what would become the final book of the Bible. Here, he presented himself as the greatest and most powerful of beings by opening a book that could be opened by no other being in the universe. In opening the book one seal at a time, he exposed once more the insanity of the world's views of greatness and power and the devastating consequences that flowed from that insanity.

Sadly, that revelation along with every other revelation of true greatness and power has gone unheeded to this day. We are, as John's apocalypse warned so long ago, suffering the consequences of that refusal to learn. Only time will tell if we are about to suffer the final destructive consequences of our rejection of Jesus' repeated revelations concerning the nature of true greatness and real power.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus.