

**THE HEAVENLY CHOIR; REVELATION 7:9-17; JOHN 10:22-33; THREE CHOIR
EVENSONG, APRIL 17, 2016; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER**

Welcome friends and visitors, welcome The Very Reverend Will Mebane and St. Paul's Cathedral Choir and Choral Director Jonathan Scarozza and welcome Rector Judith Lee and Calvary Episcopal Church Choir and Choral Director Alex Benestelli. And on behalf of all of us welcome David Henning, Choral Director/Organist at St. Martin's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX who leads the glorious music we are hearing this afternoon and will again lead much of the same music at this summer's American Guild of Organists national convention in Houston.

One liturgical comment regarding the censing of the communion table at the procession and Magnificat: just as Westminster was the first Presbyterian church to conduct a same-sex marriage in the State of New York, I am confident that you witnessed the first use of incense in a Presbyterian church in the State of New York, perhaps the nation.

I say this simply to point out that what we are doing here as brothers and sisters in Christ, as Episcopalians and Presbyterians, is not only called for in our governing board's policy of collaborating with and learning from other liturgical traditions – and who better to learn liturgy from than the Episcopalians! – but our worship together is a moral calling in these divisive times when even the Republican Party, so monolithic in its Congressional politics and posture, seems hard pressed to find any common ground in its painful search for a presidential candidate.

We are the body of Christ in the world and as we approach the Ascension and the risen Christ's plea for unity among his followers – as if he anticipated the present state of the church's if not the world's fragmentation and disagreement – we do well to heed his words as best we can, right here in the city and region we call home.

Even as interfaith collaboration is no longer an esoteric exercise in our religiously volatile world, so ecumenism is as relevant now as ever in the church universal, where political differences and theological disputes sunder the body of Christ. How are we to lead, or to be heard without some attempt to unify our voice under the banner of Christ we collectively profess? This is today's theme from Revelation.

We aspire this afternoon to emulate and evoke with our 80 strong, three church choirs, the 144,000 voices of the heavenly choir referred to in Revelation 7, who, by Biblical arithmetic represent the twelve tribes of Israel – at 12,000 each.

But those who have survived the 'great ordeal' as it is described are more than the 144k. It is a great multitude as John says that no one could count from every nation and all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb waving branches of palm, robes washed white by the blood of the Lamb, singing, "Salvation belongs to our God."

Two verses later from this symbol-strewn text, a figure with a golden censer stands by the altar, before the throne of God, and the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints rise to the seat of mercy.

What does it all mean? This is precisely the question of John to whom the vision has been given. We find ourselves in the midst of a Q and A in these verses after the opening of the sixth seal and before the opening of the seventh seal.

John asks, "Who can stand after the great day of wrath?" It is not an irrelevant question. The apocalypse he describes – "blackening of sun, falling of stars, disappearance of sky, mountain, island; fleeing of king and slave" this apocalypse is not far removed from what we might imagine the devastation of climate change to bring; cities under water, failure of crops, famine, collapse of economic and political systems.

Indeed, John wants to know who could withstand this wrath. What would salvation mean, how would it occur? John wants to know, as I am sure we do too, in our time – if not for ourselves then for our children and grandchildren who may be the ones to face the final devastation of melting polar ice caps.

The book of Revelation was not the last New Testament text to be written but the penultimate book of the Bible to be scribed. It appeared, nevertheless, late in the life of the early church just when persecution and martyrdom were coming to define Christian witness during the reign of Nero.

Revelation is one of the most important pieces of the biblical narrative. It says, "this is the end of the story, this is how it all turns out." We read it as ancient text but the first generation of readers were living the questions it asks and seeks to answer. The seven seals opened by the Lamb are a kind of apocalyptic advent calendar – behind each seal is more information leading to the consummation of history.

What I am suggesting is that we have more in common with those first readers of this book than we may realize. Not as blueprint or definition how the world will end; but as a faith community asking the eternal questions humans ask – about good and evil; suffering and justice.

We held a memorial service here yesterday for a man who died of Lou Gehrig's disease. I was interested to find an essay written by Tony Judt, the celebrated 20th century historian and expert on the holocaust, facism and anti-Semitism. Judt was diagnosed in 2008 with ALS and died two years later. But in his essay he says how his suffering from this horrific disease gave him insight into his work – humiliation, shame, fear and anger, he writes, he now understood from his experience with ALS were not 'just feelings' they were also political ideas and weapons.

I mention this because then, in John's time, Christians were routinely martyred and now, in our time, everyone from terrorist organizations to some presidential candidates invoke humiliation, shame, fear and anger to achieve their political ends. Some say we live an age of fear.

And I mention it also because salvation is too often thought of only as 'personal salvation' whereas the salvation referred to in Revelation – for a great, diverse multitude without number is communal, corporate, collective.

And that's where the heavenly choir comes in; to sing, "Salvation belongs to our God" is to proclaim that the demagogues and the institutional purveyors of humiliation, shame, fear and death will not prevail but God's people sustained by the One upon the throne to whom we ceaselessly sing.

But also the choir we hear today, in this Evensong, with their songs, hymns and spiritual songs offer a reasonable facsimile, a good guess from our earthly perspective of what it will be like:

music to stir and move the soul, music to bring healing and hope,
music to wipe away every tear of sorrow and suffering from our eyes.

You see, with just a little imagination you can put yourself into John's first century or bring his vision into this century.

Spaces like this were meant to give folk, at least one day a week, whether in the 11th or 21st centuries, an earthly glimpse, but still a glimpse of what it might be like. We can taste *and hear* – today with our multitude of voices – what Revelation says the heavenly paradise will be like at the end of time.

Choirs of diverse people from town and country, different walks of life, race, sexual orientation, age – even creed – for we know Calvin was no friend of the English monarch. The remarkable thing, so obvious we may have missed it is this: from all the countless people in that diverse multitude comes one, single, united voice.

No wonder there is silence before the seventh seal is opened; before John's final vision. And prayer; prayers and incense rising to heaven, rising to the throne of God and the Lamb.

We do not have enough silence in our world today. But any liturgy worth its salt allows for it; allows for the senses to absorb the beauty, the wonder, the awe of God's presence in word, prayer, sacrament and especially song.

What is celebrated here – says the bible, at the end of time – what comes through to John living in a world of persecution and despair, is the chief blessing among all the blessings of the bible – "You shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever and ever."

How better but with poetry, brass, timpani and organ – the king of instruments – and great choirs to proclaim that final, glorious truth of Holy Scripture! Amen.