

Sermon for Easter 3 C

The Text: Revelation 5:11-14

Today I will be proclaiming the word of God from the second reading, Revelations 5:11-14. This Sermon was prepared for lay reading and taken from the LCA worship resources and has been modified under the supervision of Pastor Dale Gosden for this service.

Let us pray.

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.

Grant, O Lord, that we may receive your spirit as we meditate and reflect on your word. Amen

Christians worship on Sundays, not on Saturdays, which must have been a huge change for the first Jewish Christians, who were used to obeying a commandment to worship on the Sabbath (that is, Saturday). Such a drastic change came about to show we are part of something BIGGER – the resurrection of Jesus! This history-altering event took place on a Sunday, which became known as *the Lord's Day*, so billions of people across the world worship the risen Jesus every week on a *Sunday*, just like we are right now. It's encouraging to share this custom with other people around the world, but far more encouraging still to know we share in Jesus' resurrection by coming to meet with *him* every Sunday.

Being part of something bigger than ourselves lifts us up, especially if we feel that faith can, at times, be lonely or isolating.

Our reading today from Revelation makes it clear that when we worship, we are participating in something EVEN bigger still – something that goes beyond the billions of Christians worshipping God on a Sunday, here on earth. And it all has to do with singing in a big group.

It is no secret that I like to sing. Whether in choirs, in the car, in the shower, or as part of worship. My favourite thing to do by far, is to sing in groups, the bigger the better! And I have good reason to believe I am not alone in this opinion. Some time ago I read an interesting article in the newspaper about this craze called 'pub choir'. Perhaps you've heard of this? I believe it started in Brisbane and has expanded around Australia. Basically, they offered people to pack themselves into a pub with hundreds of strangers, learn a song in 3-part harmony in 90 minutes, and perform it together - just to each other in the pub. And it took off! Who would've known that in our day and age something like this would appeal to people?! They had to find bigger venues because so many people wanted to join in. What's going on there?

Even at a secular human level, there is something about gathering with others to sing and rejoice that uplifts the human spirit. When we transpose this into the Church, you know this experience as well. For many people who go to events like our general conventions or district synods, if you ask them what was the best part they don't hesitate but respond: the worship. The singing! Joining together with hundreds of

other Christians to sing thanks and praise to God lifts our spirits and encourages our hearts.

But what if there was an even greater dimension than just the one here on earth?

I wonder how many of us can recite the liturgy of holy communion from heart without the power point slides. The pastor begins with; "The Lord be with you!", congregation responds with "And also with you"

P: "Lift up your hearts"

C: "we lift them up to the Lord"

P: "Let us give thanks to the Lord"

C: " For that is fitting and right"

To which the pastor responds with the preface - a changeable prayer which is part of our liturgy. It's a prayer most of us have probably heard a thousand times, but as I read it out really pay attention to the words. Today's preface goes like this;

'It is truly fitting and right and for our lasting good that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to you, O Lord, Holy Father, almighty and eternal God, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, WITH ANGELS AND ARCHANGELS AND WITH ALL THE COMPANY OF HEAVEN, we adore and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and singing...'

(from The Preface in The Service with Communion, Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement, page 16)

Dear friends in Christ: when we gather for worship, there is so much more going on than meets the eye. We actually join together with the angels in heaven in bringing glory and praise to God. In worship, heaven and earth intersect and overlap. Not metaphorically, but literally and physically in and around the gift of holy communion. It is a wonderful mystery, one that can bring an entirely different perspective to our worship and great encouragement in our faith. Most of all because the ministry of the angels points us not to themselves, but to Christ, "...the Lamb who was slain...". (Revelation 5:12b,)

Our text from Revelation is one place where this unseen part of our worship is revealed to us. St. John says:

'Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands...' (Revelation 5:11)

What we have here is a heavenly vision which St. John was given. It is, if you like, what Christian worship looks like from a heavenly perspective, and it's pretty interesting to say the least!

There is a throne. This is where God sits. To be more specific in this context – God the Father. Around the throne are two groups: the 'living creatures' and the 'elders'. If you go back into chapter four you find there are four living creatures and twenty-four elders. Here's how the

four living creatures are described: *'full of eyes in front and behind'*, one *'like a lion'*, one *'like an ox'*, one *'with the face of a man'*, and one *'like an eagle in flight'*... *'each of them with six wings...'*, and *'day and night they never cease to say, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!"'* (Revelation 4:6ff.) - does that sound a bit familiar?

Traditional interpretations of the four living creatures are that they are the archangels – the commanders and chief angels, who have a responsive liturgy with the 24 elders. These elders are commonly interpreted as the 12 tribes of Israel for the people of God from Old Testament, and the 12 Apostles in the New Testament.

When it comes to the angels there are: *'myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands...'*. (Revelation 5:11b) Now I didn't know what a 'myriad' was formally and had to look it up! It means 10,000, or simply 'a number that cannot be counted'. The magnitude of this joyful heavenly choir, in which we are caught up, is beyond anything we can even imagine.

We are reminded of a parallel text in the book of Hebrews which also describes what happens when Christians gather in worship:

*'...you have come to Mt Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to **innumerable** angels in festal gathering...'* (Hebrews 12:22).

I said earlier that this mystery of joining with the angels can be a great encouragement in faith.

How much more to know that every time we gather we join with ten thousand upon ten thousand angels in joyful praise. We are part of something so much bigger than ourselves.

Then there is something else we need to look at which makes this radically different from the 'pub choir' phenomenon. The problem in something like the pub choir is that people want to express their joy in song, but ultimately there is no object beyond themselves. That joy is a closed circuit.

However, as we join with the heavenly worship of angels and archangels, this worship is directing us to a particular object, or better, to a particular person.

The text says that these myriads of angels all sing together: "*Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing!*" (Revelation 11: 12)

The angels sing of the Lamb. The angels direct us to Christ. The angel's worship is so full of joy because it's all about Jesus and what he has done for us in his death and resurrection.

This is no small thing. Angels are such awesome beings and such a glorious part of God's creation. There has always been a temptation for

people to focus on the angels, and even worship them, rather than join with them in worshipping Christ. For example, if you go down to a bookstore and look on the religions and spirituality shelf, you will quite likely find a number of books on angels, maybe some from a Christian perspective, but more often in the 'New Age' scene. We'll often find they fall into the trap where the angels take centre stage. They often come very close to worshipping the angels themselves, rather than letting the angels direct us to Christ.

We have warnings about this in the Bible itself. In Colossians, St Paul warns against the worship of angels. It's one thing to worship with the angels, but it's another to engage in the worship of angels. Even in the book of Revelation we're looking at today, towards the end, we have another scene which implicitly brings the same caution. Here's what it says:

I, John, am the one who heard and saw these things. And when I heard and saw them, I fell down to worship at the feet of the angel who showed them to me, but he said to me, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God." (Revelation 19:10).

The angels sing of the Lamb. The angels direct us to Christ.

A related mystery here is that the angels in the Bible are depicted as having a very keen interest in God's plan of salvation, and that this plan

was hidden from them in some sense. In 1 Peter you have this little discussion about 'salvation', about the 'sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories', and then at the end of the paragraph the intriguing little line that these are 'things into which angels long to look'. Christ's death and resurrection for our salvation are the 'things into which angels long to look'. What God has done and is doing, and will bring to completion in Christ, captivates the angels. It's as if they are the heavenly spectators to God's grand drama of salvation and they are on the edge of their seats in joyful anticipation of God's marvelous redemptive work in Christ Jesus.

This theme is picked up in the second verse of the well-known hymn

"And Can It Be That I Should Gain":

'Tis mystery all, the immortal dies:

Who can explore his strange design?

In vain the first-born seraph tires,

To sound the deaths of love divine.

'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,

Let angel minds inquire no more'.

In our text today it's as if the angels' joyful anticipation and longing to inquire into the mystery of salvation explodes into an eternal chorus of joyful praise and thanksgiving, when they see the mystery revealed.

This is also why Jesus can say, "..., there is joy in the presence of God's angels when even one sinner repents." That is, who turns to Christ and receives salvation. The angels point us to Christ, the Lamb who was

slain. And so he is worthy to receive all the power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing.

This is exactly what these words do for us in our liturgy, they stand witness to and point us toward our resurrected Lord, and point to the lamb who was slain, who has come to us through Christ's holy and precious gift of holy communion. Just as the angel's worship points to the lamb, the angel's song, the Holy Holy Holy (sanctus) points to the point where Christ becomes truly present before us distributed in, with, and under the bread and the wine.

'Therefore with angels and archangels and with all company of heaven, we adore and magnify your glorious name, evermore praising you and singing... Holy! Holy! Holy! Lord God of hosts. Heaven and earth are full of your Glory, Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!'

I don't know if you have ever felt disenchanted with our worship. I certainly have. Some weeks it feels like we are just going through the motions, saying the words, hearing the sermon but not really listening. How encouraging it is to know that when we gather for worship, there is so much more going on than meets the eye. God calls us to be part of something bigger – his resurrection life, and the celebration of this life both in heaven and on earth. When we feel flat in our Christian faith and worship, and when life seems a bit dull and lacking in wonder, we can close our eyes for a moment in worship, and remember the other Christians, Lutheran and otherwise, and especially the angels joining us

in our worship. See them in their tens of thousands and all their splendour and glory. We are caught up in something so much bigger. And for all eternity the song is of Christ, the Lamb who was slain for us, and who is with us as the risen Lord. Who has given Himself fully and completely to us in His Holy Communion, so that we may live in the blessed hope of eternal life, in His glorious company.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, almighty and eternal God, to You and the Lamb who was slain, be praise, and honour, and glory, and power, for ever and ever! Grant that we may lift our hearts and minds to you in worship till we join the ranks of your saints and angels in your glorious throne room. Amen.

The peace of the Lord keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.