

## Tales of Grief and Glory

Rev. Dr. Edmund Jones, September 7, 2014, PCCH

My name is John the Seer. Not John who wrote a gospel. But John who penned the Revelation. I, John, was a prisoner on the lonely island of Patmos and I had a revelation of things past and things to come. I saw Evil not as some petty folly, not a mugging in a dark alley, or the theft of a coin, or a quick affair after work. In my Revelation I speak of evil as a monstrous darkness, a Beast which recognized no boundaries.

And since your National Church sets aside a day to remember a modern holocaust I will tell you of it and also of other holocausts. I will tell you tales of grief but also tales of glory. And “my witness is faithful and true”.

I saw a hill outside a city wall, a place of barbaric death where those who fought for freedom died in agony. I saw three crosses silhouetted against the sky on a black Friday. The death squad called them bandits and terrorists, but I call them freedom fighters and they died for the freedom of the land they loved. Not a kingdom in the sky, but a kingdom *on earth* which no occupier would defile. I saw three crosses. I am told that two of them had blood on their hands. Maybe that was true, but I ask you is it wrong to struggle against the powerful? Do you let evil men raise crosses - or build ovens - and do nothing?

One of the condemned was a simple man called Iesu, and he screamed his way into death on that terrible afternoon. I tell you He cried out “with a loud voice,” but the heavens were silent and Elijah did not come to take him down.

I did not *personally* know any of the three, but I salute a son of the Torah, a certain Joseph from the village of Arimathea, a high court judge and a cousin of the dying Nazarene, who provided a temporary burial tomb lest the Sabbath be defiled. To this day I do not know what exactly happened to the blood covered body. I only know that when the faithful were keeping the holy Sabbath, *someone* rolled away the stone and tidied up the tomb leaving “the head cloth not lying with the linen wrappings, but rolled up in a place by itself”. My guess is that it was some women from the family. I thank them from the bottom of my heart - for it is the women who watch over us when we are born, and watch over us when we die. It is a tale of grief but hear also a tale of glory.

I knew the man’s disciples, Peter and Paul, who perished on the night when Rome burned and Nero laughed. I knew John - the brother of Iesu - a just and godly man who was cast from the parapet of the temple and clubbed to death. It was a fearful time, but I heard a great voice from heaven and it declared “these are they who have come out of great tribulation and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.” Theirs is a tale of glory, and “my witness is faithful and true”.

I saw that holocaust in the past when Rome burned. And with my inner eyes, I saw a holocaust in the future.

I saw a virginal daughter of the Church and she stepped forward and took the place of a terrified woman - a Church which excommunicated those who believed in cremation, but refused to excommunicate those who built the crematoria to destroy the ancient people of God. It is a tale of grief.

But I will also tell you a tale of glory. I saw Father Lichtenberg who stood before the High Altar, and would not obey the Beast from Berlin, but openly prayed for the people of the Torah. And they laid hands on him and sent him to Dachau. And he perished - as did Peter and John - but he perished into the arms of God. And “my witness is faithful and true”.

Let me tell you one more tale of grief but also of glory. I saw a little girl about 5 years of age as she waited in the station for the train which everyone heard in the night but no one saw. She fed her little brother of two years and he cried. The child cried for he was sick. Into diluted jam she dipped tiny crusts of bread, soothing the child, this little mother of Israel. A tale of grief but also a tale of glory, human caring going on in the midst of monstrous inhumanity.

I, John, am an old man now. Let me tell you how it is with me. When I rise each morning Evil seems so immense, so demonic, so pitiless. I look out and I see a vast Shadow driving defenceless families up into mountains where there is neither water nor shelter, slaughtering those who do not follow its rituals, dragging 200 schoolgirls from their desks, beheading a young reporter. It is savagery on a whole different level. I never met your President, but recently he said it feels like the whole world is falling apart. That’s what I feel. Not messy. Monstrous The Beast seems greater than in all my earlier years. My heart would fail were it not for two other visions which I had, revelations which told me that the light has not gone out even in this time, and our redemption draweth nigh.

I saw an upper room and a table set the night before Sabbath. Set as it was every week when the Teacher and his disciples would meet for a social meal. It was not a festival. It was not Passover. It was not a sacrament. No holy liturgy. No sacred wafer. The purpose of this weekly supper was social intercourse. Laughter and good humoured banter. But as at all Jewish meals sooner or later the conversation would turn to religion, and the coming of Messiah to overthrow the occupiers and bring in God's kingdom.

As the guests arrived one by one each partook of the relishes saying his own blessing before eating or drinking. Finally when they were all gathered (a dozen) and reclined, I saw Jesus took the bread and broke it with words which have never changed from that day to this: "Blessed be Thou, O Lord our God, Eternal King, Who bringest forth bread from the earth". I am told that he said that the day would surely come when guests would arrive from the East but also from the West, from the North but also from the South, and the family would be as diverse as the Creator had made it. They will come from temple and mosque, from cathedral and meeting place. They will come from the bustling cities and the lonely plains, a multitude which no one can number. What a supper where the yamaka and Arab headdress, the bowler hat and the baseball cap sit side by side as one family. My heart rejoiced and I was glad. It is a picture of immense hope and in my Revelation I wrote of the great bridal feast. And my witness is faithful and true.

This morning I, John, bring you prophecy, but true prophecy has not just to do with the shape of the future. It must also challenge and confront the present. I saw that in a divinity student in New York who left his books and returned to Germany to struggle against the evil Beast that had spread over a gifted nation and a shuddering continent. A Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

I saw that when a Baptist pastor spoke of a dream that one day "on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood. A Martin Luther King Jr.

I saw it, as some of you did, when you reached for your morning paper and read of a brave Dutchman called Henk Zanoli, who risked his life to slip a little Jewish boy past the brutal guards, and hid him for two years until that holocaust would pass - the only one of that family to survive. Henk Zanoli, a Gentile, was awarded a Jewish medal for his bravery in the face of unutterable evil and the Beast he would not obey. But when they destroyed his home in Gaza six weeks ago he gave the medal back in memory of over 2,000 dead - and one in every four of them a child. "We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground".

But in my vision I saw a God who promised a new heaven and a new earth. We need a new heaven. And when I sit at the table time after time, I miss those whose places are empty now, those we have loved long since and lost awhile. I wonder what that new heaven will be like? Will our loved ones know us when we come safely into harbor on the other side? Will the widow be held again by that rugged man who loved the sorrows of her changing face? Will the mother clasp the child she lost with such unconsolable grief?

So I John am not cast down. It is not all darkness. For in my vision I saw that God had given us not only a new heaven - but also a new earth.

Imagine a new world where no child is ever abandoned, no woman is ever abused, and no old person is ever forgotten. (ii) Imagine a world where no people are occupied, but everyone will sit "under his vine tree and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid" (Micah 4. 4). A new earth. And my witness is faithful and true.

*But, dear friends, the End is not yet!* And until we gather at the river which flows by the throne of God we must confront and challenge the Evil we see. We will stand strong against the Beast. Where there is no *hope*, let us invent it. Where there is no *compassion*, let us practice it. Where there is no *liberty* let us create it. Where there is no *tolerance* let us live it.

And out of the tales of grief which I have told you this day there will arise tales of glory - glory to the One who sits upon the throne. And blessed, thrice blessed, are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb". So let it be! So let it be! And let all God's people say "Amen".