

The Lamb on Mount Zion

A sermon about our continuing struggle with racism

by the Rev. Jeremy F. Simons, Bryn Athyn, January 9th, 2022

“Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred and forty-four thousand, having His Father’s name written on their foreheads.” Revelation 14:1

These “one hundred and forty-four thousand” stand for angels devoted to the Lord, who stand with Him in the struggle against evil. They are said to have the Father’s name “written on their foreheads” – the name representing their quality and their acknowledgment of Him.

Our topic this morning is the way that the courageous stand of a few can have an impact on many others. These angels who stood with the Lord represent those who are willing to stand up against the seemingly unbeatable power of those described as “the beast” and “the dragon” in this story from Revelation.

The way that beliefs and behaviors gain currency and popularity with a group of people is a mysterious thing. Some cultures are characterized by honesty, kindness, and morality, others by other qualities. Sometimes cruel practices and immorality are tolerated and even promoted. Then sometimes people stand up against those evils, and sometimes this leads to significant and dramatic changes.

Next weekend we honor the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as someone who stood up against racism and bigotry, and who was able to mobilize people to change this country for the better. We especially honor the way that he approached this seemingly impossible task, changing the thoughts and feelings of millions of Americans – a task that continues today. How does this kind of change happen? Why do we cling so tenaciously to harmful ideas in the first place? This is our topic this morning.

Changing public perceptions

Our lessons from Revelation 13 and 14 approach this question by describing a scenario in which people have a name or a symbol written on their foreheads, a name or symbol that accurately describes them.



The 144,000 with the Lamb on Mt. Zion

In chapter 13 a beast appears, who causes all those who believe in him to receive a mark on their right hand or forehead. He then says that no one may buy or sell except one who has this mark.

In chapter 14 a lamb appears on Mt. Zion, together with 144,000 followers, each of whom have the Father’s name written on their foreheads.

These two groups clash, the one held in subjugation by false

beliefs and harmful practices, the other set free by the truth and their willingness to follow the Lord.

Dominant cultural ideas

This struggle is the subject of the whole book. Similar battles go on continuously all over the world, and also within each one of us. And even though we are all aware that we are not angels and that we are attracted by evil, we can’t help but be puzzled by the peculiar attachment that so many people have to ideas that are clearly wrong. When we hear assertions that we believe to be false repeated endlessly, we may wonder why this happens and whether it will ever change. Martin Luther King surely wondered how it could be that racist ideas were so prevalent and accepted.

In Revelation 13 and 14 the false belief represented by the dragon and the beast is the idea that our salvation is due to Christ's sacrifice to atone for the sins of humanity. Faith in Christ then causes this atonement to pay the price of our sins, attributing to us Christ's merit, and we are saved. This has been orthodox Christian doctrine for centuries, and it is seen as unassailably true.

In chapter 13 people worship the beast and proclaim his invincibility:

"And they worshiped the beast, saying, 'Who is like the beast? Who can fight against it?'"

This symbolizes an acknowledgment by the general populace that it is a sacred truth that no one can do any good work of himself or fulfill the law. It symbolizes the preeminence of that doctrine over any other because no one can dispute it.

"Who can fight against it?" also means symbolically that the leaders of the church and its teachers after them have so cleverly and skillfully defended and thus fortified the doctrine by arguments that it cannot be attacked." Apocalypse Revealed 580, 581

The point here is that ideas come into being and gain currency as part of our long-term search for answers. Some mistaken ideas come to be so strongly held that they cannot be disputed – or to do so is heresy. When an idea like this becomes orthodox, accepting it is mandatory if a person wants to be taken seriously. As we read:

"No one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast." (Revelation 13:17)

"This symbolically means that no one is allowed to teach from the Word, or consequently to be inaugurated into the priesthood... but one who acknowledges that doctrine and swears to a belief in it and love for it." Apocalypse Revealed 606

History gives us plenty of examples of bad ideas that have held sway for long periods of time. From racist beliefs about people, to erroneous medical ideas and practices, to dangerous and destructive political and economic systems.

Amazingly, the Writings tell us that it is actually easier to convince people of things that are false than things that are true. As we read in our lesson:

"There is nothing that cannot be defended, and falsity more easily than truth.

Since every falsity shines in the natural self with its appearances and illusions, and truth only in the

spiritual self, it is apparent that falsity can be defended more easily than truth." Divine Providence 318

Why would this be? The answer given here is that we tend to think according to natural appearances, and so we tend to believe whatever confirms the appearances and illusions of the natural world.

For example, if we are told that something is harmful, but it doesn't seem harmful to us, we then have to decide whether to believe what we are told or our own perception. It then becomes a question of what kind of evidence or reasoning will convince us that the thing is either harmful or not.

Another aspect of this is that we tend to believe whatever appeals to our own interests. If something is considered harmful, but we make our living from it, this will give us the motivation to believe that it is not harmful.

But it is really much more complicated than this, because our opinions are also formed by the mindset of the people we associate with and respect. We are hugely influenced by our peer group. And beyond that we are even more strongly influenced by our spiritual associations, the spirits who surround us and share their feelings with us.

For these reasons and many others societal disagreements are hard to resolve. This natural divergence of ideas and beliefs is the origin not only of the issues surrounding racial justice, but arguments about climate change, Covid, sexuality, politics, elections and many other topics.

The variety of opinions that exist among us is a good thing, and the Writings praise the tolerance of the opinions of others that exists when there is true charity. But there is a difference between the varieties of opinions about faith, and a tolerance of truly harmful evils.

Martin Luther King was not tolerant of racial hatred, even as he advocated racial justice in ways that were not aggressive towards those who disagreed. The constant aim was to shift public opinion.

How societal change happens

The cornerstone of this shift is a clear sight of the truth of the issue. This sight needs to be based on what is seen as reliable information – information that people believe. Each side brings out its own facts over long periods of time, aiming

at consensus.

Consensus is hard to reach, however, and we often see one side of the argument repeated endlessly, with stories brought forward to support the narrative, while those who think differently are silenced. It can be maddening to see this happen.

This is what is happening in Revelation 13 and 14. In those chapters the “world” accepts the dragon’s point of view, persecuting everyone who is opposed. At this point in the book the Woman Clothed with the Sun has had her Child, which has been caught up to heaven, and the dragon and his followers are after her.

This Child has followers in the heavens. He stands for “*a rational doctrine that will convince all who are willing to be convinced*” (*Apocalypse Revealed* 5446). His followers are the *one hundred and forty-four thousand* on Mt. Zion. Initially no one is listening to them at all.

Still, from this point on in the book the dragon and his associates continually lose power, and those on the Lord’s side gain it. The reason for this change, as described in the *Apocalypse Revealed*, is the power of information, the power of the truth, the success of this “*rational doctrine*,” exposing the evil and articulating what is good.

More than this, though, is the power of good. Everything depends on the existence of people who are able to see the goodness in the truth. One way that this is described in the Writings is the distinction between people who are affected by truth and those who are affected by good:

“Take as an example the idea that the neighbor is to be loved for the good that resides with him. Those with whom the affection for truth exists think, question, and discuss whether this is true, that is, whether it is so. They ask what the neighbor is, what good is; but they go no further than this, and therefore they shut the door to wisdom against themselves. Those however with the affection for good assert that the thing is so and do not consequently shut the door but enter in and so come to know, recognize, and perceive from good who is pre-eminently the neighbor, ...and that everyone in differing ways is the neighbor. Thus they perceive things beyond description, over and above what is known to those with the affection solely for truth.”
Arcana Coelestia 2718

In other words, people who genuinely love good

will not be stuck in endless debates but will see the truth and see the good in it. As it is put in *Canons*:

“At this day nothing else than the self-evidencing reason of love will reestablish [the church].” *Canons* 1

The same forces are at work in the fight against bigotry. Harmful attitudes and practices are gradually exposed, seen for what they are by people who are willing to see, and the hearts of the nation are gradually changed.

The courage of the one hundred and forty-four thousand

But in chapters 13 and 14 the resolution remains uncertain, as the struggle against racism and other evils still remains uncertain in many ways today. The *one hundred and forty-four thousand* gathered with the Lamb on Mt. Zion, are a courageous few.

Unlike Michael and his armies who fight the dragon in chapter 12, they are not powerful angels from the ancient heavens who are invulnerable to the dragon’s wiles (*Spiritual Experiences* 5747). They are Christians who have resisted the false ideas around them and entered the higher heavens.

As in most conflicts the ultimate outcome is to them in some doubt. None of us know exactly what name is written on our foreheads, or to what extent we succumb to the pressure that is the mark of the beast. Nor can we even be certain of what stage the conflict has reached in our world and in our lives.

The guiding hand of Providence

We can, however, be sure that, wherever we are in the struggle, Providence moves all things in a good direction.

The reasons why some ideas and attitudes prevail among us, while others that may seem better are neglected, are hard to explain. “*The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice.*” Much of it depends on how many people there are who are able, through all the arguments, to recognize goodness. These are those who are able to sing the new song in our lesson:

“They sang as it were a new song before the throne; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones that follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being first fruits to God and to the Lamb.” *Revelation* 14:3,4 **AMEN**

Readings from the Word

Revelation 13:

Then I saw another beast coming up out of the earth, and he had two horns like a lamb and spoke like a dragon. ¹⁶ He causes all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hand or on their foreheads, ¹⁷ and that no one may buy or sell except one who has the mark or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

Revelation 14:

Then I looked, and behold, a Lamb standing on Mount Zion, and with Him one hundred *and* forty-four thousand, having His Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a voice from heaven, like the voice of many waters,

and like the voice of loud thunder. And I heard the sound of harpists playing their harps.

³ They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred *and* forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being first fruits to God and to the Lamb. ⁵ And in their mouth was found no deceit, for they are without fault before the throne of God.



“And they worshiped the beast, saying, ‘Who is like the beast? Who can fight against it?’” Revelation 13:4

Apocalypse Revealed 613

Having His Father's name written on their foreheads.” This symbolizes the acknowledgment out of love and faith among them of the Lord's Divinity and of His Divine humanity...

Therefore, with respect to the people who are the subject here, we are told that they had the Father's name written on their foreheads, inasmuch as the 144,000 that were sealed of the twelve tribes of Israel mean angels of the higher heavens, all of whom are prompted by the goodness of celestial love, and that is, as we said, the love meant by the Father.

Divine Providence 318

1. There is nothing that cannot be defended, and falsity more easily than truth.
2. Truth is not seen by confirmed falsity, but confirmed truth causes falsity to be seen.
3. To be able to affirm whatever one pleases does not constitute intelligence, but only ingenuity, possible even in the worst of people...

[2] As regards the FIRST, that there is nothing that cannot be defended, and falsity more easily than truth: What cannot be defended, when atheists argue that God is not the creator of the universe, but that nature is the creator of it? That religion is simply a shackle, and one for the simple and the masses? That humans are a species of animal, and die the same death? When they argue that adulterous affairs are allowable, and that guile constitutes intelligence, and maliciousness wisdom?

Who does not defend his own heresy? ...Since every falsity shines in the natural self with its appearances and illusions, and truth only in the spiritual self, it is apparent that falsity can be defended more easily than truth.