

## Revelation 7. The World at His Feet

In Revelation 7:9 John describes his vision: *"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."*

Uniting people from different nations, tribes, peoples and languages is a formidable task. When the Olympics are on many speak of the power of sport to unite people. Soccer is called the World Game. But I am reminded of the soccer coach out in our western suburbs who had black-skinned Sudanese in his team and other players from various European backgrounds. He got frustrated with some of the racist remarks being exchanged between players on the basis of skin colour. So he got the team together and said, "This has got to stop. From now on there is no black in this team and there is no white. There is only green." Having got that off his chest he said, "Now, let's get on with our practice session. We will form two teams to play each other. Let's have the light greens over here and the dark greens over there."

You don't effect unity by denying difference. It is striking therefore that John's vision observes the same diversity which is positively referred to back in Genesis 10 where we have what is often called The Table of Nations. There we read of "clans" and "languages" and "territories" and "nations". John picks up these same terms with his "nation, tribe, people and language." Soon after the record of ethnic diversity in Genesis 10 we read how God promised Abraham. *"I will make of you a great nation" and "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (Gen 12:3).

John sees the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham; he sees a great nation comprised of all peoples on earth, unitedly crying out to God in a loud voice.

A work colleague went on a bushwalk in Canada, with seven others, all from different nations. At one point they were scared because they had been warned about bears. They had been told that the way to scare off bears was by making lots of noise. So they decided to sing loudly as they hiked along. But they could only think of one song they could all sing. Guess what it was? Bohemian Rhapsody. So there they are, people from eight different nations, united in one aim as they loudly sing together,

*Mama just killed a man,  
Put a gun against his head, pulled my trigger, now he's dead.  
Mama, life had just begun,  
But now I've gone and thrown it all away.*

Our text speaks of this great nation composed of people from "every nation, tribe, people and language" crying out in a loud voice. But they do not do so because they are afraid of being attacked. On the contrary, they are united by the fact that every one of them feels perfectly secure and revels in the wonder of salvation. There is no bear to fear. For there is a Lamb before whom they stand. He's a very strange lamb indeed. You expect a lamb to be led with other sheep by a shepherd. But the chapter ends: *"the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes"*.

The only words those bushwalkers from many nations could remember from that famous song by Queen concerned killing a man. The first time the expression "from

every nation, tribe, people and language" is used in Revelation is in the context of singing a new song which also concerns the killing of a man, the Lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ: *"You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation"* (5:9).

Here's what unites us as the great nation extracted from every nation, tribe, people and language. We all stand before the throne and in front of the Lamb wearing white robes that have been washed in the blood of the Lamb (7:14). Mussolini had something quite different in mind when he said, *"Blood alone moves the wheels of history"*. Unwittingly, his words communicate a great truth. When Jesus came on the scene God's vehicle for creating the great Abrahamic nation was the people of Israel and the wheels of that vehicle were clogged in the deep cloying mud of human depravity. The blood of Jesus alone has moved those wheels. So John looks ahead to the day when God's great purpose for history is achieved in the creating of a great, cosmopolitan nation - a nation that is no longer defined by Jewishness, a thoroughly cosmopolitan nation that incorporates Jews as well as every people group on our planet, through that blood which has cleansed each of us from the filth and stench of our sins.

Our bushwalkers feared a bear. It is striking that our text concerns the terror inspired not by a fearsome beast like a massive bear but by the Lamb. Here note the broader context. Revelation 7 occurs after the sixth of seven seals of final judgment has been opened. Consider how Chapter 6 closes: *"Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand!'"*

That's the question: On the day of wrath who can stand before the throne and before the Lamb? What's the answer? *"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb."* Who can stand? That international community of people purchased by the blood of the Lamb. Those who have been washed in his blood have nothing to fear on that day of terrifying wrath.

Why are they able to stand? For a more immediate answer see how Chapter 7 begins: *"four angels standing at the four corners of the earth, holding back the four winds of the earth to prevent any wind from blowing on the land or on the sea or on any tree"*.

It's interesting that in Bohemian Rhapsody, Queen sing,

*I'm just a poor boy, I need no sympathy,  
Because I'm easy come, easy go, Little high, little low,  
Any way the wind blows doesn't really matter to me, to me.*

Think again. When we start Chapter 7 the wind is not just going to blow "any way" it is going to blow "every way" and that matters to every person on the planet because these are terrifying winds, winds that will turn the seas into monster tsunamis, winds of such magnitude that granite rocks will be smashed to smithereens. But God is holding back that day of final judgment until the full number of his elect, his chosen ones, has been finalized. The four angels who will unleash those winds of final judgment are presently holding them back. For an angel from the east, from paradise,

who carries the seal of the living God, has commanded them, "*Do not harm the land or the sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God*" (7:3). That's what is happening right now. God will continue to put a seal on the foreheads of those he calls to be his servants until there are 144,000, that is, the complete number of all he has chosen.

Why is that great multitude of people from every nation, tribe, people and language able to stand before the throne and in front of the Lamb? Why won't we cower in terror like everyone else? Why won't we seek to hide from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb? Why will we be able to stand when the great day of their wrath comes? Because we have been sealed on our foreheads.

A few years back 20 year old Andrew Fischer, used eBay to sell advertising space on his forehead. He said he wouldn't let a swastika or anything racist or 666 be put on his forehead. Each one of us, if we are truly servants of our God, has a seal on his or her forehead and everyone of us presents our entire body, our entire life, to God to be used unconditionally by him for advertising space. And remember that one of the chief ways the Lord advertises is through the unity of his people, as Jesus prayed: "*May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*" (Jn 17:23).

When John speaks of the angel placing the seal on our foreheads, John is comparing our situation with that of the Israelites prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the slaughter of its inhabitants at the hands of the Babylonians. People had been practising idolatry even in the temple itself. God promised to destroy them for this. In the vision of Ezekiel 9 God sends a man clothed in linen to put a mark on the foreheads of all who grieve and lament over all the detestable things done in the temple. Those who have this mark will be spared. Look at the list of the twelve tribes provided by John. Notice one oddity. The tribe of Dan is excluded and replaced by the tribe of Manasseh. Why? Presumably, because it was in Bethel and Dan that Jeroboam set up his two golden calves. When the great nation, the true Israel is formed it will be constituted of all who deplore idolatry and serve and worship God alone.

John's language is rich in irony. On the one hand, there is a sense in which we can number the chosen people of God, that is, 144,000. Yet when after this John looks at this great nation he sees "*a great multitude that no one could count*". Here John plainly has in mind that time recorded in Genesis 15 when God took Abram outside and said, "*Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.*" Then God said to him, "*So shall your offspring be*".

Clearly, the number 144,000 is symbolic, contrary to the view held by Jehovah's Witnesses. Compare Revelation 5-7 with Revelation 21-22. You will find striking parallels. In 21:16 we read that the New Jerusalem is "*12,000 stadia in length, and as wide and high as it is long*". Indeed, the number 12 is used repeatedly to describe the perfection of the New Jerusalem and the number 144 is also used. The 144,000 are also mentioned right at the beginning of Revelation 14 where they have the name of the Lamb and of God on their foreheads, as do the saints in the New Jerusalem (22:4).

By the way, Ezekiel 9 does not speak about a seal on the foreheads but merely of a mark. The notion of a seal on the forehead goes back to Exodus 28. There we are told

that a gold plate must be placed on the forehead of the high priest, engraved "AS ON A SEAL" with the words "Holy to the Lord". The book of Revelation tells us over and over again that God has made us the great nation, that is, the holy nation and royal priesthood that God declared Israel to be at Mount Sinai as recorded in Exodus 19. Look how the book starts at 1:5b-6: "*To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.*" That's why Jesus died for you and me. That's what it means to bear the seal of the living God on our foreheads. We are now a royal priesthood. Central to being a priest is the right and privilege of access into the very glory-presence of God. Look at 7:15 and see for yourself that when we serve God we do so as regal priests: "*they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.*" What a future! To live every moment of our lives in the immediate presence of God, to be ever surrounded by, immersed in the glory-presence of our great and wonderful God.

What is our role in seeing the vision of Revelation 7:9 fulfilled? The text itself is silent here. Indeed, there is no hint in the entire book of Revelation as to how this colossal cosmopolitan community got to be standing before the throne and the Lamb, except for the fact Jesus died for all of them. Somehow, people from *every nation, tribe, people and language* ended up as followers of Jesus and people from *every nation, tribe, people and language* also ended up as his disciples. But in his Gospel John recalls Jesus' prayer (Jn 17:20-21): "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one." Clearly, people come to believe in Jesus when they hear the "message", the same gospel taught by John and other apostles. So, bottom line? Our role in seeing the vision of Revelation 7:9 fulfilled is to do all we can to see that people "from every nation, tribe, people and language" have the opportunity to respond to the gospel message. I say "all we can" because, clearly, this is too big a task for any one church community.

What can we do? First, recognize that we need to take the message across cultures. Don't just sit and watch while others do the ministry. You don't have to have special training and technical know-how to talk to others about Jesus, what he has done for you and what he means to you.

Think about how you can make contact with people and build relationships. Consider restaurants within reach of the church when you go out for meals. In terms of attracting folk from other cultures into the church recognize that food is very important. Inviting people into your homes. Offer hospitality. Why not consider occasionally having lunch after the service? I know many churches which think and say they are friendly churches but they only seem friendly to those who are already part of those churches. Outsiders don't find them friendly at all. Go out of your way to make sure visitors are spoken to and made to feel at home. As a church make sure you identify all of the local organizations accessible to the church and do what you reasonably can as church members to become a part of such organizations with a view to building relationships with people, e.g. getting to know people at the local gym or becoming a member of community clubs. Some of you may need to do some brainstorming about such opportunities. Maybe you need to start a new home group for newcomers.

Second, gauge where your church presently stands with respect to the challenge of ministering across cultures.<sup>1</sup> Third, develop a plan. The wonderful outcome described for us in Revelation 7:9 is the result of God's wonderful plan of salvation. This doesn't just happen. God is fully intentional in all that he does. Sure, for us planning isn't the same because God is in such complete control he ensures everything goes according to plan. But we too are called to be an intentional people, e.g. to be intentional about seeing that God is glorified in all we do and say. Since God is glorified when his great promises to Abraham are fulfilled as in Revelation 7:9 then we need to be intentional about getting the message to people from other cultures. That's a good reason to get serious about planning. So may I encourage you to work your way systematically through the Mission Action Plan<sup>2</sup>, though make sure you use an external facilitator. Our experience is that most churches that try to do this by themselves lose objectivity and/or only plan in a half-hearted manner.

May the Lord use your church, through both overseas and domestic ministry, to contribute significantly to his great plan of forming a people for himself " *from every nation, tribe, people and language*".

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<sup>1</sup> See "How is Your Church Positioned for Multicultural Ministry?"  
<http://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/category/articles/>

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.facetofaceintercultural.com.au/>