

Alice J Stewart

Today's reading from Revelation ends with the final words of Revelation. It ends with the final words of the entire Bible. These final words tell us who Jesus is, assure us that he's coming, and tell us that we who desire God's Kingdom through Christ will be showered with every blessing. Isn't this the gospel message in a nutshell?

Revelation is a long story, and a long vision. It's packed with imagery and action. And it's only natural to end a story with the moral of the story. In this case, the moral is the gospel message.

The Revelation of John was written at a time of upheaval in the Roman Empire which led to some challenges in the growing but still fragile early Church. Revelation is written as a letter to churches, sharing a unique vision and a message from Jesus himself of hope and encouragement. I'm going to say later that we are always in need of a vision from the Holy Spirit and a message of hope and encouragement, but right now I'm going to take us down a bit of a rabbit trail. I'm going to put on my anthropologist hat and talk a bit about the importance of stories and visions in our ancient human past.

To the best of scientific knowledge, stories have been an important part of being human for at least 40,000 years. Stories aren't just things we make up for the amusement of children. Stories are humanity's greatest invention that doesn't involve killing something. Stories use words to paint a picture of a world we do not see. Stories guide us to a place in our minds, and that allows us to take what was once unimaginable, and make it real. Stories are shared among us. Visions are private, but stories can make visions universal.

The great storytellers of early humanity were people we might think of as shamans. Shamans were the earliest religious leaders among the earliest human beings. Shamans went to the spirit world beyond the world we know,

and they returned with visions and knowledge, with wisdom and stories, with guidance for survival and healing. They did this through a lot of study, through trance states, and were sometimes assisted by psychedelic substances found in the natural world.

As humans developed, so did our religions. We came out of the ice ages and started agriculture. We built complex social systems and cities. The great Abrahamic religions came out of these new, complex socio-cultural realities.

Notice that the religious leaders and prophets in our scriptures continued to tell stories and to heal others. They did this through extensive study, a lot of spiritual practice, that sometimes may have led to trance states with visions that were later shared. This is what's happening in Revelation. Revelation isn't just some strange book, it's part of a long tradition. By the way, there is no evidence that psychedelic substances were used either by Old Testament prophets or anyone who came after among Jews or Christians. Psychedelics are, frankly, somewhat rare in religions around the world.

So, I've taken us from 40,000 years ago to the last book in the Bible written in the last decade of the first century AD. And that's where the Bible ends.

I think many of us think that there were no other visions or revelations or sacred stories that need to be shared among the faithful after the back cover of the Bible is reached. To a certain degree, it is true that a lot that's come after is commentary. A lot of ink has been spilt over the last two thousand years. Some of that ink includes visions and revelations and sacred stories that we treasure to this day and share as widely as we can. Julian of Norwich. Hildegard von Bingen. St John of the Cross. To name a few.

It's not only venerable saints in the past who share vivid insights drawn from rigorous spiritual practice and study. Every preacher of every sermon you've ever heard has sought soulfully for the vision and message the Spirit wants the Church to hear. That requires the same effort as those who've gone

before us. Long years of spiritual practice. Flashes of insight that pull together hours of scripture reading and written reflection. Not, however, the use of psychedelics.

Study. Practice. Reflection. Insights. Sharing those insights. Psychedelics. I've mentioned all these things a few times. I've said that everything but the hallucinogens are important for the building up of the church, for our teaching, for sharing a vision of hope, and for our healing. Just as Revelation was written and just as every sermon is preached.

This is the holy work we do, these are the reasons we do it, and this is the way the holy work is done. Not just by a few of us, but by all of us. Study. Practice. Reflection. Insights. Sharing those insights. And if we don't do it, we shouldn't be surprised when hurting people go elsewhere for their visions and healing.

Open a newspaper or magazine these days. What do we find? We find an increasing use of psychedelics to heal those suffering from a variety of ailments. Those suffering severe depression, post traumatic stress, and hospice patients are now sometimes treated with psilocybin mushrooms, LSD, ketamine, and DMT which is derived from the ayahuasca vine.

If you've got problems and you need healing, you can go to a modern day shaman and enter the spirit world using psychedelics and find relief. You can find a vision to share with other hurting people, share with your therapist, and bring to your spiritual life.

This isn't part of our religious tradition and doesn't need to be. I'm not suggesting that. I am glad for the healing of those who are hurting, but I grieve that the Church is surrounded by those who are so desperate for healing and vision and a spiritual life. People so desperate they are turning to things far outside the traditions of the Church. So desperate they will travel to Peru to vomit for three days while hallucinating.

The Church can and has provided healing and vision through the hope of Jesus. The Church can and has shared this vision of hope with a hurting world. Why does it seem as though we are ineffective lately?

I think it's because, right now, we are also a fragile Christian Church in a culture of incredible upheaval just like the Church was when Revelation was written. We've held on to the vision in Revelation for almost two thousand years and it's been a real comfort. Revelation assures us of where we're going and that Jesus leads us there. Revelation is our shared vision.

But it's hard even for us to understand, and we've studied it, reflected on it, talked about it, and prayed through it.

Revelation is the last book in the Bible. Our reading from Revelation today are the last words in the Bible. But I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that Revelation is not the last word, but rather a launching point.

What would happen if we, each and every one of us, took our years of study, drew from our years of prayerful reflection, collected our insights, and shared our vision of God's holy Kingdom with the world?

Church is not a spectator sport. We are the saints of the Church. The Church is not a consumer culture where we take insights in but never share the insights given to us by the Spirit. And you do have insights gained from years of prayer and reflection. We all do.

Your visions of God's glorious Kingdom may not be as spectacular as Revelation. It's unlikely that the entire Church will read your insights like we do our blessed saints. But just because you won't set the world on fire doesn't mean you're off the hook.

Your vision of God's Kingdom-Come can and will bring healing and comfort to those you share it with. Your vision of us all eternally living in the blessed forgiveness and eternal life of Jesus can and will heal and comfort and bring hope to this church and, ultimately, to a waiting and hurting world.

What is your revelation? A hurting world is waiting to hear it. Amen.

