

## APOCALYPSE (3)<sup>1</sup> THE “SECOND COMING”

It's somewhat misleading to speak of a “Second Coming” of Christ, of Christ “returning” or “coming again”. Such expressions go back to words of the two angels who appear when the disciples have seen Christ going into heaven, when he was “being lifted up”, a cloud taking him out of their sight. At this ascension, the angels become visible to them, standing by them and asking why they are standing there looking into heaven. “This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him going into heaven” (Acts 1:11).

“He will come in the same way as you saw him going into heaven.” You saw him going from you – you will see him coming to you. In essence, this Ascension experience has to do with their “seeing”, their ability to perceive; it doesn't say anything about Christ departing and returning. Their eyes can't follow him anymore now that he is carried up into heaven because “a distance” has grown between them, as Luke puts it in his gospel (Lk 24:51).<sup>2</sup> Once more, it will be a question of human perception when “a cloud will bring him into your sight” – as we might paraphrase and conclude what these angels say. He has not really gone away – he has been “seen to go”, and in the same way he will be “seen to come”. It's a question of perception, of awareness even.

In the Gospels, in the words of Christ himself, in times of earthly and also of cosmic disturbances, there will “appear the sign of the Son of man in heaven”, and people on earth “will see the Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven” (in Matthew's version, 24:30). In this way, Christ answers a question about his *parousia*, which is Greek for his “presence”, his “arrival”, his “coming”, and about the close of the age (24:3). – Would it be possible that Christ speaks about the “coming of the Son of man” when he speaks about the way he himself will once more enter human perception, human awareness, as anyhow he is “with you always, to the close of the age” (28:20)? As “lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west”, as “were the days of Noah” when “the flood came and swept them all away”, so will be this presence, the awareness of the presence of the Son of man (24:27 and 37-39) by human beings able to see him.

The “Son of Man” in his coming: are these indeed the words Christ uses when He wants to signal that human beings are starting to become aware of His cosmic presence – of Him who had become the “God of man” through death and resurrection? For many of the apostles, his contemporaries, this coming was almost at hand, was “coming” soon”, in the near future; in line with the general apocalyptic mood of the century. Yes, soon indeed he will be with us again! – that's what they felt.

This urgency was for instance felt by Paul when he invoked an encompassing apocalyptic picture: “We who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord will himself descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first; then we who are alive, who are left, shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air; and so we shall always be with the Lord” (I Thess 4:15-17). Or by James, who uses an amazing picture of preparation: “Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient over it, until it receives the early and the late rain. You also be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand” (5:7-8). “Establishing your hearts”: this would mean preparing your hearts by “strengthening”, by “buttressing”. The Greek word, for instance, is used about the way the abyss is there between the living and the dead, in the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus (Luke 16:26), or of the way Christ “set” his face to go steadfastly to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). – Let your hearts receive both the early and the late rain!

John, in his first letter which is so closely connected with his gospel and like the old presbyter himself in his last years is overflowing with love, states that for us, who are God's children now, “it does not yet appear what we shall be; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as

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<sup>1</sup> After a presentation in the Boston Christian Community congregation, July 29, 2007. Edited by Muriel Morris.

<sup>2</sup> See Rudolf Frieling's article on the Ascension of Christ, in his (German) collected works: *Gesammelte Schriften zum Alten und Neuen Testament*, Part III, *Christologische Aufsätze*, Stuttgart 1982, pp 172-179.

he is" (1 Jn 3:2). This will be the secret of our connection with the Son of man: that when we will be ready "to be like him", recognizing in him "what we shall be": then he will be coming – even when Christ is already present in us, among us, by virtue of his *parousia*.

This same reciprocity was felt by Paul, who when speaking of love in his first letter to the Corinthians, recognized that as we are now we "see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face". "Now I know in part", as is usually translated (meaning "on the basis of fragments", "because I see only fragments before me"), "then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood" (1 Cor 13:12). What Paul here describes on the epistemological level, John experienced as the ultimate apocalyptic mystery.

### **The Opening Vision**

In the Revelation to John we find this same dual reality of Christ "being there" and still having "to come", because human beings are yet in the process of growing into beings who are really human on the level of the Risen Christ. As they are still in need of growing inwardly, in order to perceive His coming as "a son of man". In the opening vision this comes through clearly.

This "son of man"-like being appears in John's opening vision in a powerful way: in the midst of the seven golden lampstands, his congregations, having the stars of their angels in his right hand. When speaking to the individual angels of the congregations, he shows many facets of his appearance. As the one holding the seven stars in his right hand and walking among the seven lampstands he speaks to the first angel, to the second in the way he characterized himself to John in the first words he spoke to him – as the first and the last, who died and came to life. Speaking to the third angel he speaks as the one who has the sharp two-edged sword, but to the fourth he goes way beyond the one who has eyes like a flame of fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze; he speaks the words of the "Son of God". To the fifth angel, he who has the seven stars also speaks as the one who has the seven spirits of God which already appeared in John's initial greeting and will appear burning before the throne and as the eyes of the Lamb (1:4, 4:5 and 5:6). When speaking to the sixth and seventh angel, he goes fully beyond the appearance of one who is "like a son of man".

And this may be why, when speaking to the various congregations through their angel, in five out of the seven letters he states that he "will come" – or more precisely maybe, "will have to come" if the people in the congregation will not change, "repent" with the old word. He will have to make his presence felt to help them overcome a difficult (inner) situation or to strengthen their resolve. In the first letter he even will have no choice but, coming, to remove their lampstand from its place if they do not "repent" (2:5). In the third letter he would come if the congregation doesn't keep out the teaching of the (to us unknown) Nicolaitans; if it doesn't hold fast what it has, in the fourth (2:11 and 25). The fifth letter carries the call to be awake – otherwise he will come "like a thief" without anyone knowing at what hour he will come upon them (3:3), in the sixth letter he urges them to "hold fast" as he is coming soon (3:11). Only the second letter with its "be faithful unto death" and the seventh with its "I stand at the door and knock" (2:10 and 3:20) do not need this "I will come". – In most of the letters we find expressed the need not to persist in the situation as it is, the need to change, to "repent". We will come back to this aspect in the next contribution.<sup>3</sup>

In this opening vision of the Revelation to John, within the liturgical setting of the "Lord's day", Christ's coming is spoken of with a more, let's say, "pedagogical" intention – to help the Christian congregations on their way, to prepare them for the dawn of an all-encompassing apocalypse which will go far beyond what human beings have yet experienced on earth by "changing heart and mind" in specific ways. Throughout the visions of the Revelation to John we find Christ's presence described in a series of different manifestations.

### **Awareness of His Presence**

The transformation of Christ throughout the apocalyptic process, we might say, does reflect a growing awareness of his Presence: a "Coming", an "Arrival" in new forms, new manifestations until his Presence will have been fully established.

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<sup>3</sup> See "Apocalyptic Times", the fourth (August 5, 2007) contribution.

Before looking at these seven manifestations, let's first remember what the Apocalypse is about. It describes the way heaven and earth, which both have become corrupted by what is described in the book of Genesis as the "Fall" and have continued to grow apart since then, are rejuvenated and will penetrate each other to create a new world. "A 'new earth', made new by what has come from above, joins a 'new heaven', which itself has been rejuvenated by what happened through Christ on earth."<sup>4</sup> But this can only happen when what is "of the Fall" in the end becomes fully separated from what is to be "of Christ".

We know this process of separation from the Gospels, especially from Matthew. In the chapter following the one describing the birth-pangs of a beginning apocalypse, in a fairy-tale like way Matthew tells the story of what happens when the Son of man comes in his glory (25:31ff). Having gathered the nations before him, he will separate them one from another in the way a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, using an amazing way of separating them (which we will not consider here further). The "sheep" at his right hand will go into eternal life, the "goats" at his left hand into eternal punishment.

Two preceding parables in this same chapter give other glimpses of the process of separation. Here, as well as in Christ's words to his disciples, the need to "watch", to "be awake" is stressed (Mt 24, Mk 13, Lk 12). In the second of those parables we encounter a realm of "outer darkness; there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (25:30) into which those who have been "separated-out" will be cast. It is the realm where those will end up who are without enduring faith (8:12), who have not taken the trouble to put on the wedding garments prepared for them when entering the wedding hall (22:13), who did not make the most of their talents (25:30). All this gives but a first inkling of the process of separation which is described in the Apocalypse to John. This final separation has been preceded by acts of acceptance and rejection, by identification and denial. These followed when the initial call of John the Baptist "to change heart and mind" (to "repent", in older religious parlance) had been taken up by Jesus. When he began to work among human beings he also spoke the warning which had followed, that the kingdom of the heavens, the kingdom of God "is at hand".<sup>5</sup>

The process of separation has begun with Christ's death and resurrection on earth, and has been carried by Him into heaven from Ascension onwards. Now that both earth and heaven are beginning to be transformed in this way, between heaven and earth "in-between" realms grow which on the one hand become more and more "of Christ", on the other more "of the Fall", once the powers of adversary have become openly engaged. Realms of growing light and of growing darkness, preliminary stages, as it were of the apocalyptic city of life and of the city of doom take shape. The transformation of the world into the apocalyptic city of life goes hand in hand with the transformation of Christ himself.

## Seven Manifestations

In the Revelation to John, this transformation of Christ and his realm is shown in seven stages.<sup>6</sup>

In his first manifestation in John's opening vision, as we have already seen, Christ appears on earth like "a son of man" (1:13), human in such a way that he can be a mirror for everyone, even if at the same time he is "the Son of God", as he reveals himself at the beginning of the fourth letter (2:18). The First and the Last, with power over death and resurrection, he shows himself as the center of the congregations-in-progress on earth, showing their angels how their members can become more like himself – in order that they may come to recognize in him "what they shall be" (as John put it in his first letter).

In his second manifestation, in the first Throne Vision, in heaven he appears in the way John the Baptist had already seen him at the very beginning of his incarnation on earth: as "the Lamb of God, the bearer of the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). But here, in heaven, after his death and resurrection he appears "as though slaughtered" (5:6), and having experienced death and resurrection he brings something new into the heavenly world. Through him the kind of deadlock regarding the world's ongoing evolution and

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<sup>4</sup> Rudolf Frieling in the opening paragraph in the last chapter, "Human Evolution in the Apocalypse of John" in his *Christianity and Reincarnation* (Floris Books, Edinburgh 1977), pp 90-91.

<sup>5</sup> See the following contribution with its contemplation of the Seven Letters to the angels of the congregations.

<sup>6</sup> See the article by Jochen Butenholz on the "Second Coming" in *Ich sah den Himmel aufgetan*, pp 17-25 (ed. Johannes Lauten), Urachhaus, Stuttgart 2006, the book mentioned earlier.

transformation is brought to an end. He is able “to open the scroll and its seven seals” (5:5), which evolve into trumpets and bowls of wrath. What began on earth becomes a reality in the heavens, and from there transforms both the terrestrial and the cosmic situation in the world; so much, that the various powers of adversary have to make their stand, when in the third Throne Vision “God has begun to reign” (11:17).

In the fourth Throne Vision Christ once more appears as the Lamb on “Mount Zion”, the sanctuary and spiritual meeting place of Christians, also known to the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews (12:22). Here the “144,000”, who already at the end of the First Vision had been sealed with the name of the Lamb’s Father on their foreheads, are learning to join the widening circles of those singing a “new song” at the throne (5:8f to 14:2), accompanied from heaven. More and more, “redeemed from mankind”, they have been becoming part of the “in-between” realm of Christ, also taking a more active part in its realization. As if released to their tasks, a series of angels pronounce that “the hour of judgment has come” and show some of its consequences in various crises developing on earth.

After another call for endurance and a second beatitude (14:12-13), in the same vision the one “like a son of man” once more manifests himself, now seated on a white cloud. As in the Gospels, his heavenly manifestation here follows his terrestrial manifestation (Mt 24 and parallels). He is called to harvest the earth, as its harvest is fully ripe, assisted by an angel harvesting the vintage of the earth. By this fourth manifestation of Christ (14:14ff), the earth is prepared for the battle in which the triumph won in heaven will have to be won on earth, too.

In his fifth manifestation, Christ appears in an opened heaven as the Rider on the White Horse with his hosts (in the sixth Throne Vision, 19:11ff) – the “Word of God” which was from the beginning. The reign of God the Father having been fully established (see 19:6), the Son and those with him (“called, chosen and faithful” [17:14]) will begin the transformation into making final the separation which has to precede new heaven and new earth as they come into being.

When this final separation is in its last stages, Christ manifests himself for the sixth time as One Sitting on a Great White Throne, before whose presence “earth and sky fled away” (20:11) – the Creator once more unhindered at work who has become Lord of Destiny too. In his presence, fulfilling the words of the One like a Son of Man in the opening Vision (1:18) and the promise of the second beatitude (14:13), Death and Hades have no place anymore in a world transformed, as neither have all those who go into the “outer darkness” now that their individual soul has died into the second death.

In the holy city, New Jerusalem within a new heaven and a new earth, the final and seventh manifestation of Christ coincides with the manifestation of the Father who together share the throne (22:1). The temple of the city (its walls measured by human measure, which is angelic) is a manifestation of the One God, even when the glory of the revelation of the Father illuminates the city as its light and Christ carries the light as its “lamp” – in a city which knows no night (21:22ff) and is not in need of light of lamp or sun (22:5).

The prologue of the Gospel of John speaks of the Word who was in the beginning, with God and at the same time “God”, through whom everything entered into existence – who was in the world, which through him had entered into existence. This is the Word which on earth entered into existence in the flesh, to dwell among human beings as the Christ, to die and rise from the dead.

The Apocalypse to John speaks of him, through whom the new world came into existence, its city fashioned in human, which is angelic, measurements – in which the Word once more is “with God”.