

5th Sunday of Easter C

You are probably familiar with the preverbal question of whether the glass of water before you is half full or half empty? If you say half full you are said to be an optimist. If you say half empty you are said to be a pessimist. How do you view the world around you – through the eyes of an optimist or pessimist?

The Christian community that St. John is writing to in the second reading from the Book of Revelation, has every right to be pessimistic since they experience persecution and even death for practicing the Christian religion. We get a hint of their persecution in the first reading taken from the Acts of the Apostles where we are told that Paul and Barnabas exhorted the Christian communities that they founded to “persevere in the faith” because “It is necessary ... to undergo many hardships to enter the Kingdom of God.”

We may think of persecution or hardships for the sake of Kingdom as being in the past but the Easter Day bombing of a Catholic church in Sri Lanka and the increasing portrayal in the American secular press of Catholics being intolerant of certain groups that don't hold their values might give us pause to reconsider the possibility.

St. John in the Book of Revelation definitely sees the glass of water half full. He offers his persecuted community a vision of the future that he describes in optimistic terms as a “new heaven and new earth,” that is, as a total transformation of all creation. The former heaven and earth where the community has experienced uncertainty and suffering will be no more.

All of this newness has its origins in God. It is a future where God dwells within creation and creation dwells in God. It is a new way of humankind being together with God and one

another. It is a “resurrected” creation – like Jesus’ resurrected body that no longer experiences the limitations brought about by original sin.

A “taste” of the new heaven and new earth promised by John can be found in Christian families and communities that practice the new commandment we hear Jesus promising in the gospel reading: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another.”

The measure of the love that Jesus is commanding here is not determined by one’s feelings or one’s culture – but by the love of God found in the concrete actions of Jesus. For example, Jesus gave us this commandment at the Last Supper where according to St. John Jesus, who is lord and master, became a slave by washing the feet of his disciples. Jesus would also the next day die on the cross in behalf of sinful humankind. The love commanded by Jesus then is self-sacrificing love. It is that kind of love that gives us a “taste” of the new heaven and new earth proclaimed in the Book of Revelation.

I have always been more of a pessimist than an optimist, seeing the glass of water half empty rather half full. And so the vision of the Book of Revelation and the optimism of Christianity in God’s ultimate victory over sin, suffering and death has always been a challenge for me. How about for you?

While most of us may never suffer persecution because of our faith all of us will face death. How will we face it – as an optimist or pessimist?