

Worship-worthy

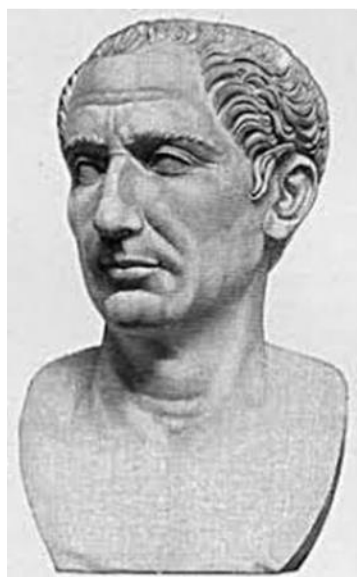
Pentecost 10, Year C,

Sermon by Rev. Glenn A. Brumbaugh

18th August, 2019

Revelation 4:1-11 NIV / Revelation 5:1-8 NRSV

When I started working on this sermon, I did a Google search for the greatest world leaders. These are the first five of the results that were returned.



First of all, do we recognize who these people are?

Starting at the upper left:

Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, Napoleon Bonaparte,
FDR, and Winston Churchill.

First, interesting that they're all men.

But what else do all these men have in common?

Certainly they were considered great leaders, not only in their own times,
but from a historical viewpoint.

Each of these men significantly
affected the course of history for generations to follow.

But what about them made them great leaders?

All of them led their respective cultures through times of war and conquest.

They achieved great military victories
and expanded their country's influence on the world stage.

Some even conquered much of the known world
and changed the social-political structure of that world in a lasting way.

They were all very charismatic men who rose to positions of power,
that they then used to achieve their accomplishments.

They were praised, some even worshipped by their followers and citizens
because of the great things they achieved.

Yet none of these successes came without cost.

They were heroes to their own people,
but those who were the ones conquered were not as thrilled with them.

There's two sides to every story and each one of these men, even FDR,

used their positions in ways that were not honorable or noble.

They were proud, powerful men, who could influence people

and had the might to accomplish their goals,

and received great praise for their achievements.

I mentioned how each of these men impacted the course of history,

and Julius Caesar certainly influenced our history.

His establishment of Rome as an empire, with his family as its monarchs,

set in motion the chain of events

that led to the oppression of Palestine,

and the persecution of Jews and early Christians

throughout the empire under his various successors.

As emperor, he and his descendents expected as a matter of deference,

the complete prostration of vassal rulers seeking patronage and support.

The story is told of the king of Armenia, Tiridates,

who came to have an audience with Emperor Nero,

seeking an alliance with Rome to offset the threat from nearby Parthia.

As he approached Nero during a very public display of homage and humility,

attended by thousands, he fell to his knees,

clutched his breast and exclaimed,

“Master, I am the descendent of kings, and your slave.

I have come to you, my god, worshipping you as I do Mithra the sun god.

The destiny you spin for me shall be mine,

for you are my fortune and fate.



To which Nero replied that, "...I declare...

that I have the power to take away kingdoms and bestow them."

Which brings us to our first lesson from Revelation this morning.

Revelation is a book full of praising and worshipping.

Lots of singing and repetitive praise choruses going on there.



Like our story about Tiridates and Nero,

there are those who bow continually to the Divine throne,
singing accolades of praise,
and tossing their crowns at the feet of the throne.

As has often been the case in our journey through Revelation,
the parallels between John's vision and the Roman world are significant.

In John's vision, we have the same subordination to the ruler by the elders.

But the ruler is not defined in human terms.

There are no identifiable personality traits or identifying features
that would allow us to define what we are seeing
in humanly recognizable terms.

Many aspects of John's narrative lead us to believe

he is likely of Jewish rather than Gentile descent,
with his description of God being one such clue.

People of the Jewish faith believe it is blasphemy
to create any graven image of the Almighty.

God is beyond human definition and to do so

would be to try to contain the infinite in finite human terms.

Devout Jews won't even say the word for God, *Yahweh*.

They instead use the word *Adonai*,

which is the title "Lord," not an actual name.

Even seminary textbooks abbreviate *Yahweh* as YHWH.

Jews wouldn't even tolerate symbols of other kinds,

as they can too easily distract our attention away from God.

During the rule of Pontius Pilate, to raise the profile of Rome in Jerusalem,

he publicly displayed icons of the emperor in the holy city.

Alarmed and outraged, a large number of Jews

made their way to Pilate's residence at Caesarea in protest,

willing to sacrifice themselves rather than suffer this idolatry.

Likewise, when Caligula ordered a statue of himself

installed in the temple,

thousands responded in a similar fashion.

They understood the influence symbols can have,

and the importance of keeping worship focused solely on God.

Which may explain why some of your pastors

really don't like national standards in God's sanctuary.

Being Jewish, John is careful not to describe the Divine as human,

but in terms of color,

using simile to illustrate God as brilliant as precious stones.

As we've established, the Roman world

was full of appreciation of the power and influence of the Roman throne,
and John presents us with an alternative

that is full of its own symbols of power and influence:

a throne (symbol of sovereignty);

surrounded by a rainbow (reminder of God's covenant with Noah);

Which emits flashes of lightning and peals of thunder

(echoes of Mt. Sinai and Moses).

All this being led by four winged creatures representing all of creation:

a lion representing wild beasts,

an oxen representing domesticated animals,

a man, and an eagle representing creatures of the air.

At a time when pagan rulers dominated,

this was a powerful statement to the contrary.

Probably the biggest contrast John's vision offers, however,

is what traits are truly worthy of worship and allegiance;

what truly makes a leader great.

It's not pride and power, popularity or charisma.

It's humility and selfless sacrifice.

It's being willing to lay yourself down for others,

not having the influence and power over the lives of others.

Theologian Loren Johns writes, "The Lamb of Revelation is manifestly no cute,

little nonviolent Lamb. It is a powerful and courageous Lamb,

who through his consistent nonviolent and faithful witness, conquered evil.



He did not deny the reality of evil or the reality of violence...

Rather, the Lamb overcame evil

by refusing to adopt its methods and its rules

and bearing its brunt.

And he serves in the Apocalypse as a consistent and trustworthy model

for those believers facing the harsh realities of civic pressures

to conform to the expectations of Graeco-Roman society.”

Jesus’ victory over sin and death, through resurrection,

makes him infinitely more worthy of praise than any mortal ruler.

The beast killed the Lamb and the Lamb came back!

The Lamb broke the stranglehold of the beasts of this world

by offering a new world order,
giving believers the power to live in redeemed communities
by the standards of the kingdom of God,
not the standards of worldly realms.

And like those early Christian communities,
we too have charismatic, proud leaders
who seek our allegiance, our prostration in gratitude.



We too, have powerful symbols competing for our worship.
Symbols that can lead us away or towards the Lamb.
However, there is a significant difference.
The leaders we have are not forced upon us,
left to be “divinely appointed.”



We freely choose our rulers.

We have nowhere else to lay the blame or justify a bad choice.

The question is, what is worthy of our worship?

Do we lift up those symbols that point us towards God?

Do we let our focus be on the rulers of this world, the voices of the beast,
succumbing to their alluring promises?

Or do we give our allegiance to the humble sacrificial lamb,

whose true bravery gives us the only true hope in a future without end?

Choose wisely my sisters and brothers. Amen.