

## Sermon – 15/04/2007 am

### Cry of the Martyrs

Study Text: Revelation 6:9 –11

Who was the first martyr in the Bible? Who was the first martyr in the New Testament? Abel was killed by his brother because God had accepted Abel's offering but not Cains. In the New Testament, Stephen was stoned by the Jews because he spoke the truth about Jesus Christ whom they had just crucified. After Abel's death the Lord said *the voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground* (Genesis 4:10). Even though Stephen prayed for his killers to be forgiven, ultimately the Lord will judge such wickedness because he is holy and true.

Stephen would have been among the martyrs whom John saw under the altar. He saw these when Jesus opened the fifth seal. These souls who had been slain for the word of God were crying out *how long, O Lord, holy and true, until you judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth* (6:10).

### The Martyrs

John saw these souls under the altar when the fifth seal was opened. They were the soul of martyrs. What was this altar and who were these martyrs? And what does this part of the vision mean?

In the temple which Moses was told to build, and also the rebuilt temple which had recently been destroyed, there were two altars – the altar for burnt offerings and the altar of incense. This earthly temple was built as a copy of the heavenly temple. The altar John sees is in heaven. It is before the throne of God (8:3). In 8:3 it is the altar of incense that is seen. This altar stood just in front of the Ark of the Covenant and the mercy seat, which represent the throne of God. The blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled at the base of this altar on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 4:7).

The souls John sees had been faithful unto death. They had given themselves as a sacrifice just as they were called to do by Jesus. *If anyone desires to come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me* (Matthew 16:24). Jesus did not say if you are a super Christian, or if you are a Christian living in the first century, or if you are Christian living in China, but he tells every Christian to be ready to die for his sake. This must be a core commitment of every believer; it is not an optional extra.

John wrote to the churches telling them to be faithful unto death. Worship **only** Jesus or you are not really worshipping him at all. This reference to those slain for the word of God may well have a wider reference to all believers who suffer for their faith. A parallel passage in 20:4-5 seems to indicate all believers are in this category of the slain dead.

The altar is associated with sacrifice and blood. It is also associated with prayer which has already been seen in relation to the throne (5:8). The altar is before the throne and the martyrs are under the altar. This probably symbolises the protection that is accorded these saints – not protection from death for they are slain – but protection unto eternal life.

God allows them to suffer even unto death in order to test their faith and to bring them to himself purified. Abraham's faith was tested as was that of Job. The sovereign God is in control, and his divine purpose is not thwarted by the death of his saints. Far from it! In death they have the victory, just as Jesus did.

## Cry

These martyrs suffered unto death but John sees them alive before the throne in heaven. He hears them crying out to the Lord for justice. These persecuted and glorified Christians call upon God to demonstrate his justice by judging their persecutors. Do you find their cry somewhat 'unchristian'? Many do.

The world today has a very distorted view of justice. Hundreds of Christians are in prison around the world because of their faith in Jesus. Many are being tortured or killed for their faith in Jesus. We rarely read of such people in the press. But every day we read of someone from another religion who is being denied justice. Every day we read of homosexuals being denied justice. We should of course stand up for justice for all people – but we do not see this in society.

Leaving aside the worldly view of justice, such as it is, we need to look at this cry of the martyrs in the light of the rest of Scripture. How do we reconcile this cry with the teaching of Jesus about forgiving our enemies and even the cry of Stephen as he was being stoned – *Lord do not charge them with this sin* (Acts 7:60). The prayer of Stephen does not preclude ultimate justice. In fact it is because of this ultimate justice that he prays for the Lord to forgive those who sinned in killing him. He knew their destiny as sinners.

These martyrs are in heaven. They are awaiting Judgment Day, the day when all people will have to give account before the throne in heaven. The martyrs died because they refused to worship the emperor or some idol. They died believing that God is holy and true, they died believing that God is *just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus* (Romans 3:26).

*Shall not the judge of all the earth do right* said Abraham. The Lord had come down to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities were full of wicked people who refused to worship God. They thought God was a joke. Homosexuality was rife in these cities. Righteous Lot was saved before fire and brimstone rained down upon these cities.

David cried out to the Lord in much the same way as these martyrs. He cried out for justice. He prayed for God to destroy the wicked who accused him falsely (e.g. Psalm 69) and mocked and hated God (e.g. Psalm 39). It was not a cry for personal vengeance but for the honour of God to be vindicated. The more you love God the more you will hate the blasphemy and violence of those who hate God. Did the owner of the vineyard come to forgive those who killed his son? *He will come and destroy those vinedressers* (Luke 20:16).

*Judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth* (6:10). 'Those who dwell on the earth' refers to worldly people; in this case those who have conspired in killing Christians simply because they refused to worship idols. From Scripture the martyrs understood that the Lord would avenge their innocent blood. Their cry is 'how long until God does this'.

Do you believe that God is just? Do you believe that he will judge those who do not repent and believe in Jesus Christ? Or do you believe that God will forgive everybody and all will be saved in the end? Whilst these martyrs are in heaven those who killed them are still dwelling on the earth. Will they all end up in heaven with the martyrs even if they do not repent? Was dying for Jesus a big mistake? We must be clear on these things.

### **A Little While**

What was the Lord's answer to the martyrs cry? Did he reject their cry? Had they got it all wrong? Certainly not! He told them to *rest a little while*. In fact with the opening of the next seal on the scroll we see the great day of God's wrath *has come, and who is able to stand* (6:17). The martyrs are safe under the altar while the wrath of God is poured out on the earth.

These martyrs were given a white robe. What does this symbolise? In chapter seven John sees a great multitude around the throne, all wearing white robes. These are those who have *come out of the great tribulation he was told, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* (7:14). These white robes point to their victory, a victory that was won by Christ on the Cross. Although they died in apparent weakness they live and reign with Christ. They reign through the entire period between the first resurrection and the second death – the period referred to symbolically as a thousand years (20:1-6).

How long? Until the number of fellow servants is complete (6:11). Times and numbers are in God's hand. God is patient wanting even persecutors of his saints to repent, but the countdown is on – or rather the count up! A certain number of faithful believers, a number known only to God is the target – not 144,000 of course.

These martyrs can rest knowing that God is holy and true. He heard their cry and he will avenge their blood. It is just a matter of time. The persecuted Christians to whom John sent this letter would have been comforted by this truth. It appeared that they were the losers in the battle against the world but the message given to John assured them that God not only saw their suffering but would bring about justice in his time.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*