

Today I am going to concentrate my homily on first four verses of Revelation 20, what is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible to interpret.

What I want to do is explain the chronology. There is a thousand year reign, followed by a time when the Devil is let loose and then another thousand year reign.

A common interpretation among Protestants today is that Christ will return and set up some kind of earthly reign. Yet Christ explains, "My kingship is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36).

Because of this, it seems unlikely that John meant to say that Christ would set up an earthly kingdom. Instead, we will see how John's use of symbols and covenant terminology envision something much more than just a future reality. Revelation 20 gives us a kind of panoramic view of salvation history of which we are intricately related. In short, Revelation 20 is the summary of the story of Jerusalem, established by David, who began to reign in c. 1000 BC. Through to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the ushering in of the age of the Church.

20:1–3. The devil is locked in the "pit" by an angel, who uses the "key" to imprison him and a chain to secure him. These two images were loaded with meaning to Jewish readers. Understanding these two terms will be key (pardon the pun) to unlocking the meaning of this passage.

The "key" is drawn from Isaiah 22, where it represents the authority of the Davidic kingdom. Indeed, John specifically identifies it as "the key of David" (Rev. 3:7). It is also referred to as the key of "Death and Hades" (Rev. 1:18). It is the same key that Jesus gives to Simon Son of Jonah in Matthew 16:

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

The "key" is linked with the "pit." This "pit" (also called the "bottomless pit" in Rev. 9:1) is a word used in the Old Testament and Jewish tradition for the watery place of the dead, that is, the underworld, or "Sheol."

This "pit," or "abyss," was also connected with the temple in Jewish literature. Although it is not recorded in Scripture, the temple, according to Jewish tradition, was built by David's son Solomon on top of a special rock, called the "foundation stone." This stone was said to be the "plug" to the netherworld. Anyone who has ever seen a picture of Jerusalem can hardly miss the famous Muslim mosque called the Dome of the Rock, in which this famous "stone" or "rock" is located.

The blood of the sacrifices was said to run down the shafts under the altar onto the foundation stone below, so that the blood would "cover" those in Sheol.

It is this tradition that forms the background for Jesus' words in Matthew 16. There, Jesus builds His Church on Peter, the Rock, as Solomon built the temple on the foundation stone (Mt. 16:18). Moreover, He gives Peter the "keys to the kingdom," which gives him power over the "gates of Hades," and in so doing, grants him the power to "free" souls from the power of the devil (Mt. 16:18–19).

This brings us to the angel's "chain." Just as the "key" was symbolic of the Davidic kingdom, so also a "chain" was associated with Solomon's courtroom. Right near the "Dome of the Rock" in Jerusalem, there is a smaller shrine called the "Dome of the Chain." This building commemorates an ancient legend, which says that a "chain" was used by the king in determining the truth of a witness' testimony. The person under oath would hold on to the chain and give his sworn statement. If he were not telling the truth, a link would fall so that all would know the lie he had told. (An early lie detector test.)

The image of the devil being "bound" for "a thousand years," therefore, is a depiction of the incredible power of God's oath to establish the Davidic kingdom, through which the nations would be taught and the devil's deceptions unmasked. Indeed, the Davidic kingdom stood for one thousand years from David to Christ, since it was established in about 1000 BC.

The Millennium, therefore, does not bespeak a future age of an earthly kingdom, but rather, summarizes God's work in salvation history in the thousands years leading up to Jesus.

So far we have seen that the one thousand year reign relates God's use of the Davidic kingdom and the king's own city, Jerusalem, in His plan to save the nations. The image of the devil being "loosed" for a short time at the end of the thousand years, therefore, must be understood in connection with this. In fact, as we have seen in other readings at Mass this week, Jerusalem, became increasingly evil in the first century. Its wickedness reached its peak at the time of its destruction in the year 70.

The Jewish historian Josephus writes of his own people:

"Nor did any other age ever breed a generation more fruitful in wickedness than this was, from the beginning of the world."

Therefore, at the end of the thousand years, Satan was let loose to wreak his worst damage. So when we read:

After that he must be let out for a little while.

This is understood to relate to the destruction of Jerusalem between 66-70 AD.

Notice that after the jail break there will be another 1000 year reign.

Then I saw thrones, and those seated on them were given authority to judge. I also saw the souls of those who had been beheaded for their testimony to Jesus and for the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image and had not received its mark on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and reigned with Christ a thousand years.

This refers to the age of the Church. In this interpretation, the “thousand” years are understood symbolically. The thousand years stand for the time Christ would reign through the Church—from the time of His first coming to the time of His Second Coming. Satan is restrained—the power of the sacraments administered by the Church hold him at bay. The first resurrection—the one prior to the final resurrection at the end of time—refers to the saints being taken up to God. At the end of time there will be a final confrontation between the Lord and the devil, wherein God will crush Satan once and for all. This view is well attested to in the Fathers of the Church.¹

So here in an economy of words St. John is retelling the story of Salvation. A story, that includes us as those who are part of that second thousand year reign. One that assures us that through all of life we are part of God’s unfolding plan that will reach its culmination when we see

a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. * 2 And we will see the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband

¹ Barber, M. (2005). *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation and Applying Its Lessons Today* (pp. 243–244). Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road Publishing.