

Views from the Pews - Sea Sunday

The Book of Revelation (21:1) describes a vision of 'a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more'. I have always found this idea hard to digest, considering the beauty of the sea itself, and the enormous diversity of marine animals that depend on it. Why should whales and tuna and albatrosses and sea anemones not be included among the myriad of God's creatures that we hope will be among those taken into God's kingdom? After all,

God said, 'Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the dome of the sky.' So God created the great sea monsters and every living creature that moves, of every kind, with which the waters swarm, and every winged bird of every kind. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.'
(Genesis 1:20-22)

...which suggests that God delights in the sea and its creatures as much as we do. On the surface, the vision described in Revelation conflicts with everything else we know about the immense love of our creator God for all forms of life, however humble. A bit of background provides a more helpful interpretation.

First, neither Genesis nor Revelation are intended to be understood as literal descriptions of the material world. For the Hebrews, the sea was an image of chaos, the state that preceded God's ordering of creation. Genesis One is best understood as a celebration of God's authority over the disordered state of nature, including the unruly primeval sea, which was how nature had been previously understood by the toothless cosmologies of the pagan world.

Revelation belongs to a recognisable apocalyptic genre, which trades heavily in symbolism. The images and events in the Book of Revelation are figurative, and prophesy Christ's conquest of all forms of chaos and evil. The imagined destruction of the sea symbolises that ultimate victory. Revelation's letters to the churches, and the book as a whole, were written primarily to encourage them to stand firm despite the delay in Christ's eagerly expected return.

For another view of Sea Sunday, written in 2021 by our much loved Colonel of Marines, the late David Bailey, go to the Cathedral's archives <https://www.stpeter.org.nz/god-talk>.

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