

“OUR SAVIOUR JESUS CHRIST ABOLISHED DEATH” – 2 Tim 1:10

Homily of His Eminence, Peter Ebere Cardinal Okpaleke at the Golden Jubilee of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Nigeria (CCRN) at Ubulu-uku, on November 19, 2022

First Reading: Revelation 11:4-12
Psalm: Ps. 143:1-2, 9-10 (Rv. 1)
Acclamation: 2 Tim. 1:10
Gospel: Luke 20:27-40

PREAMBLE

Once more, we congratulate the Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria on this jubilee celebration. We thank God who sustained you, as a group and as individuals, all these years. We pray for the faithful departed, especially for all your members, those who worked hard for the spread of the CCRN and for the spread of the Kingdom of God. We commend you all into God's care and pray that as you step out on the journey to the centenary of the CCRN, we may all be renewed in body, soul, mind and spirit, through Christ our Lord – Amen.

THE MONTH OF NOVEMBER AND THE REMINDER ABOUT THE END

You must have observed that in the month of November, the Church in the liturgy constantly reminds us of the end. We start off the month with a celebration of All Saints, followed immediately by All Souls. During the month, the readings, often from the Book of Apocalypse, point to the end of things. All these indicate to us that the Church's year is about to end. If you have been to Europe, at this time of the year, you would see that nature makes it obvious that things change and end. The grasses fade away and most of the trees lose their leaves. Imagine, you look around you and the greenery is gone. You see only tree trunks and no leaves. You look and the grasses are gone. This will surely deliver a powerful message that things change and come to end, even if, to come back to life again. This is the message that the Church teaches us with the end and beginning of the Church's year. We are at the threshold of this change. Tomorrow is the last Sunday of the Church's year and the Solemnity of Christ the King. It is only by making Christ the king of our lives that we can manifest his glory in line with the theme of your celebration. We shall come to that later. Let us reflect on the readings.

OUR LORD JESUS ABOLISHED DEATH – 2 Tim 1:10

I have chosen as the theme of our reflection what St. Paul tells Timothy and which we used for the alleluia verse: “Our Lord Jesus abolished death”

Starting from verse 6 of that first chapter of the second letter to Timothy, Paul admonishes Timothy to fan into flame the gift of God that he received through the laying on of hands. He reminds him that “God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but the Spirit of power and love and self-control.” Consequently, Timothy should not be ashamed of witnessing to the Lord or afraid to go through hardship for the sake of the gospel, relying on the power of God’s grace. Paul continues that Jesus is the source of this grace, which had been granted before the beginning of time, but only revealed by his taking flesh in the Blessed Virgin Mary and through his suffering and death. By dying, Jesus “has abolished death, and he has brought to light immortality and life through the Gospel.” This affirmation of faith brings together what the Church presents to us in the first reading and in the Gospel.

THE BOOK OF APOCALYPSE

Before we go into the passage presented to us from the Book of Apocalypse, it is important to situate the Book as a whole. The Apocalypse of St. John is a difficult Book. Unlike the Gospels that are straight stories, the Book of Apocalypse is something else. There are many symbols and images – lamp, scroll, seal, the dragon, different beasts with horns and eyes sometimes in unusual places. Numbers – for example, 7; 144,000; 12; 666 – are mentioned. But these numbers are symbols. Colours are also significant. One of the images is that of the Lamb that was slain and worthy to open the seal.

It is important to note that these symbols are not arbitrary. For example, the image of the Lamb that was slain reminds us of the passage in the Gospel where John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29). So, instead of speaking about Jesus, the Book of Apocalypse speaks of the Lamb that was slain. Similarly, many of the images and symbols used in the Book of Apocalypse are taken from the Old Testament or other Jewish literature. In the first reading of today, we hear that there are two witnesses – that is, two olive trees and two lamps that stand before the Lord of the world.” (Rev. 11:4) It will be a mistake to take the olive tree and the lamp literally as if the passage is talking about olive trees and lamps. This will be like taking the tortoise that feature prominently in Igbo folklores as if such stories refer to real tortoises that had the power of speech. Those conversant with the Old Testament will immediately link this to Zechariah 4:1-14 where there is a reference to lamps and two olive trees. Here in the Book of Zechariah, lamps stand for “the eyes of God which range over the whole world” while the two olive trees stand for the two anointed ones in attendance on the Lord of the whole world. The anointed ones at the time of the Zechariah were Joshua, the priest and Zerubbabel, the

governor. It is actually with reference to Zerubbabel that God made the famous statement “not by might and not by power, but by my (God’s) spirit” (Zech 4:6b) that Zerubbabel was accomplishing the task of rebuilding the temple. In summary, although the images and symbols used in the Book of Apocalypse are strange to us, the first century Christians were conversant with them.

Why then, one may ask, did the writer of the Book of Apocalypse need to clothe his message in a layer of symbols? One has to note that Jesus spoke in parables too. So, it is normal for the Jews to clothe messages in symbolic language just as the Igbos claim that proverbs are the palm oil with which one eats words. But circumstances explain the extra layer of symbolism in the Book of Apocalypse. The Book of Apocalypse and other writings in the apocalyptic genre were literary products of oppressed groups intending to communicate to the faithful ones, secrets or mysteries, for their encouragement. The writer introduces himself as “I, John, your brother and partner in hardships.” (Rev. 1:9). The intention of the writer is to encourage his fellow partners in hardship to stand firm because their triumph is assured. In the Book of Apocalypse, we hear of such affirmations as “Look, the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed” (Rev. 5:5). Because he was slain and has gone through the same hardship that his followers are presently going through, “the Lamb is worthy to receive power, riches, wisdom, strength, honour, glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12). It is this assurance of light at the end of the tunnel, of victory after the hardship, life even through death, that provides the courage of hope that sustained the early persecuted Christians for whom being Christian is equivalent to embracing death. It is this paradox of life through death, lived out fully by Jesus which is the mystery foretold before the world began, a truth hidden in plain sight so that, as Jesus put it in Mark 4:11-12, they will look and look and never perceive, listen and listen and never understand. But for those granted the secret of the kingdom of God, everything is clear. It is my prayer that we all are among those who have been granted the secret of God’s kingdom – the secret that life comes through death in obedience to the king of the universe, the lamb who was slain.

Another interesting question about the Book of Apocalypse is why it speaks about the end and about new heaven and new earth? This gives the impression that it is about when this physical world will come to an end. I remember in the ’90s when there was the craze about 3-day darkness, about the world coming to an end. Let us remember that the Book of Apocalypse is full of symbolism. Some people had taken the prediction of the end of the world literally and when the world did not end, they decided to end the

world for their followers. Yet, this emphasis on the end of the world and the new creation distinguishes the Book of Apocalypse and apocalyptic literature from the prophetic books. All the prophets in the Old Testament, usually warned the Israelites of the impending punishment from God unless they repent. Repentance and faithfulness to the covenant guaranteed their restoration. Restoration is often in terms of peace, security, prosperity, fertility, etc. These are captured in Deut. 28. However, with the exile of the Israelites, the destruction of the temple and the loss of sovereignty, the prophetic gave way to the apocalyptic frame. The situation is interpreted as a battle between the force of good and the forces of evil. However much evil may seem to be prevailing, good will eventually conquer through the definitive intervention of God. Those who fight on the side of the good may temporarily suffer death. But death itself has been conquered because it is only the door to a fuller life. In other words, death which had hitherto stood for definitive defeat has been transformed into the pathway to fuller life and success. This calls to mind the saying that anyone who kicks a frog has given it a lift – the person kicking has the intention of punishing the frog but ends up helping the frog to arrive faster at its destination. This is the big shift that the Book of Apocalypse promotes and this is the wellspring of the hope that it presents to all. Its focus is beyond this earth. It is about a new heaven and a new earth while remaining firmly committed to the good in this life, even to the point of shading one's blood. This is the vision that St. Paul captures in what we heard in the Gospel Acclamation – Our Saviour Jesus Christ abolished death. Let us now pay closer attention to the readings.

“THE TWO WITNESSES ARE THE TWO OLIVE TREES AND TWO LAMPS” Rev. 11:4

We have alluded to the possible referents of the two witnesses – the olive trees and the lamps. Against the background of the Book of Zechariah, the two witnesses may not be understood as two human beings but as corporate personalities, the religious and civil establishments. The ministry of these witnesses is cast in the light of Prophet Elijah – who shut the heavens for 3 years (1 Kings 17:1) and Moses who turned water into blood (Ex. 7:14-25) and struck Egypt with many plagues. Thus, just as at the Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah were seen conversing with Jesus (Matt 17:1-13); the witnesses, symbolically represented as olive trees and lamps, could be interpreted as the law (civil) and the prophets (religious). These were attacked by the beast that comes from the Abyss. This beast represents chaos and lawlessness. This chaos overran the law and the prophets. Possibly the writer of the Book of Apocalypse was describing the existential situation of the Jewish people. Interestingly, the reference is communicated

with symbolism – the corpses of the two witnesses it says, were left on the street of the Great City known by the symbolic names Sodom and Egypt. It goes further to say it was the city in which the Lord was crucified. This is expo! The Lord was crucified in Jerusalem but by referring to this city as Sodom and Egypt, the writer wants to project the immorality in the city as in Sodom where Lot lived (Gen 19) and the oppression experienced in Egypt before the exodus. The corpses were exposed for three and half days – not letting them be buried. This is unlike the Lord who was buried and rose on the third day, these witnesses were denied burial and they were exposed half a day longer than the Lord. Now comes the most amazing thing, God breathed life into their corpses. This reminds one of the dry bones of Ezekiel 37. This is a pledge of God's unfailing intervention which will bring new and better life; an intervention that will rattle the enemies and one through which the just, those who persevere in their witness, will be exulted to the consternation of those who had persecuted them. Our first reading today ended with this invitation to the faithful, who persevered even till death from which the Lord will raise them to new life: "Come up here." It is reported that they went up while their enemies watched as they went up to heaven in a cloud.

I have tried to painstakingly go through the first reading and trace the symbols to their possible original sources for the purpose of interpretation. This is to help us do the hard work of getting the message intended by God to the original hearers or readers of the Book. Often what obtains is that people either ignore the Book of Apocalypse or impose their arbitrary meaning on the numerous images and symbols. One stands to gain deeper insight by working through the symbols and images and letting the Word of God speak to one instead of imposing one's meaning on the Word of God.

WE ARE CHILDEN OF THE RESURRECTION

The key point of the first reading is that those who persevere in the good are guaranteed transition from this life to a better life because of the Lamb who was slain. The reading is a statement of faith about the new life made possible by our Saviour Jesus Christ who abolished death. Put differently, the death of Jesus changed the meaning of death. Yes, people still die in the flesh. We have all been bereaved and know many who have exited this mortal flesh. But Jesus abolished death because by dying he destroyed our death; by rising he restored our lives. It is this new life made possible for us by Jesus Christ, which is the basis of our courage to hope.

To underscore the importance of this new condition made possible by Jesus, the Gospel today engaged the Sadducees and their belief that death marks

the end of life. They brought up the story of a woman who married seven husbands and asked whose wife she would be at the resurrection. Their aim was to highlight the absurdity of the belief in the resurrection. Jesus dismissed them by pointing out that there will be a qualitative difference between earthly life and post-resurrection. "Children of this world take wives and husbands." But children of the resurrection do not marry because they can no longer die, for they are the same as the angels, they are sons and daughters of God.

This is the good news that God is calling our attention to: we are children of the resurrection; we are sons and daughters of God and we have a promise of becoming like angels. We only need to persevere in our present lives, and make Jesus Christ, the king and ruler of our lives. When we do this, we become manifestations of his glory (Rom 8:19).

BECOMING MANIFESTATIONS OF HIS GLORY (Rom 8:19)

God works in mysterious ways. As I was reflecting on the readings, it became clear to me that it has an internal link with the theme of your celebration. I thank God through the inspiration of whose Spirit you chose this theme which is at the heart of the Good News preached by St. Paul, especially in the letter to the Romans.

Let us remember that the Church in Rome was not founded by Paul and that Paul wrote and sent the letter to the Romans before he ever set foot in that city. He sent the letter through the deaconess, Phoebe as we read in Rom 16:1. The many people in Rome that Paul sent greetings to in his letter shows that although he had never visited the Church in Rome, he knew many Christians in Rome. He could have therefore known the challenges they were facing as a community. A close reading of the letter shows that it is the question of the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. Are people saved by keeping the law, being circumcised, keeping the other prescriptions, etc.? For St. Paul, the Mosaic Law was good and holy (Rom 3:20, 7:12). It revealed God's will to the Jews, without providing the spiritual power necessary to obey it. The Law made people aware of sin and of the need they have for God to help them. This help can only be provided by God and in the life of Abraham who was justified not because of what he had done but by faith (Rom 4). As Christians, our justification can only come through faith in Jesus Christ. Indeed, because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, Christians have been liberated from slavery to sin and freed to live for Christ. As St. Paul put in 2 Cor 5:15, the purpose of Christ dying for us is that "those who live should live not any more for themselves, but for him who died and was raised to life."

Living for Christ implies allowing Christ to be one's lord and master, allowing Christ to dictate the path of one's life, being indeed free from the slavery to sin which includes the sin of trusting in one's merit. It is about making oneself available for God, yielding oneself up to the Spirit which gives life in Christ Jesus, a Spirit which frees us from the law of sin and death. This vision makes it possible for us to see that "all we suffer in the present time is nothing in comparison with the glory which is destined to be disclosed for us." St. Paul goes on to remind us that the whole of creation is waiting with eagerness for the children of God to be revealed."

Creation is waiting for you and for me to become manifestations of His glory. If we come nearer home, we say that Nigeria is waiting for us Christians to become manifestations of God's glory, so also our dioceses, parishes, extended and nuclear families. This call to become Spirit-filled and energized by divine love is one that calls for sacrifices in line with the example of the Lamb who was slain. It requires a lot of courage that comes from faith knowing that we are called to persevere even to the point of shading our blood as witnesses of Christ in the secure knowledge that our Saviour Jesus has abolished death and given us the life of resurrection.

Let us pray: Lord increase our faith. Help us to open our hearts, minds, souls and bodies to you. As we commemorate the end of time and of the world. Let us remember always that you are our anchor and stronghold. Help us to know that by your dying you have conquered death and given us a pledge of everlasting life. Help us to open ourselves to the guidance of your Spirit so that we become manifestations of your glory in our families, workplaces, communities and the world - Amen.