

**Therfield Chapel**  
**Sermon**  
**Revelation 14**  
**2<sup>nd</sup> November 2008**

The present Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, has never believed that the Bible is the word of God – not in any sense that we would recognise anyway

But his views on the Book of Revelation are particularly interesting

Let me quote you a few words from his book, *Open to Judgment*

“The Book of Revelation contains page after page of fantasy and malice, like the letters clergymen so often get from the wretched and disturbed. The Book has touched diseased places in many psyches and unlocked streams of violence and obscenity and plain madness”

Now, although I radically reject his interpretation of the Book of Revelation, it is hard not to be shocked by the Book at times

As we’ve preached our way through to the present chapter, some of you have suggested to me that it’s been quite a traumatic journey

Undoubtedly, there’s lots to puzzle over and lots to disturb – lots that to our modern minds that sounds unreasonable and heavy-handed

So tonight I thought I would start by making a comment about our reactions to the Book

As Christians we have to take the word of God as a whole

It’s no good chopping out the bits that we don’t like as some are in the habit of doing – after all what we like or dislike has little relevance in the great scheme of things

We always need to keep in mind that God our Creator is infinitely better placed than we are to be in a position to determine what is justice and unjust

Our perspective is simply too small to be much use in the great scheme of things

When I’m scandalised by the Word of God – and at times I am – I’m always drawn back to the encounter that Job had with God

You may remember that for 35 Chapters Job and his friends philosophise and pontificate about how the world works – about what’s really going on – about whether certain things are just or unjust

And for all that time God is silent

And then eventually in Chapter 38 God breaks His silence and speaks

And by the time He's finished Job is speechless

God starts by saying to Job:

<sup>2</sup> "Who is this that darkens my counsel with words without knowledge?"

<sup>3</sup> Brace yourself like a man;  
I will question you,  
and you shall answer me.

<sup>4</sup> "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
Tell me, if you understand.

<sup>5</sup> Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! (God's being sarcastic)  
Who stretched a measuring line across it?

<sup>6</sup> On what were its footings set,  
or who laid its cornerstone-  
<sup>7</sup> while the morning stars sang together  
and all the angels <sup>[a]</sup> shouted for joy?

<sup>8</sup> "Who shut up the sea behind doors  
when it burst forth from the womb,  
<sup>9</sup> when I made the clouds its garment  
and wrapped it in thick darkness,

and on and on it goes

So we find God asking Job question after question that he was incapable of answering

Each question humbled Job – each one was a reminder of how little he really knew

Each one was a reminder that God was God and that Job was a man – each one a cue to Job to get back into line; a polite, "Just who do you think you are?"

And sometimes we need to subject ourselves to the reality check that Job was put through before we sit in judgment over God and his ways

I know that such thinking runs completely contrary to our so-called modern minds

I know that deep in our contemporary worldview is the right to protest that we don't like something – to sit in judgement over anyone's actions – even God's - and decide for ourselves whether it is right or wrong

Sometime I sense when listening to people talk, that they will only consider submitting to God or even accept His existence if He meets their personal approval

They will give him the rubber stamp only if He's the kind of God that's in keeping with how they think God should be

And so sometimes, like Job we all need to remember who we are and our status – just here for a few years and then gone

We need to keep in mind that we are not God and can never have the perspective that He has on what is right and what is wrong

About what's best for the world and eternity

And we need to remember this lesson when we reflect on the 'heavy' parts of Scripture – the things most offensive to us – hell, wrath, judgement – the common themes of the Book of Revelation

For the fact is that if we were able to get a God's eye perspective on the world – and we can't – there would be times when we our tongues will stop wagging and like Job we'd be silent

There's a great danger that if we sit in judgement upon God, one day we will find ourselves highly embarrassed when we're given the ability to see the end from the beginning

In an age where so often we sit in moral judgement over God – and wax lyrical about whether we like His ways of running the world, we would do well to remember the words of Paul who wrote:

“But who are you, O man to talk back to God?”<sup>1</sup>

Let's go back to Chapter 14

Now last week Paul Zanreps gave us some insights into Chapter 13

And there we thought about the ways Satan via the beasts he raises up, deceives the world

It's as though the chapter is a warning to God's people about the ways in which Satan will try to deceive them and win them over to his side

Now prior to chapter 13 we thought about ways in which Satan tries to destroy the church through violence leading to martyrdom

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 9:20

But last week we saw that deception is a much more effective tool than violence – it’s much harder to recognise and counter

In other words controlling our thinking and ideas is a much more effective way to control us than when the issues are stark and out in the open

And by and large the way that Satan holds the Western World in his grip is by feeding it a false view of reality –

Sadly that false view of reality is mostly considered to be the truth

That’s the situation we see in our society today – an official worldview that seeks to explain human existence without reference to God

To the point that God now seems strange to our ears - so clever we have been at making Him of no relevance to life

I often think it’s amazing that we creatures made by a Creator can – in our *thinking* at least - abolish Him from His world

The irony of it

It’s a bit like a robot coming to life and deciding that his designer and builder doesn’t exist – that he is simply the product of chance

And we should make no mistake behind such things is Satan the deceiver – the father of lies as Jesus called him<sup>2</sup>

He plays the world like a grand piano in his deceptions

So amongst other things Chapter 13 contains a warning as to the tactics of Satan to caution us as the people of |God not to be seduced and led astray and fall under his spell

So what about Chapter 14 – tonight’s passage?

I want to consider it in three scenes under the headings used by the NIV Bible

- (1) The Lamb and the 144,000 1-5
- (2) The Three Angels 6-13
- (3) The Harvest of the Earth 14-20

### **(1) The Lamb and the 144.000 verses 1-5**

Here John has a vision of the Lamb standing on Mount Zion

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<sup>2</sup> John 8:44

In this Chapter we find a sea-change from the previous grim chapter – for we see a vision of hope for God’s people

For in spite of Satan’s project to destroy and seduce the church – here we find the victorious people of God worshipping around Mount Zion

Satan and his beasts have failed

For these people, far from bearing the mark of the beast, are instead marked with the Father’s name on their foreheads

There are 144,000 them, which probably means they are made up of Jews from before Christ and Christians after Christ

When my sister and I were little, we had a big times table chart on our wall made by my mother

It went from  $0*0 = 0$  right through to  $12*12=144$

Do you remember those?

It was supposed to help us learn

When you’re a little boy as I was you tend to be impressed by big things and fast things – at least I was

I used to investigate what was the tallest building in the world and the fastest animal and the quickest car and the strongest man

And so I learned  $12 * 12$  very early on – 144 - it was the biggest number on our wall chart – and to me as a five year old it seemed to me a big number – one worthy of respect

So why 144,000 people around the throne?

Now I don’t think that we’re dealing with a fixed number of people that there will be in heaven (as the Jehovah’s Witnesses think)

Like so much in this Book, I think it’s symbolic

There were 12 tribes of Israel (each one the descendents of one of Jacob’s 12 sons) – so the first 12 seems to represents the Jews

And there were 12 Apostles who were set apart by the Lord Jesus to establish the church and write most of the Scriptures

So 12 also seems to represents the church

And if we take  $12 * 12$  we get 144 and the thousand seems to be a big number – making the point that there are lots of God’s people in heaven – both from BC and AD

What about Mt Zion?

Well throughout the Bible, Mount Zion is nothing less than the dwelling place of the living God

And so here we find the people of God finally with their Lord, saved and safe from their persecutors and oppressors

We find a people who’ve come home and are joyful and relaxed

Perhaps many of them perhaps martyrs

But there seems to be no sadness – they’re not bitter that their lives have been cut short

Not a bit of it - for here we find them singing for joy

I remember reading comments written in 1956 about the death of Jim Eliot (Elizabeth Eliot’s husband) as he and his missionary colleagues were murdered trying to evangelise indigenous people in Ecuador

So much of the Christian world in America saw the whole affair as a terrible waste of life – five lives cut short in their prime, five widows and nine fatherless children

But I doubt that in heaven they have any regrets

For as a result of their martyrdom a church was eventually established amongst the tribal people and many were converted to Christ

Perhaps often what we call a tragedy is actually a privilege<sup>3</sup>

Now we should notice in verse 3 that those around the throne were singing a new song that no one else was able to learn – only the redeemed of the earth

Songs are powerful things

They can express our deepest desires and loyalties

Songs have the power to bind people together and can fire the collective imagination to service and devotion

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<sup>3</sup> David Pawson

In 2001 just before we left Kenya, we were invited to a 4<sup>th</sup> of July Independence Day celebration evening by our American missionary friends

It was quite ironic because we as Brits were the enemies of their independence – it was independence from us that they were celebrating

But we were invited

And after consuming copious amounts of food – they were American after all - we sat down on the floor and Julie and I listened to our friends singing their patriotic songs

As well as singing the Star Spangled Banner (“the land of the free and the home of the brave stuff”) they sang:

America The Beautiful:

O beautiful, for spacious skies,  
For amber waves of grain,  
For purple mountain majesties  
Above the fruited plain!  
*America! America! God shed His grace on thee,  
And crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea.*

My Country 'Tis of Thee

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My country, 'tis of thee,  
Sweet land of liberty,  
Of thee I sing;  
Land where my fathers died,  
Land of the pilgrims' pride,  
From every mountainside  
Let freedom ring!

Now being American and deeply patriotic, it was all stirring stuff and a very emotional occasion

But the point was that *we* were outsiders – we felt a bit awkward – we didn't know the words

There are some songs that you can only really know and feel if you're on the inside

And that's what we find with the 144,000 here – they're singing a song that one else can learn

And it's like that for us too I suppose – we turn up at the Chapel and sing our praises to God week by week

Outsiders – the non-believers – would think us a bit weird and odd and that’s what we would expect

For they are just that - outsiders – they’ve never known the joy of what it means to be redeemed and be really loved by God and so our songs mean nothing to them

But to us on the inside – like the 144,000 here – the songs we sing are our anthem – they give expression to the deepest realities about us - our identity, our hopes and joys and our destiny

## **(2) The Three Angels 6 - 13**

In the next vision we find three angels

The first angel in verse 6 is flying mid air and has the eternal gospel to proclaim to all who live on the earth

We all know by now that there’s lots in the Book of Revelation about judgement

But here we find a angel or a messenger (same word in Greek) calling men and women to get right with God before the judgment comes

And we should note the context of the angel’s message, for it’s a good reminder of the gospel

V7 the angel calls for people to fear God and give Him glory as the Creator of all things

It’s a reminder that the gospel isn’t fundamentally about God meeting mine and your needs (the ‘me and God Gospel’ as PR calls it) – although He does

No the Gospel is a call to put God in His rightful place in our lives as King and Lord – and to do that we need to have a healthy fear of Him and give Him glory

So often today in parts of the church you could almost believe that God is a vending machine who we approach to get what we need so that He can make us happy – as if that’s His job

And then moving on the second angel in verse 8. he announces the fall of Babylon the Great who has “made all the nations drink the maddening wine of her adulteries”

The Living Bible puts it as “She [Babylon] seduced the nations of the world and made them share the wine of her great impurity and sin”

As you may know there are lots of theories about Babylon – about what it represents

The term Babylon is derived from the Tower of Babel where the people built a tower perhaps to reach God but more likely they were trying to announce their prowess and status in defiance of God

That gives us a clue to Babylon – Babylon is the world to use the language of Jesus – it is humanity organising itself without reference to God and in rebellion against him

It is society where God's absence is normal not abnormal

It is society where the opinions of men and women are the final word – where Man is the highest being and final court of appeal about what's right and wrong

And here the angel announces Babylon's doom

So what we see here is a pattern emerging – the people of God stand and triumph and the world falls and fails

Then the third angel appears announcing judgment v9ff

He announces that anyone who has the mark of the beast and worships him will drink the cup of God's wrath

And then we get a vivid and terrifying description the coming wrath of God upon His enemies

It's really a picture of hell

Now some of what we read may be metaphorical language but when we think about hell we mustn't ignore its reality

The one who told us most about hell was the Lord Jesus himself – the one who died to save us from going there

And so we have to take it seriously

If we trust Jesus on heaven we have to trust him on hell as well

We can't just go to some beautiful woods and forget about hell

We can't just sing the words of John Lennon's song Imagine and go all dreamy eyed

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky

No. These words – in our passage - are not the ramblings of a mad mind as Rowan Williams thinks; no, they're the revelation of our Lord Jesus

So this angel brings a warning to those who reject God

But it's also a warning to believers

Look in verse 12

<sup>12</sup>This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God's commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

In other words, for these early Christians, life may be tough and it may have been very tempting to join the world and forget about God and his gospel

But the world's doom is assured – they are exhorted to be patient and not to give up – it is the Lamb that wins – remain faithful

And in verse 13 they and us are promised that those who die in the Lord are blessed

And in verse 13b the Spirit says that the saints will rest from their labours and their deeds will follow them

Now when we read that they will rest from their labours - we shouldn't get the impression that heaven is one massive lounge full of sofas<sup>4</sup>

This verse is using the term labour as we use it for childbirth – for pain and travail<sup>5</sup>

The angel is saying that the saints will rest from their pain and suffering

And their deeds follow them

Here we have one of many confirmations that lots of things that we do here have eternal value and significance

One day I would like to preach on this – under the title “What Lasts for Ever?”

I think that there'll be far more continuity between this world and the next than most of us expect

And if we really got hold of that it might change how we live here

### **(3) The Harvest of the Earth v 14-20**

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<sup>4</sup> David Pawson

<sup>5</sup> ibid

The harvest is a common metaphor in the Bible – especially when it comes to judgment

Sometimes I go for walks in the fields around Therfield and Kelshall

And over the Summer months I see the wheat growing in the fields

Week by week it gets taller and taller and then it starts to ripen

And as I look out at the crop it fills the field – by the end of the Summer in some places the whole horizon seems to be golden

And then I return a few days later and its all gone – just a barren field left – the farmer has deemed it time to harvest and has put in the sickle

There's parallel with our society

We walk around our cities and towns and see people everywhere – society carries on generation after generation it seems – and in the minds of many it always will

But according to the Bible there will come a day when the Father indicates to the Son that the time has come to put in the sickle – when the world is ripe for final judgement

And just like the field of wheat that is no more, the world as we know it will be gone

And so what we find here in this passage is one like a son of man, sitting on a cloud, a crown on his head and a sickle in his hand

This must be the Lord Jesus himself

Then an angel comes out from the Temple – presumably a messenger from God the Father – and tells him to take his sickle and start reaping, for the harvest is ripe and ready

Remember that the Lord himself told us that *he* didn't know the day or the hour when the world would end – only his Father

Jesus said that the Father had committed all judgement to him the Son<sup>6</sup>

And that's what we find here – the Son instructed by an angel from God to commence the final harvest at the end of the age

And so the Lord Jesus takes his sickle and swings it over the earth – he harvests the first crop – we're not told what is it

Most commentators think that this is the harvesting in of the people of God

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<sup>6</sup> John 5:22

Then we're told in verse 17 that another angel joined the Son and then another – this time they are harvesting for judgment

The second angel has fire from the altar – presumably the fire of judgement that the apostle Peter talked about in his letter

And so the first angel swings his sickle and gathers the grapes from the earth's vines and throws them into the winepress of God's wrath

And the grapes – presumably representing people – are trampled outside the city and their accumulated blood is as high as a horse's bridle for a distance of 1600 stadia – about 184 miles

So the result is what we might call a blood bath – or a tide of blood

So here the primitive method of treading the grapes to extract their juice is used as a graphic symbol of divine judgment

It was from these verses that John Steinbeck formulated the title of his now famous novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*

But this is not fiction it is fact

Now it's difficult to know what to say about all of this

In one sense it is a reminder that there is no equality when it comes to entering heaven – we can't all live according to our own personal preferences and enter heaven together under equal opportunity laws

There is a radical discrimination between the sheep and the goats to use the language of Jesus

I remember hearing a quote from someone who said that, "There are only two types of people in the world – those who divide the world up into two groups and those who don't"

So those who divide the world up may do it into Muslims and Non-Muslims; Americans and non-Americans; Conservatives and Liberals; Christians and non-Christians

The point of the quote I suppose is that those who don't divide up of the world into two groups are less divisive and more unifying and tolerant

But the Bible definitely divides the world up into two groups – there is no getting around it

There are those who cast themselves onto God's mercy and those who refuse any offer of help and live their own sweet way

This passage teaches us that those who reject the mercy of God and spurn his call to repent will drink the cup of God's wrath – as we read in verse 10

Let me read you the words of C.S. Lewis speaking of hell and judgement (I share his sentiments):

“There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay...in my power. I would pay any price to be able to say truthfully, “All will be saved”<sup>7</sup>

But Lewis like me knew that he couldn't be truthful and say that all will be saved – for they won't

Look at verses 19-20

<sup>19</sup>The angel swung his sickle on the earth, gathered its grapes and threw them into the great winepress of God's wrath. <sup>20</sup>They were trampled in the winepress outside the city, and blood flowed out of the press, rising as high as the horses' bridles for a distance of 1,600 stadia.<sup>[b]</sup>

What we *can* truthfully though say is that 2000 years ago a Man knelt in a Garden in Jerusalem and said, “If it be possible, please allow this cup to be taken away from me; but not my will but Thine be done”

But it wasn't possible

For the Lord Jesus was holding in his hands – symbolically - the cup of the wrath of God against sin and wickedness

He knew that the only way that any other human being could escape the wrath of God was that he drink the cup in their place right down to the last dregs

And as he went to the cross that's exactly what he did

In the word of the prophet Isaiah:

“It pleased the Lord to bruise him”

“The LORD laid upon him the iniquity of us all”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> CS Lewis, The problem of Pain, Macmillan, p106.

<sup>8</sup> Chapter 53:6b

And as we come the communion cup in a few minutes we need to remember that the cup which to us is a cup of blessing was to him the cup of wrath

We need to remember that he took the cup of wrath and out of our hands and drank it instead

Taking the metaphor from the grape harvest, Jesus allowed himself to be taken and be thrown into the great winepress of God's wrath

He was taken outside the city, and all the life in him was trampled out of him by his crucifixion – and his blood dripped down to the ground

It is this same Jesus who will come and judge the world with his sickle

When we talk about judgment and hell we always need to set it in the context of the cross and resurrection

And announce that every sinner that repents and seeks forgiveness from God will avoid the sickle of wrath

Let's pray