

**Sermon**  
**Therfield Chapel**  
**Revelation 6**  
**17<sup>th</sup> Aug 2008**  
**Title: The Wrath of the Lamb**

Those most cultured and learned among you will know that in 1985 Clint Eastwood made a film which took its title – Pale Rider - from this passage

<sup>7</sup>When the Lamb opened the fourth seal, I heard the voice of the fourth living creature say, "Come!" <sup>8</sup>I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him.

In the Western, Eastwood plays a character called the preacher: he rides a pale horse, wears a dog collar and is introduced by this verse

The film is interesting because it portrays a people on the Mid-West frontier who are seeking to build a perfect world for themselves and their families to live in

The problem is that they are doing so ignoring the realities of wickedness and suffering that have a habit of rearing their ugly heads just when we least expect them

In other words, they were seeking to build their lives with insufficient thought to the things that can and do emerge to wreck our nice cosy worlds

And Eastward's film cleverly exposes these failings

Now Revelation 6 was written to help John's readers and us to prepare for the worse and to be realistic about life in this fallen world

As you will have seen from our reading, we're now entering the middle and darkest part of the book

When we walk through a forest, we find that it's darkest in the middle and that's where we're heading now

But over the weeks we'll keep walking and as we do we'll emerge into the glorious light of the final chapters of the book

And the light will seem more glorious because of the darkness – for then we'll arrive at the new heaven and the new earth where there's no more crying or pain – for these former things have passed away

But let me begin by reminding us of the contents of the previous two chapters

I'm going to suggest tonight that the previous two chapters - four and five - give us the key to understanding tonight's chapter

Two week's ago we saw in chapter 4 that John is invited up into heaven and the first thing he sees is the throne room of God

And there John is given a God's-eye perspective on the world; he enters a God-centred worldview which he's able to share with us in this book

Then we meet the 24 elders and the four living creatures and together they worship the One who sits on the throne

Then last week we thought about Chapter 5

There we found that there is a scroll in the right hand of God – a scroll that is sealed with seven wax seals

The scroll is the book of history

It is history from God's perspective – from the perspective of the throne

There's lots of debate today about history – about how we do history (or herstory as the feminists call it!)

Fifty years ago it was generally taken for granted that historians could be impartial observers of history and look back over events, make sense of what was going on and record it as a great narrative

As you might expect in our postmodern age this approach is now generally treated with contempt and disbelief

The postmodernist argues that there is no one perspective on what has happened in history – in fact everyone's view is different - especially depending on whether you are on the winning or losing side of what happened

So the British view of the colonisation of Africa would be very different from the conquered African's view of what happened

And so it follows that the victors wrote the history books – mainly white European males - and convinced us that their 'take' was the true one

And so - the postmodernists argue - the marginalised and conquered voices were drowned out and never heard

History in this view bolstered a particular version of reality – which is given a privileged position and is then used to oppress others who don't share it

Now following this logic many historians now feel that the only way that history can be done with any integrity is to deconstruct past Eurocentric versions of history and in future only study how individual people themselves saw events rather than look for grand narratives

There are as many versions of history as there are people we are told

So in many schools now the study of the Battle of Trafalgar is no longer couched in terms of a great sea battle that put the French back in their place and established 100 years of British navel supremacy

Instead children are more likely to study what a sailor in a British Ship during the battle recorded about his experiences in his diary

According to this view of history and reality there is no overall perspective on anything but only the perspective of each person – and everyone's view is different

Now whilst I don't agree with many things postmodern, I still have to concede that we are all influenced by our own perspective – and the perspective of the times we live in

There's no doubt that we're all to some extent children of our time

And that we're too close up to history to read it accurately

It's as if we have our noses pressed right up against our own century... or the year we live in – or even up against what's in the news in any one particular week<sup>1</sup>

We have little valuable perspective – we can't read history – we can't accurately read the story of reality – and so we can't really tell what's going on – the miss the big picture

To be human is to be partial and biased and limited

And that's why we said last week that the one who can unfold the scroll of history and make sense of it can't be just a human being

And so thankfully the one who emerges is the God -man, the slain Lamb of God – he is found worthy to break the seals, to open the scroll and make sense of history

<sup>6</sup>Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne,  
...<sup>7</sup>He came and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne

You see we can't discover the meaning of life and history for ourselves – it's in the hands of God and it has to be revealed to us by His Son

And then what follows in Chapter Five is the revealing of a cross-centred reality

---

<sup>1</sup> Chris Wright in a sermon he preached on this passage All Souls Church, London.

A lesson - that at the centre of all things – at the centre of reality is the death of the Lord Jesus Christ

We're reminded in these chapters that the key to interpreting existence itself and all that has ever happened and ever will happen is with reference the cross of Jesus Christ

The Lamb slain is the key to everything

If that is correct all other versions of history are to a large extent false or certainly incomplete

What do I mean that The Lamb is the key to everything?

Well four things:

(1) The cross of Christ reminds us that life isn't what it should be – that this world is broken – it wasn't made this way – for at the cross we see a cosmic remedy for our world

The cross reminds us that at the heart of reality is a dilemma that needs a resolution – that sinful Man and a holy God are estranged from one another and that estrangement has wrecked the world

(2) The cross of Christ reminds us the God hasn't abandoned his creation – that God has taken the initiative and he has sent his Son into the world to suffer with his creation and has taken responsibility for its predicament

In the words of Albert Camus, at Calvary divinity abandoned its traditional privilege of heaven and took on himself the lot of his people<sup>2</sup>

The cross reminds us that God cares and loves His creation

(3) The slain Lamb of God seen here reminds us that the theme of the ages is God fulfilling the promises He made to Abraham that he would bless all the nations of the earth – promises made 2000 years before Christ died - that He would create for Himself a people out of every tribe, language, people and nation who will reign with Him

So we're reminded that the cross is universal – it applies to all peoples everywhere – the cross is global and not a construct of white European culture

(4) And importantly for tonight's passage, the cross reminds us that Christ has achieved victory over the powers of sin and death and hell and it's a victory achieved not through war and physical power and armies and empires but a victory achieved through pain and suffering

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by Tim Keller, The Reason for God, p31.

So in response to the philosophical question: “What’s it all about?” or “what is life?”

The answer flows from the cross – we can’t read reality from any other perspective

From there – for the cross - history is given meaning

Let me try and illustrate this

The postmodern world is often likened to a carnival

In a carnival there are lots of little individual shows on parade with no one show more important than another

You ‘pays your money and your takes your choice’ about which show you value most and which one you want to focus on

And it’s the same in life in the postmodern world

So your life choice which gives you meaning may include having a secure job; a good income; a wife and three kids and a nice house and being a member of the Tory Party

That’s the drama that you might create to make life meaningful for you – but someone else might choose to work for an aid agency in Africa to create their stage where that find meaning

But the point is that meanings are different and equally valid in the postmodern world

But these chapters remind us that true reality is much more like a circus than a carnival

At a circus there is one place where the action is – one show that we all go to see

And the problem with our carnival society is that by and large we’re so busy creating our own side-shows that we miss the main show

The main show is the slain lamb of Calvary and we all – all peoples of the world - can only find meaning to the extent to which our lives fit into that show

That’s the theme of the first few chapters of the book of Revelation

Mrs Ann Cousin in the hymn The Sands of Time are Sinking wrote:

The bride eyes not her garment  
But her dear bridegroom’s face;  
I will not gaze at glory  
But on my King of grace ;  
Not at the crown he gifteth,

But on His pierced hand;  
The Lamb is all the glory  
In Immanuel's land

The Creation we inhabit is Immanuel's Land

History is in the final instance His Story

And then we come to Chapter 6 – as I said before I think that the key to interpreting this chapter is found in the vision we've already looked at

Now in the first half of this chapter we find four horses – often called the four horses of the apocalypse

We're reached the point where the Book of Revelation gets controversial and I'm going to explain it how I think it should be explained

I'm going to try and derive principles from it rather than locate definite events from history

Now that doesn't preclude other explanations – and when I teach it another time – perhaps in 10 years - I might give it another angle – I don't know

But let's think about these horses

As each of the four seals is broken, a different coloured horse is unleashed upon the world

And each one seems to represent the effects of sin in the world – evils that are the lot of humanity

So the first seal of the scroll is broken and John looks to see a white horse

The rider of the horse has a bow and a crown and this horse seems to suggest invasion and conquest

The ambitions of those who want power and empires

It points to men and nations that play the game Risk but with the real world not the board game

The history of the world is littered with invasions and conquest

The white horse of conquest

The second seal unleashes the second horse which is fiery red

Red is the colour of blood

We're told that its rider is given the power to take peace from the earth and to make men literally (Gk) slaughter each other – and to him was given a large sword

This horse appears to represent battle and bloodshed

The third horse released by the third seal is black

Black is the colour of starved flesh

Its rider holds in his hands a pair of scales and someone shouts “A quart of wheat for a day's wages and three quarts of barley for a day's wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine” – which should probably read: and there is no oil and wine

This is a picture of famine, of rocketing food prices caused by shortages of basic foodstuffs

The fourth seal unleashes the final horse which is pale or greenish yellow and its rider is called death and Hades or death and hell

Greenish yellow is the colour of the skin of dead people

For they – that's death and Hades are give the power to kill a quarter of the earth by sword, famine and plague and by wild beasts of the earth

So this is a picture of death – and not death in your sleep

So what does it all mean?

Well some people think that these are events that will occur in the run-up to end of the world

That they are some kind of apocalyptic nightmare vision of what will occur before Christ returns

And they may well be right – Jesus suggested as much when he discussed the end of the world

But I suspect that they have a wider meaning

I think that these things – military conquest; war and bloodshed; famine, plague and starvation are seen right through human history

Or to put it another way, these horses ride through every age of human existence<sup>3</sup>

They leave their hoof-prints on every generation

War and conquest and the suffering and death they induce, I suggest are the default activities of fallen sinful human existence

We always revert to them in the end

We can't help ourselves – we are sinful

Yes I know that we fence in sin with the rule of law and democracy for a while – and so we should - but eventually it breaks its bonds and reemerges

We only have to read the history book of mankind and there's blood on every page

Now I know that most of us haven't experienced such things in our lives we're the exception rather than the rule - we just happen to have lived through a relatively stable and prosperous window of human history

But our grandparents didn't – they knew all about war and conflict – as do a good chunk of the world's population today

There are few things more sobering than to stand in the First World War Battlefield Cemeteries in France and Belgium and see white crosses stretching as far as the eye can see

Especially when we remember that in 1900 there was massive optimism about the coming perfect society of peace and prosperity – only 14 years before all hell broke loose in Europe

In fact in 1914 The philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche was a lone figure predicting a century of wars – and how right he was

And now, in my opinion we're living in a dying culture – moral and spiritual decay is rotting away the fabric of our society

International conflict is never far from the news

And so we'd be naïve to think that our comfy world will be here for ever; eventually it will once again give way to war and economic hardship and suffering

These horses have been our constant riders through the ages

---

<sup>3</sup> Chris Wright

They're not only things we find at the end of time – perhaps then they'll just be an intensification of them

But this chapter is a reminder to the church of these realities

And what else does the chapter predict that the people of God will have to cope with?

Well, the breaking of fifth seal reveals the continuing tale of Christian martyrs who are slain for the word of God and the testimony they maintain

And they cry out for justice

And then in verse 12 we find a picture of cosmic disturbances

<sup>12</sup>I watched as he opened the sixth seal. There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, <sup>13</sup>and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs drop from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. <sup>14</sup>The sky receded like a scroll, rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place.

Now these images – I don't think – are to be taken literally

They seem to be cosmic disturbances but they probably point to natural disasters: earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and perhaps tsunamis and floods and hurricanes and the like

The sun and stars and moon are great fixed reference points that we take for granted – we depend on their regularity

And the point that's being made is that these things that we rely on as our great anchors in life may become unreliable – and that will be scary

Again these things are the lot of human history

Let's take two centuries as examples: John's century<sup>4</sup> and then the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

The first century (60AD – 99AD)

In AD 60 there was a great earthquake – the one that destroyed Laodicea as we saw a few week's ago

In AD 62 The Roman army was defeated in battle, an event which sent shock waves through the Empire

In AD 64 there was widespread persecution of the Christians after they were blamed for the burning of Rome

---

<sup>4</sup> Derived from Chris Wright's sermon

In AD 70 The Jewish War occurred, which culminated with the horrific destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman army

In AD 78 Nero committed suicide an event which resulted in civil war across the Roman Empire

In AD 79 the volcanic mountain Vesuvius erupted destroying countless luxury homes in seaside resorts around Naples; in fact the cloud of sulphur that filled the air blocked out the sun for so long that people living in the vicinity feared that the end of the world was upon them

In AD 92 there was a serious grain famine and many many died

And the twentieth century?

Well to be brief for the sake of time (you all know it)

88 million people died from genocide

42 million died who were in the military

19 million civilians died as a result of war

44 million in man-made famines

At least 25 million have died of AIDS

These are just snippets of two centuries

Let alone the other 18 centuries since Christ was born

The point I'm trying to make is that in every century the people of God have had to live with these horsemen as their constant companions

The scroll at this point then reveals the tragedy of history – it unfolds it before our eyes

So what's the lesson?

Do we all go home in despair?

What's the point of this chapter?

Well, it seems that in it we find an acknowledgement that the Lord knows all about the sorrows of history

He's not unaware of them

But that's not all – the Book of Revelation is saying something much more than that

It is reminding us of the Sovereign Reign of the Lamb in spite of these terrible horsemen

Why? Why does it need to do that?

Because when we're in the midst of suffering it is tempting to think that God is not sovereign – that He's not all-powerful; that there are some happenings that force us to doubt whether God really knows what He's doing or even whether He can help us

So how does this passage help persuade us that that is not the case?<sup>5</sup>

(1) Each horseman is summoned from the throne – in each case the horse and its rider is summoned out from the scroll from a voice around the throne

So does that imply that God is the author of the evil unleashed?

No, not at all

But it does teach us that each form of evil is ultimately under the power of the throne of God

It teaches us that sovereignty rests with the throne and not with the horsemen

(2) By the time we get to the end of Chapter 6 we find God's judgment in action

<sup>15</sup>Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. <sup>16</sup>They called to the mountains and the rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! <sup>17</sup>For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?"

I tend to think that here we are fast-forwarded here to end of history

And here after all these evils of history we find that the martyrs' cries for justice are answered

That the unrepentant perpetrators of evil are brought to account and face the terrifying wrath of God

It's a lesson that in the final instance, sovereignty and power is established by those who do the judging

It's the judge who has the last word

---

<sup>5</sup> I am again indebted to Chris Wright for the following train of thought

I heard about a man who was a terrorist in one particular country

He rolled a hand grenade into a tent containing soldiers and killed some of them

Later he was caught and put on trial

On the first day he stood up in court and declared in a loud voice that he didn't accept the authority of the court that was trying him

The judge looked at him and smiled and told him to sit down and shut up

And not long afterwards he was found guilty and sentenced by that judge to be hanged from the gallows

And he was

You see the judge had the final word

You see for the unrepentant perpetrators of evil, their ability to exercise any sovereignty stops when they meet the One who really is Sovereign, regardless of whether they accept his rule to not

So the Lamb will ensure justice and place those who practise evil in chains – he will assert his will over theirs for eternity

The Lamb has the final say – His will triumphs over evil

(3) And finally we should note who opens the seals

It is the Lamb

The Lamb, we are told in the previous chapter has triumphed (or better) overcome

And how did he overcome?

At the cross all kinds of evil and human failure were amassed against him – “corrupt priests, lying witnesses, a nationalistic mob baying for blood, a cowardly leader, the treachery of one disciple, the denial of another”<sup>6</sup>, then he faced the worst kind of torture and death

And despite all that happened – despite the tragedy of it all - the event turned into one of incredible triumph when God raised him from the dead conquering everything that was ranged against him

---

<sup>6</sup> Chris Wright

Christ turned all the sin and evil of the cross back on itself and in some amazing way sealed its destruction

And – although it is hard to see it sometimes - it is this same Jesus that in the end reigns over the four horsemen; even they in the end will serve his interests and eternal purposes

The lesson of this chapter is that the rule of God extends is so comprehensive that - just like at Calvary – the forces of evil in end serve the purposes of Him

Let me quote George Caird from his commentary

“The point is that where sin and its effects are most in evidence, the kingship of the Crucified is to be seen, turning human wickedness into the service of God's purposes. The heavenly voice which says, ‘Come!’ is not calling these disasters into existence. They are to be found in any case, wherever there are cruelties, selfishness, ambition, lust, greed, fear and pride. Rather the voice is declaring that nothing can now happen, not even the most fearsome evidence of human disobedience and nemesis which cannot be woven into the pattern of God’s gracious purposes”<sup>7</sup>

Now throughout the New Testament the pattern is: as it was in Christ, so shall it be for the Creation

And in particular: as it was in Christ so shall it be in Man

Christ is the blueprint for the creation

What do I mean?

Well, after experiencing evil and suffering Christ was resurrected

And so shall it be for this world – to the point that evil and suffering serves God’s purposes

Tim Keller (the Reason for God) puts the same thing another way.

He writes: “Christ doesn’t promise us consolation... he promises us resurrection”<sup>8</sup>

Keller means that Christ has not only promised to take us away out from the evil world and comfort us for all the pain we’ve endured – no, his promise is much more profound than that

Have you ever had a nightmare that’s been so terrible that when you wake up you’re happy because the dream isn’t true?

---

<sup>7</sup> George Caird, The Revelation of St John the Divine,

<sup>8</sup> The Reason for God, p32. I am indebted to Keller for this train of thought and the quotes I use.

And in the end we're almost glad we had the dream – the relief is so great

For the people of God the world to come will be better, and the glory will be greater, than if they're never been in a broken world in the first place

And this is how we must see all suffering and pain and heartache – in some way that we can't understand - it will serve our good in the end

Listen to the amazing words of Dostoevsky:

“I believe like a child, that suffering will be healed and made up for: that all the humiliating absurdity of human contradictions will vanish like a pitiful mirage; that in the world's finale, at the moment of eternal harmony, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice. It will comfort all resentments. It will atone for all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that has been shed; that will make it not only possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened”<sup>9</sup>

At the end of The Lord of the Rings, Sam the Hobbit is in despair at everything going wrong – and he falls asleep

And he wakes up and sees Gandalf the Great Wizard

And Sam says: “I thought you were dead. I thought I was dead. Is everything sad going to come untrue?”

All the pain and suffering and evil we experience in this life will in one sense become untrue in the glory of the world reborn

And that's the hope for Christians – that there will be resurrection – all the pain and suffering and tragedy somehow will be taken up and used for good in the New Heaven and the New Earth

To put it another way: all that has happened in human existence will only enrich the world that God's creating – that's the extent to which the Lamb on the throne triumphs

I think that's the lesson from this chapter

The controlling verses are the ones that precede it; not only does the Lamb triumph in heaven but also through all the tragedy that occurs on earth

That's the message of consolation for the persecuted believers John was writing to – and for all Christians of all time as they face evil and pain and suffering

The Lamb reigns even over evil - just as with the cross uses it [evil] to serve his purposes

---

<sup>9</sup> The Brothers Karamazov

Ann Cousin again

The sands of time are sinking,  
The dawn of heaven breaks;  
The summer morn I've sighed for -  
The fair, sweet morn awakes:  
Dark, dark had been the midnight  
But dayspring is at hand,  
And glory, glory dwelleth  
In Emmanuel's land.

STOP