

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

23rd November 2008

Revelation 17 United we Fall

There can be little doubt that we live in an age where human society is bound together in a single global civilisation in a way that has never been seen before.

Part of it is psychological. We are the first generation to have seen what our world looks like from space, in those iconic images taken during the Apollo programme that put a man on the moon. We appreciate the inter-connectedness of our existence on this small planet of ours, that not only is no man an island, but no nation is either. Deforestation in one country leads to flooding in another. Excess consumption of fossil fuels in the rich west leads to changing climate across the globe.

The events on the stock exchanges and money markets of the last few months make it abundantly clear that, despite the great cultural and religious differences around the world, our prosperity is bound up with each-others, we have built international trade and investment into a tangled web that makes us all interdependent to an extent that would have been unimaginable even a century ago.

Through the Internet, we can have direct contact with people anywhere in the world, despite the distance, and even despite language barriers through the development of automatic translators - as well as (fortunately for us) the prevalence of English as the language of the web.

Through cheap travel, more and more of us have personal experience of visiting other countries & cultures; and even those who don't are familiar with their landmarks and famous customs through the wonder of TV documentaries.

So it's not difficult to see how a one-world-government could emerge from where we are today. We have the technology. Not only do we have the internet, but we can make laptops for less than \$100 for developing economies, so the Web is accessible to all. We have the business drivers – it would be much easier for most if not all business if exchange rates were fixed and we knew how much our components would cost from Europe, and how much we could sell for in the USA or the Far East. We have the economic drivers, in so far as the impending global recession could be tackled better if all nations acted as one. Perhaps all it will take is for a charismatic new leader to persuade people that pooling our sovereignty makes so much more sense than continuing as nation-states. Is there such a charismatic leader about to take to the world stage?

Now it's great to speculate in this way. Every generation has done so, and ours is certainly no exception. Not only is it an amusing pastime, but it can keep us on our toes ready for Christ's return, which is what he urges us to do. It would be quite wrong to get so fixated in interpreting the "end times" and so convinced that Christ is coming immanently that we give up our pensions since we won't be needing them. There is some indication that parts of the early church were doing this, convinced that Jesus would return within a generation – which was clearly foolish. However, being aware that God is controlling historical events to bring about Christ's return is vital to avoid the opposite extreme – living such lives of ease and personal comfort that we forget that we will be called to account.

I appreciate that some don't like speculating about what the things in the passage symbolise – for in truth we can never be certain. But this passage is here for a reason, and it would be a short service if we just cut straight to the final hymn now.

Summary of the passage

As we turn to look at Revelation 17, I want you to be aware that this is generally accepted to be the most difficult passage in the whole of Revelation. I will try to explain as best I can what seems to be going on here, but if it still seems confusing at the end then don't worry – that is the nature of the beast, if you pardon the pun! I will also put forward what seem to me to be the most sensible interpretation of things, which generally is to take the story as metaphorically as possible, to treat everything as highly symbolic and stylised, rather than to look for literal fulfilment of this very strange vision. There are many other ways to interpret it, as I said last time I preached, I'm not going to fall out with anyone over this and cannot be dogmatic in my viewpoint. Hopefully though, as we look at the passage we will find things to encourage and challenge us in our Christian lives.

If you were here last week, you would know that we have just had the coming of Christ as a thief, the battle of Armageddon where the worldly kings battled against God, and the punishment of Babylon. Rather than following on chronologically from this, our chapter takes up a different camera angle and looks over the whole of history from yet another perspective – so don't be surprised that we read of Babylon still in power, and of the kings warring against the Lamb. These are the same events, from another viewpoint.

Revelation is a bit like one of those books where the same incident is described from the viewpoint of different characters; to get a full understanding, you need to appreciate all views.

So what do we have this week? A finely-dressed Prostitute sitting on a 7-headed 10-horned beast, persecuting Christians. The Beast itself was, now is not, and yet will come. Its 7 heads are 7 mountains, and also 7 Kings; 5 have fallen, one is now in power, and the final one is to come. The Beast's 10 horns are also kings, who will unite with the beast and battle against Christ - but He will overcome.

The Beast hates the prostitute and in the end will turn on her and destroy her violently. And the prostitute is the City of Babylon.

Not much to worry about here then!

Let's look at how to interpret the various players and events.

The Prostitute Woman

Now we have seen a woman before in Revelation, I hope you remember because it was in the last passage which I took, Revelation 12. That woman was very different in character to this, and represented God's faithful people throughout time.

Throughout the old testament, God uses the analogy of a woman to represent his people – but more often than not that woman is not glorious and good, but vulgar and unfaithful. This prostitute is unfaithful not simply because she sleeps around with whoever will have her, but because she is actually married already, and is forsaking her first love and rightful husband. She is an adulteress.

She is God's people who turn their backs on him.

Commentators take her to stand for either the false church (and in particular the Roman Catholic church in its apostasy and persecution of true Christians through the ages); or of false religion in general. I tend to favour the latter approach. The essence of her prostitution is to take what is rightfully her husband's and to give it to others. You could argue that only the Christian and Jewish faiths are "married" to God, and so it is only their adultery which counts. But I would argue that, as people descended from Adam and made in God's image, everyone owes their worship to God alone, so all religious acts which are not centred on Him are adultery.

Many commentators take the view that this chapter predicts the establishment of a single world-wide religion, since we have here one woman. I find that unnecessary, indeed her characteristic behaviour of prostitution suggests she is not fussed who she is with, and that it does not matter who or what is worshipped – if it is not God, then it is false religion.

I suspect we would get in trouble today if we went around the streets calling followers of other faiths prostitutes. But that is not what God expects us to do with this revelation. After all, those most guilty of prostitution are those who claim to be part of the true church, but have become tainted with the world. We would end up condemning most of the Roman Catholic church, much of Anglicanism, and I dare say a good bit of the independent protestant churches too! Our job is not to condemn others, but to be faithful ourselves, both in our lives and our testimony – which is always more challenging!

We know that Names are very important in the Bible, and this woman's is no exception – so the fact that it starts with Mystery should give us some heart if we find this passage hard! Verse 5.

Babylon is mentioned 281 times in the Bible, and 6 times in Revelation. This puts it as a city second only to Jerusalem with 804 references in total.

Interestingly, the pure woman, the true church, the bride of Christ is herself referred to as Jerusalem later on in Revelation.

The important thing to note is the character of the city. Babylon is synonymous with rebellion against God and opposition to him. It was the city to which the Jews were dragged in exile, a place of humiliation and slavery for them. The prostitute and Babylon stand for the same thing: the world religions in rebellion against God

The Beast

Now we have seen this beast before, in Revelation 13. Paul Zanzreps showed us that it represents (Godless) political power through the ages, and the same is true here.

But here we get a further insight into its nature, its 7 heads and its 10 horns, as these are partially explained in Chapter 17 v 9-11.

The 7 heads are 7 mountains. Mountains in the Bible are symbolic of power, rising above the rest of the land and so dominating it.

As I mentioned last time, Rome is build on 7 rather small hills, so I think those who associate Rome specifically with this are trying to take things a bit too literally – though Rome does have a look-in in these verses, I don't think it is saying that either the Roman Empire, or the Roman Catholic church, is the sum total of the Beast.

This is backed up by the further revelation that they also represent 7 kings, or kingdoms. So this seems to be referring to 7 might political empires throughout human history. Now the number 7 may itself be symbolic – we have seen this as representing perfection and God-given completeness; so it could mean all the political empires, irrespective of how many there are.

There is some support for taking the number literally though, in that 5 of these empires have come and gone, one of them was current in John's day, and one still to come. The current one is easy – it is of course the Roman empire. The 5 past ones are generally accepted to be Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, and Greece – all of whom are mentioned explicitly in the Old Testament. They were all empires over much of the then-known world, but they held that authority by force of military power, rather than consent. They were also known for persecuting Israel.

The 7th kingdom had yet to come when John was writing, which leaves it open to wild speculation. What empire has been able to establish itself over the known world since the fall of Rome? Britain? Germany? America? In past years, all have had their supporters, or maybe I should say detractors, as I doubt any nation wants to be known as the Beast! Given that persecuting the church is one of the roles of the Beast-empires, you could argue that Britain and America (until now at least) are excluded. And while Germany might have seemed a likely candidate in the middle of World War 2, she was defeated before should claim to be the world super-power.

Now besides the 7 heads we have the 10 horns, which we are told also represent 10 kings. The temptation to take the number 10 literally was greatest when there were 10 nation states in the European Union, a real coup for the Euro-sceptics. Now that there are 27 countries, it has lessened the argument somewhat. I suspect the number 10 is symbolic, referring to the complete number of nations.

If the 7th head represents the final world super-power, the 10 horns are the other lesser world powers which *voluntarily* unite with the superpower, to make the eighth incarnation of the beast, an incarnation represented not by separate head, but by the whole of the Beast.

This complete Beastliness arises when the whole world, all the peoples of mankind, are united to the same political ends. The other empires did not achieve this – they may have ruled over most or all of the known world, but they did so by force, they had enemies, and ultimately those enemies prevailed.

That complete Beastliness had been seen before, but had been destroyed, and will be seen again – hence the Beast was, is not, but will be.

When has the world seen its peoples united with one goal? Genesis 11, the Tower of Babel. Read Genesis 11:1-9.

Babel is another name for Babylon. Do you see how it all fits together? Babylon was not just the seat of the empire which carried the Jews into exile. It was the site of man's first united stand against God, when mankind tried to prove how big they were and that they could live without God – that is what they were building the tower for.

God let them get so far, but no further.

In those days, it was relatively easy for mankind to act in unison. Everyone spoke the same language, and were spreading out around the same area after the flood. Communication would be relatively easy, even without the internet!

Now there is nothing wrong with unity as such. In fact it is a good thing – Christ prayed for the unity of his church, so that must be good. The problem was not the uniting of mankind, but the uniting of mankind *without God*. Notice the driving force behind building Babel and its tower – to make a name *for themselves*. There are various ideas about what this tower was, and whether it was part of a religious setup; but the suggestion in Genesis is that this was an attempt to demonstrate to God that they were important in their own right and no longer needed him.

So what we have in Revelation 17 is a prophecy that something similar will happen again. The world will unite, and in that unity they will fight against Christ, they will war against the Lamb – but will not succeed. Again thinking of this as a metaphor, this doesn't mean that the armies of the world will gather somewhere to launch a military attack on Christ. That would be quite difficult, if he is in heaven and they are on earth! But as with Babel, it means they will reject the need for God, attack his authority over them – and even, I dare say, deny his existence.

In this respect, we see people warring with Christ all the time, whether it be Richard Dawkins in his tirade against religion in general and, very interestingly, the whole virgin birth / death on the cross and resurrection of Christ in particular; or whether it be the godless and crass antics and attitudes of much of the media, including those who don't even deserve a name-check for their recent behaviour on Radio 2.

The message the angel brought to John was that even if, even *when* the whole world unites in such opposition to Christ, they will not succeed. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. He will overcome, so hang on in there!

Beast rejects the Prostitute

The final section of this chapter sees the Beast revealing his hatred for the prostitute, by violently and cruelly destroying her.

Which, if our interpretations of the characters are correct, means that the world political power will reject all religion.

With the notable exception of Communism, no political system has yet taken this stance. Quite the reverse, in fact – aspiring political powers have often sought to harness the power which religion holds over its adherents for its own ends. And religions, even to her shame Christianity, have been only too happy to prostitute themselves in this way.

So at the height of the cold war, Russia was seen by many as the Beast, daring to rid itself of the shackles of religion. Does this mean that it is China we are to watch out for now, as the only real communist power remaining, and the up-and-coming super power on course to outstrip the USA within a few decades?

It's a tantalising thought; one to ponder the next time you have a Chinese meal! But the truth is we really don't know, China is changing rapidly and could change still more.

The important point is that, as far as I can see, it is the united 7th head and 10 horns which rejects the Prostitute, not the 7th head on its own. In other worlds, it will be the united political system of the world which declares “war” on religion

Note that it is not just Christianity they are out to destroy, but all religion. The implication is that they will succeed, that the prostitute, false religion, is brought to ruin and devoured by the state, with nothing viable left.

It is interesting, but not entirely surprising, that Dawkins and his ilk cannot distinguish between the true church and false religion. In fact, on the outside the faithful woman of chapter 12 and the whore of chapter 17 were probably quite similar, so it is not surprising that those looking on the outside can't tell the difference. Perhaps the war on Christ and the destruction of false religion appear one and the same thing to the Beast. It is no surprise to us that false religion can be destroyed – for it is truly false. And equally no surprise that the true church can never be destroyed, for she is Christ's bride, and he is all powerful to save.

The arguments of Dawkins are, to many people, persuasive. The criticisms he has of false religious mumbo jumbo are spot on. Perhaps we are seeing here the seeds of the movement that will one day make it politically unacceptable to tolerate any religious notions, just as today it is politically unacceptable *not* to tolerate *all* religious notions? I wonder what it will take to reverse that position – I doubt it is the power of logical argument alone, for that does not carry that hearts and minds of the unwashed masses, who one way or another need to be brought round to the anti-religious crusade.

Conclusion

Standing back from the details of the chapter, what we have here is a portrait of how God sees all human endeavour which is not built on Him. And it is not a pretty sight.

Religion, including false Christianity, for all its claims to bring spiritual enlightenment is worse than prostitution or adultery. It is vile and filthy, not uplifting and wholesome.

Politics too is hideous and self-serving, resulting in violence and destruction and not the heaven-on-earth that politicians often promise.

Whatever form society takes, without God it is doomed. History is already littered with examples of empires that purported to last forever, but fell far far short. Even if the whole world were to work together to the same end, they would fail without God.

Now this is not to say that political power per se is wrong, in fact God has instituted the state to uphold his laws, look after the poor and needy, and to ensure justice is done.

Both Church and State are appointed to have separate and legitimate functions. State becomes the beast when it refuses to accept the higher rule of God, when it assumes a more crusading role to establish a global kingdom, even if the vision is for a kingdom free from terror. Man will never be able to make heaven on earth - heaven is only heaven because God is the unchallenged king there.

Similarly, Church becomes the harlot when she forsakes her core teaching and ministry to preach a “social gospel” or other watered-down message which is acceptable to the state, or when she strays from worship of God alone to venerate Mary or the saints.

Not only does God see such human endeavours as ugly, he also sees them as futile. The end of both the Prostitute and the Beast is their own destruction, they cannot hope to triumph over the Lamb who is Lord of lords and King of kings.

The triumph of God over his rebellious creatures is perhaps not so surprising; what is quite wonderful is that he shares his victory (v14) with his called, chosen and faithful followers. Here the true church makes almost a cameo appearance – though the last chapters of Revelation will show just how central she is to God’s plans.

It would be easy to just see the harshness of God in this chapter, in the way he condemns and brings to judgement those who oppose him. But the very fact that he views false religion as prostitution should remind us that he loves his creation as a husband loves his wife. Just as we would find it almost unbearably sad to see our husband or wife degrading herself with other people, so it must break God’s heart to see his creatures living in such a way without Him. The book of Hosea gives a very graphic picture of this, and also shows another side to the story.

For in truth the church and the prostitute are not so far apart as you might think. Perhaps this is why John himself was so astonished at the sight of the prostitute, because she looked just like the church. The truth is that, left to our own devices, we would be the prostitute and not the church. It takes an act of God’s grace, through the saving power of Christ’s sacrifice, to purify our lives so that we can be the bride of Christ. Such is the redemptive power of God that he can make something pure out of what is impure.

The church is the prostitute repented, restored and reconciled to God, called back by him, chosen to be his bride, and now faithful to him by the strength he himself gives her.

Hosea 2:16-20