

REVELATION CHAPTER 1 V 1-8

I have found the Book of Revelation intriguing ever since I first learned a little about what the books of the bible were about. I am not alone in being interested in this enigmatic book at the very end of our bibles, and its stories of strange beasts and creatures have inspired the imagination of novel & film writers as well as the brains of many preachers for years and years.

One writer that I came across during my research for this evening claimed that 'Revelation is the most abused book in our generation,' and that 'the Apostle John would not recognise his own book by many of the sermons, conferences, books, and movies espousing it.'

I concur with this writer, yet have to accept that without careful thought that I too might add to the false teaching that surrounds these visions.

The problem is that the Book of Revelation does not speak in the plain English that we would like it to be in. The style is one that was well known in the time of the Apostle John though, and is called apocalyptic. The intended recipients of the book would not have had any problem understanding it though as the symbols would most likely have been ones in use at that time. Indeed parts of the book borrow from the Old Testament.

Does this mean that the book was intended to be only for those of the late first century AD, and does it have nothing to say to us today? Well I think it has a lot to say to us, and was not meant just for those living 2000 years ago.

Let us remember that its name is the Book of Revelation, and revelation obviously means revealing. It is a book that is supposed to reveal something, not hide it.

So please leave any pre-conceived ideas you may have about the Book of Revelation at home, and use your imagination as you listen to the reading of Gods Word, but please do not let your imagination run too wild.

This book is meant to be read out loud and listened to as verse 3 of this evenings passage says

'Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.'

And take to heart what is written in it. This is not just a book of academic interest, but one that ought to encourage, teach and even perhaps chastise us. Let us be prepared to listen to what God has to say to us today from its passages.

Do we really believe that God speaks to us today, because if He does then we ought to listen.

And as we read the passages ahead of us they may remind us of situations that Christians face around the world today. This ought to inspire us to pray for them, and the situation they are in.

But above all the Book of Revelation should inspire us in our worship & praise of the Lord. Many hymns and songs have been written from the words we will read together over the next few months

So what does Revelation reveal? Well the answer is in verse 1 of the first chapter. It is

‘The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show His servants what must soon take place.’

Here we see a little of how the Godhead works. There seems to be a hierarchy of sorts with God the Father being in possession of knowledge of the future which He then revealed to Jesus Christ in order for Him to be able to pass it on to us in this book.

It reminds us that the ultimate source of true revelation or true prophecy has to be God Himself, and that revelation will reveal something about Christ & His relationship with His people. There is nothing more important than this & when we are reading about strange creatures, terrible events, & weird beasts we must keep in mind that they are there to help in our understanding of Christ, and to give us encouragement, because they show that He is in fact in control. They are not there to give us a timetable for the future.

This would have been a great blessing to the persecuted early church, & would be a blessing to the parts of the church today that experience persecution. And they ought to be a blessing to us in this country as we see our Christian nation disappear before our eyes as secular law after law is passed in our parliament in the name of religious tolerance. Truly the Book of Revelation is valid for the whole of the period of time that the Christian church has existed.

For this book to be introduced in such a manner as verse 1 does informs us that Christ is the centre of this book, but that last part of verse one that says ‘to show His servants what must soon take place’ has caused enormous controversy. What did John mean by ‘must soon take place?’

Well as you might expect theologians have argued amongst themselves and decided upon four possible answers & as you would expect have given them unusual names that sometimes are helpful & sometimes not. I think we ought to have a quick look at these four groups as how you take ‘must soon take place’ defines how you look at the whole of the Book of Revelation. The groups are as follows

Preterist

This group assumes that the events that 'must soon take place' are never the less in our past. They may have been in the future to John & his readers, but they have since happened. This allows a message for today, but not a predictive message for the future. This group has most liberals within it.

Historicist

This group believes that Revelation describes the whole of history, but particularly the time from Christ's death to His second coming. This was the view of many of the Reformation scholars, and so you know where I'm coming from it is my view as well. It allows for a message for John & his readers, us, and also an element of prediction of future times.

Futurist

For this group the Book of Revelation deals mainly with the future. Many modern popular writers & novelists come from this group. For them the book is interesting to read today, but will only become really relevant sometime in the future.

Idealist

For them Revelation is entirely symbolic & does not refer to any specific event at all. Meaning can be gleaned from this book, but it is not immediately obvious. I have to admit that although I am a historicist some of the views of the Idealist have to be taken into account.

So these are the four interpretations of 'what must soon take place' means. The interpretations are quite different to each other so it is important that we think about them, because as I said earlier they will colour how we see the book, and what it has to teach us. To recap I will take the historicist position, and assume that the Book of Revelation is for the whole church period from Christ's death until His Second Coming. The fact that it is highly symbolic does not mean that it is unintelligible.

John concludes his prologue to the book in verse 3 by saying

'Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it, and take to heart what is written in it.'

This is the first of seven beatitudes or blessings that are found in the book of Revelation. The others are in chapters 14, 16, 19, 20 and 22. For any of you that are counting that does only list 6 chapters in total, but there are two blessings in chapter 22 that make up the seventh.

Now this means that the number seven appears at least 3 times in this chapter. There is the first of the seven blessings in verse 3, there are seven churches in verse 4, and seven spirits before the throne also in verse 4.

Now as we go through this book it will become clear that certain numbers appear regularly. Seven is one of them as is three, three & a half, four, six, ten, twelve, plus numbers such as 24, 42, 144, 666, 1000, and 1260.

However numbers such as eight, nine, and eleven for example do not appear at all. This leads us to assume that numbers are used symbolically in the book. Now before I go any further I must point out that number symbolism in Revelation is not some sort of secret bible code that only those in the know can understand. The numbers are there symbolically to reveal something to the readers & hearers. John's readers would almost certainly understand what was meant by the number seven as they would have come across it in their scriptures, the same scriptures that we have.

As our speaker last week informed us the number seven was commonly used to designate perfection, or God. So the seven churches are the perfect number of churches, and therefore probably a cross section of the church throughout its history. The seven beatitudes are exactly the right number of blessings or ones that come from God. And the seven spirits before the throne (probably better translated as the sevenfold spirit) is in fact the Holy Spirit, the one and only perfect Spirit.

Don't worry I am not going to list the meanings of all the numbers I quoted as you would not remember them unless you had a much better memory than me so it would be a waste of time anyway.

Suffice to say that numbers in Revelation are qualitative rather than quantitative. They are there to help in the revealing process of the book. If you think that they hide some deep hidden dramatic message then you will be disappointed.

Now from verse four onwards John turns to the seven churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea. John states that they are the seven churches of the Roman province of Asia, but as we learned last week there were in fact many more churches in this province. This has led scholars to assume that these seven churches represent the perfect number of churches or the whole church throughout time. God was addressing the whole of His people whether they were alive in John's day, today, or have not yet been born.

I do not however believe that these churches represented time periods as some have suggested. They are the whole church from beginning to end.

If the seven churches represent the whole of God's people then it ought to be a sobering thought to study these churches as most had serious problems to say the least. It will tell us that we who claim to be God's people do not live as if this were the case. But then that is why we need a Saviour.

But in thinking of these churches as symbols or representations of the whole church we must not forget that they were real churches with real congregations, and people not too unlike you or me. They faced similar problems to us here at Therfield chapel in as much as people are people, sin is sin, and persecution hurts. The agents may change, but the problems are the same.

Now if you were to sum up the work of God in two words then you could probably do no worse than the 'grace & peace' used in verse 4 as an introduction. We have peace with God only through the grace of God, and Paul used these words in several of his letters, and John follows' suit which means either that John was familiar with Paul's letters or that this was a common introduction throughout the early church.

Grace reminds us that we owe everything to God. It is the unmerited favour of God & reaches its ultimate demonstration in the death of Christ where Christ dies on our behalf. Christ did not have to die, He chose to.

And because of Christ's death on the cross, and the forgiveness it bought we can now have peace with God. There is no longer the barrier of sin between us and God because that fell the moment we accepted Jesus as our Saviour.

For Johns readers, and us it is a sobering reminder of what Christ had to do to win our Salvation. It is a reminder that we cannot blame God when bad things happen, and say that He doesn't understand what it is like to be us. We cannot say that He never experienced poverty, rejection, hunger, thirst, and injustice, because Christ experienced all of these things whilst on earth, and therefore He is in a unique position to understand our situation when persecution comes our way. We pray to a God who really understands what we are going through.

'Grace and peace to you from Him who is, & who was, and is to come, and from the seven fold Spirit before His throne, and from Jesus Christ'

And who is making this greeting to the churches. I hinted that it was John because it was him that wrote the words or at least had them written down. However the greeting is clearly from God, and all three members of the Holy Trinity are mentioned here.

It is interesting to look at the description of Jesus in verse 5

'Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and ruler of the kings of the earth.'

Now if the troubled believers in the province of Asia are going to put their trust in Christ then they must think more clearly about Him, and there are three things said about Christ in this verse that help this.

First of all He is the faithful witness. Who to? God the Father. And Gods people are expected to be faithful witnesses also. We will not be perfect witnesses, but in our own imperfect way we should be witnesses or pointers to Christ.

The term firstborn is a title & is given in the bible to those in a unique position. Christ is in a unique position in being the instigator of all life. His Resurrection has enabled us to have everlasting life.

To call Christ 'the ruler of the kings of the earth' may have seemed unusual to a church that was suffering persecution. But we must remember that Christ told His disciples that they would suffer for their faith just as He would too. Living in England in the times that we do it sometimes escapes our attention that the lot of the Christian is to be persecuted. Today in many parts of the world believers are disinherited, shunned, and even imprisoned, tortured and shot for their faith.

Where is God in all of this the persecuted church may ask? But they must remember what Jesus went through Himself to get our Salvation. He too suffered for His faith & now God tells us that He is 'the ruler of the kings of the earth.' Secularism or Islam or any other religion may seem to be taking over the world, but all of these faiths have only a season. There is a plan for the Salvation of the whole world, and the Book of Revelation is there to reveal something about it, and Christ is portrayed in this book as the one in control, the referee who will one day blow his whistle and all the godless persecuting regimes and ideologies will be gone in an instant.

Why does He not blow the whistle now and save the lives of many of His followers? I don't know. Perhaps we should read more of the Book of Revelation & we may find out.

The rest of this evenings passage is what I have read called a 'doxology of praise'. It appears that John is so caught up in what has already been revealed to him that spontaneous praise erupts from his pen. But this spontaneous praise is also full of meaning

'To Him who loves us' Not loved us. Christ's love is not in the past & only for His 12 disciples, nor is for the future when we are made sinless and acceptable in Gods presence. No He loves us now. Perhaps the words of Paul in Romans 8 v 38-39 came to mind

'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present, nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'

'To Him who loves us & has freed us from our sins by His blood.'

The love that John, and indeed Paul, was writing about was not sappy sentimental love, nor divine good wishes. He isn't a granddad in the sky, but God. When God loves He loves properly, the self sacrificing love that led Christ to die on the cross. Blood here represents death.

Those of you who have been coming to our Sunday breakfasts may have been reminded of the picture of the Tabernacle that we have been studying over the past few weeks. How blood was a big part of the consecration of the priests and the altar. We have seen how the whole Tabernacle, the priestly robes & the sacrificial system was a picture of how God relates to His people & how Jesus would one day free His people from their sins by His sacrificial blood, His death.

But Christ's work did not finish on the cross. Yes the work of Salvation was completed there, but there was much more to do in the lives of His people. Coming to the Lord is only the first step for the baby Christian.

'To Him who loves us & has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father.'

Christ did not save us & then leave us alone to sink or swim in the world around us. Christ's death & Resurrection gave us a new home. Now the world around us is only a staging place, a stopover for us. We really belong to God's Kingdom, a Kingdom where there is no need for priests to intercede between us and God, because we have direct access to God ourselves. In Gods Kingdom we are all priests.

Again those of you who attend the Sunday Breakfasts will be reminded of Exodus 19v6 where God says

'Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a Kingdom of priests, and a holy nation.'

The persecuted readers of this book in John's day would know this passage & would see how the church was the ultimate fulfilment of these words. To see how God has been directing things would have been a great encouragement when all things around them seemed to be going wrong.

John finishes verse 6 in the following manner

'To Him be glory and power for ever & ever! Amen.'

This is not just a throwaway phrase although perhaps we sometimes used similar phrases in a throwaway manner at the end of our prayers. But it also ought to be a reminder that we owe Christ everything. He deserves all the glory, because He is the Creator & Sustainer of all that is good. We owe our existence and our talents to God. To praise God in such a manner is only to give God, what is by right already His.

John then makes a declaration to the world about the future coming of Christ in verse 7

'Look, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; & all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of Him.'

This is the hope of all believers since these words were written. The hope that one day the Lord will return again. It is a source of comfort to all genuine Christians especially those who have been suffering persecution. It means that the Lordship of Christ which is only now recognised by faith, and by believers, will one day be recognised by everyone.

However this will not be a happy day for a lot of people in the world, because the majority of people do not recognise the Lordship of Christ. So when this becomes obvious to them they will indeed mourn as verse 7 says, because they will mourn for their lives.

So this book that we are studying is more than just Revelation for believers, it is also revelation to those who do not yet believe, a warning for them to turn from their sins and give their lives to *who*?

'I am the Alpha, and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.'

Do you worry that one day the forces of secularism will win? Do you fear that one day the gospel will be disproved by a scientific discovery? Well have no fear. Our God is not a new boy on the block. Neither is He a geriatric who is losing the plot. He is the Alpha, and the Omega, the first & last letters of the Greek alphabet. He is eternal, and He has a plan for the Salvation, and restoration of the entire universe.

We may see only a little of the story that is Salvation, but He is big enough to not only see the whole picture, but to have created that picture out of the turmoil, and desolation that Satan wrecked on the world in Eden.

Rejoice as we go through the Book of Revelation over the next few months, but mourn for those who will not heed what it says.

Let us close our service by singing

ORDER OF SERVICE – EVENING SERVICE 25TH MAY 2008

1) Opening Song – 631 ‘Tell out my soul’

2) Opening prayer – PZ

Loving Heavenly Father

As we come before You this evening we ask once again that the joys, and sorrows of our daily lives might be put to one side for a moment as we consider what You have to say to us this evening. Help us as we go through the Book of Revelation; help us to understand what You want to say to us from this book. May our pre-conceived ideas be put to one side, and may we learn from what You choose to reveal to us - amen

3) Introduce TC Times - PZ

4) Offering & prayer

Loving Father

Thank You that You have provided all that we need at this chapel, and we pray that this might continue until its work is done. Please take this gifts that we now return to You from the plenty You have given us, and we ask that You use them to extend Your Kingdom here on earth – amen.

5) Song Time

a) 14 ‘All heaven declares’

b) 605 ‘Soon & very soon’

c) 726 ‘We declare Your majesty’

6) Prayer Time – DC

7) Song number 679 'There's a light upon the mountains'

8) Reading & address

9) Closing song 45 'At Your feet we fall'

10) Closing prayer

Loving Father

To Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made us to be a Kingdom and priests to serve His God and Father – to Him be glory and power for ever and ever – amen.