

Sermon – 30/12/2007 pm

Beauty and the Beast

Study Text: Revelation 17:1–6

In this chapter we come to a new vision given to John. Some say it is the sixth of seven visions, and other the sixth of eight. What we find is an angel showing John the great harlot/prostitute and her judgment. This is the focus of chapters 17, 18 and 19:1-10.

It is not ‘another angel’ that called to John but one of the seven angels who had poured out the bowls. In the outpouring of the last bowl of God’s judgment we saw Babylon being judged and the cities of the nations falling along with her (16:19). It may well be the seventh angel who now comes to explain further the mystery of the great Babylon.

Beauty of the Prostitute

You have heard the story about the boy who got as cute little bear cub for his birthday. The cub was very sweet and cuddly. The boy had a lot of fun with the cub. But bear cubs grow up into big grizzly bears. One day this bear showed its natural instincts and attacked the boy even though he loved it and cared for it.

Prostitutes make very effort to make themselves attractive to their customers. In the book of Proverbs the young man is warned about the immoral woman or prostitute. *Her lips drip honey and her mouth is smoother than oil.* But what happens in the end? *She is as bitter as wormwood* (Proverbs 5:3, 4).

John is shown *the great harlot/prostitute who sits on many waters* (17:1). He was taken into the wilderness where he saw her more clearly. She was seated on a scarlet beast and was herself adorned in purple and scarlet. She was dressed like a princess, wearing gold and precious stones. In fact she thought of herself as a queen (18:7).

Her beauty dazzled and blinded many inhabitants of the earth. Many were seduced by her. When John saw her he *marvelled with great amazement*. The angel said to him, as if by rebuke, *why do you marvel?* (17:6, 7). She is a dangerous woman and her powers are not to be underestimated.

The kings of the earth committed fornication with the great prostitute. They fell for her, for her beauty and what she offered them; pleasures and treasures, and a sense security. Not only kings but multitudes of earth dwellers were sucked in as it were. They were made drunk with the wine of her fornication. In their intoxication they committed indecent acts with her.

She turned out to be a filthy and repulsive woman. John saw that she held a cup full of filth and abominations. What looked so sweet, tasted very sour. The prostitute was not only seductive; she was vengeful towards those who rejected her advances. John saw that she was made drunk with the blood of the saints, the blood of martyrs of Jesus (12:6). She was responsible for the persecution of many followers of Christ.

Babylon the Prostitute

Who is this great prostitute that John is shown in this vision. He is not being warned about sexual immorality as such. In the Old Testament the people of God were accused of adultery when they turned away from God to worship idols. Even in the New Testament such imagery is used. James calls those who make friends with the world, those who go after what the world offers, adulterers and adulteresses. *Whoever wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God* (James 4:4). Friendship with the world is idolatry.

John saw a name written on the forehead of the great prostitute. It is believed that prostitutes in Roman times wore name bands on their heads. It is interesting to see sports people these days with their names emblazoned across their hat or shirt. The name is called a mystery. Mystery does not mean riddle. This is not a puzzle we have to solve. Mystery simply means something that was hidden is now made known. It is an open secret to those who see.

Her name was *Babylon the great, the mother of all harlots and of the abominations of the earth* (17:5). She is the greatest prostitute in the entire world. She is the most beautiful woman but also the filthiest of all women. Why is she called Babylon the great? What is the significance of this name?

We have come across the name 'Babylon' previously. It was in the city of Babylon that Daniel had to contend with kings who thought they were gods and people who worshipped the king, along with a collection of gaudy idols. They may have had an idol to the goddess of wealth as some do today.

The name Babylon goes way back to the very beginning when sinful men moved out over the earth. On the plain of Shinar they came together to *make a name for themselves* (Genesis 11:4). To do this they would build a tall tower reaching to the heavens. They would delight in the work of their own hands.

The name Babylon symbolizes 'prevailing economic-religious systems in alliance with the state and related authorities existing throughout the ages'. A brief look at world history, and even at the world today, will show how politics and business can easily become allies in corruption. Sometimes religion also takes its place in alliance with business and the state.

The prostitute was sitting *on a scarlet beast which was full of names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns*. This is none other than the beast of the sea (17:3 cf. 13:1). This beast symbolises antichristian government. Many rulers down through history have exalted themselves against the Most High God and persecuted the people of God. Daniel and his friends suffered under Babylonian rulers. He also spoke of the coming of Antiochus Epiphanies.

John's first readers were suffering at the hands of the Roman emperor. They even referred to Rome as Babylon. Business in Rome and its colonies usually operated through trade guilds. To trade one had to be a member of the guild, and members of the guild were obliged to worship the patron idol of that guild. To 'belong', to have security in business or employment one had to go along with the 'culture'. 'Any institution or facet of a culture that is characterized by pride, economic overabundance, persecution and idolatry is part of a Babylon'.

Fornication with the great prostitute is not sexual immorality as such but spiritual adultery. It is worshipping the creature, worshipping man made things rather than the creator. Only God our maker is worthy of our worship. But many are lured away from pure worship by the great harlot. They are shown the treasures and the pleasures, the control and the comfort that money can buy. *If you will worship me* Satan said to Jesus then *all this will be yours*, referring to the kingdoms and the glory of this world (Luke 4). Jesus was not seduced, but heaps of people are.

Resisting the prostitute carries a cost. Jesus soon 'felt the heat' when he rejected the offer of Satan. He did not fit into the culture into which he was born. He was rejected by his own. 'Those who do not submit to the idolatrous requirements of economic well being will be persecuted by the economic system itself, by Babylon the great. John expresses this by portraying *the woman drunk with the blood of the saints* (17:6)'.

I am sure you have felt the pressure to conform to our own economic system. What an amazing system we have. Millions of people owe billions in debt on their credit cards. How did this come about? Were we not seduced by the system? I remember once not being able to do business because I had no credit card and no credit rating. The system promotes credit because it makes the rich richer. But Gods tells us in his word to be content with what we have and to owe no man anything (Romans 13:8).

Beware of the Prostitute

John was *carried away by the Spirit into the wilderness/desert* (17:3). Is there any significance in this place? God punished his people in the desert when they rebelled against him. He also prepared them there for life in the Promised Land. In the end Babylon will be judged; the once beautiful and prosperous city will become a desert. The once beautiful and prosperous prostitute will be stripped naked and left to perish in the desert.

The other point with regard to the desert is that it is a place away from the city, a place where economics has little meaning. It is a place for reflection. In the desert John could see clearly what was going on in the city. He was himself in exile on Patmos at this time. He could see the bigger picture of the economic system operating in collusion with Roman imperial power. He wrote to warn the churches.

It is not easy to see clearly when one is living within the city and the system. Paul often prayed for discernment for believers. We must open our Bible and read what God has to say to us. We must come together for fellowship and worship. The prostitute beckons us and many are seduced by her. They are too busy to read their Bible and too busy to come to church. Soon they are bowing to idols. In their quest to be financially secure and to get rich they will sacrifice anything and everything, including friends and family and even Jesus.

Beware of glittering gold. Beware of the economic system of this world that promises everything but in the end delivers nothing. Seek security in the Lord, not in your wealth. God gives eternal security to those who worship Him and Him alone.

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