

Sermon – 30/03/2008 am

Mourning or Rejoicing

Study Text: Revelation 18:9–20

The price of oil is at an all time high. Oil companies are making profits in the billions. Imagine if a new fuel suddenly came onto the market which made the use of oil obsolete. The economic and political implications would be enormous. What would happen to the Middle East? What would happen to the global oil companies and the thousands of ships carrying oil around the world?

Back in 1833 a law was passed making slavery illegal in the British Empire. With the signing of that law slaves became worthless. Ships carrying slaves from Africa suddenly found their human cargo worthless. A whole industry, the evil industry of slave trading, came to a halt overnight. Many mourned the death of this industry from which they had profited greatly over a long period of time.

Kings Weep

Alas, Alas, that great city Babylon, that mighty city! For in one hour your judgment has come (18:10). An angel came down from heaven crying out *Babylon the great is fallen is fallen* (18:2). Babylon was the name given to the great prostitute, and the great prostitute represents the economic/religious system of this world. The name Babylon comes from the literal Babylon which was such a world power.

But there were other such power bases in the world before and after Babylon. Tyre was a seaport city fitting the description of the great prostitute. Take a look at Ezekiel 26-28 and you will see language very similar to that found in Revelation 18. Tyre was a great trading city which came to boast of its riches and beauty. In their prosperity the people lifted up their hearts saying 'I am god', and consequently came under the judgment of Almighty God.

In New Testament times Rome was seen as 'Babylon the great'. Emperors like Nero and Domitian lifted up their heart against God. They declared themselves to be divine and demanded worship. They persecuted those who refused to bow down and worship them. Their power was closely linked to economic prosperity. Big business profited from their political favours and they in return got the support of big business.

In Asia Minor the close connection between idolatry and economic prosperity was a fact of life. 'Allegiance to both Caesar and the patron gods of the trade guilds was essential for people to maintain a standing in their trades. Local and regional political leaders had to support this system to keep their offices and the economic benefits that came with their high position'.

If the picture is one very similar to what you see in the world today then do not be surprised. That is the point of this vision given to John. The lessons of this book are for the world today and for the future (1:1). We thank God who restrains evil in this fallen world but we do live in a fallen world that is evil and will remain so until it is judged and destroyed by God.

The kings of the earth drank the wine of the great prostitute and committed fornication with her (17:2, 18:3,9). They were seduced by her charm and beauty. They lived in luxury thanks to the

great prostitute. They were captivated by money and power, but became captive to these things. The great prostitute held the kings of the earth in her power.

See how property developers can hold politicians in their power. Money, drink and sex can corrupt politicians and administrations. This alliance is mutually beneficial; it is cosy relationship but an uneasy one. It can suddenly turn sour and come unstuck.

When the kings of the earth saw *the smoke of her burning* (18:9) they wept and cried out ‘alas, alas, the mighty city has fallen’. They stood at a distance for fear of her torment. They felt sorry, not for her, but for themselves. They in fact tried to distance themselves from her as she came under judgment. The great prostitute was paid back in full measure for her evil and the harm she had done to innocent people. The cry of those innocent sufferers had come up before God, even from the grave.

But was it not the kings of the earth who destroyed the great prostitute you ask? Images in this book are quite fluid so that the kings of chapter 17 may be different to those here in chapter 18 – but it does seem that they are the same. The great prostitute was on a beast having ten horns which represented ten kings (17:12). These horns hated the prostitute; they turned on her and destroyed her (17:16). The cosy relationship turned sour. Destruction followed, and following destruction weeping in self-pity. Not weeping of repentance but of remorse, remorse like that of Judas as he threw away the ‘blood money’ he got for betraying Jesus.

Merchants Weep

The great prostitute had many lovers. The merchants of the earth became rich through her (18:3). The luxury in which they lived was the result of their submission to the great prostitute. They sold their own souls to her even as they traded in the bodies and souls of men (18:13). When they see the great prostitute going up in smoke they *weep and mourn over her because no one buys their merchandise anymore* (18:11).

The abolition of slavery in 1833 caused weeping and mourning among those who profited from this evil business, as we have seen. In this passage we see a long list of products sold by the merchants. While some would be considered essentials, notice the word ‘precious’ describing many of these things – precious stones, precious wood and fine linen. Such products were for the rich and powerful, for those living in luxury. With the demise of the great prostitute, and with the kings all in mourning, the bottom dropped out of the market for such goods.

The fruit that your soul longed for has gone from you, and all the things that are rich and splendid have gone from you (18:14). The merchants, like the kings, stand at a distance for fear of her torment, weeping and wailing (18:15). They fear lest they go down with her to destruction. What will be revealed in the court at her judgment? Will it become known that they exploited their workers (James 5:4), will it be made known that they did not pay their taxes (Romans 13:7), will it be made known that they siphoned off some of the company profits for themselves. The great prostitute encouraged such business ethics but now she was gone. Is this why the merchants wanted to distance themselves from her?

With trade guilds and their patron idols being a Christian businessman in the Roman Empire would not have been easy. It is interesting that few Christians in India are in business. Most are in public or private service or in education – education is itself a business and open to corruption. It is not that different here. Running a business is not only hard work but can be difficult because of corruption. We must pray for Christians who are in business.

The great city that has fallen was clothed in fine linen, purple and scarlet along with precious stones (18:16). Some see in this picture an allusion to the garments of the High Priest and hence to the religious facet of the world economic system. Some churches are greatly adorned with the treasures of the world and are noted for their impressive rituals. The tentacles of the great prostitute reach even into the church. Maybe the aim of this scene is 'to depict a system in which apostate religion has merged with the ungodly world'. Unholy alliances between church and state punctuate the history of the church even to the present time.

Sea Captains Weep and Wail

This is the first mention of such a group in this vision. They join the kings of the earth and the merchants in weeping over the destruction of the great prostitute. Maybe the mention of such sea traders in Ezekiel (ships of Tarshish – Ezekiel 27:25) is the basis for their inclusion here. Most great trading cities have been seaports, including Tyre and Rome.

We see a few ships coming into our ports but to fly over the harbour at Singapore is amazing. Hundreds of ships can be seen waiting to load or unload their cargo as they ply the oceans of the world. The whole city is dependent on this sea trade – as is the sea trade dependent on this city.

The angel told John in this vision that all the sea captains who *became rich through her wealth* will weep and wail when they see the great prostitute going up in smoke – *for in one hour she is made desolate* (18:19). No one wants the cargo they are carrying because the economic system of this world has collapsed.

This is not just a recession, but a complete closing down of the economic system of this world. Almost everything the rich desired and called precious has become worthless. This is a warning to all who profit from corruption and sin. The great prostitute received her just punishment, and all whom she seduced stand at a distance weeping and wailing in remorse and self-pity.

Rejoice

The whole world appeared to mourn the demise of Babylon the great, but this was not the case. It would have been the way the media reported things, but there were some who rejoiced over her destruction. *Rejoice over her, O heaven, and you holy/saints apostles and prophets, for God has avenged you on her* (18:20). The people of God who were warned about this evil woman and in the strength of God withstood her rejoiced. They had been beaten and imprisoned, starved and had their property stolen, and some were put to death (Hebrews 10:32f). They rejoiced when their persecutor was destroyed.

Come out of her my people lest you share in her sins (18:4). Have you come out of Babylon or have you been seduced by the things of this world. Coming out is not easy; walking in the truth is not easy but the Lord gives the strength, the strength to say 'no' when the world pressures us to break the commands of God. Rejoice today because Jesus overcame the power of Satan. He cast out the ruler of this world at the Cross. Satan fell like lightning before the power of the Son of God.

But do not rejoice in this alone. Rejoice rather in that your name is written in the Lamb's book of life. Rejoice that your name is written in heaven, for it is heaven, not on this earth, that your future lies.

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