

Sermon – 22/10/2006 pm

The Revelation of Jesus Christ

Study Text: Revelation 1:1-3

When did you last read, or attempt to read, the last book of the Bible, the Revelation of Jesus Christ? For many believers it is an enigma and many preachers steer away from it. Yet for others it is their favourite book. Some are obsessed by it. They have their calculators and measuring tapes in hand as they read it, preferably while wandering the land of Palestine. Whenever there is a crisis in the Middle East they race to this book to see if they can tick off another prophecy fulfilled.

On the news recently was a preacher standing on the edge of a valley in Israel declaring that blood would flow down this valley to the depth of the horse's bridle (Revelation 14:20). He did not mention that the text says that blood will flow from a winepress. Years ago a man pointed out to me that the bankcard with its triple 'b' was actually the 666 spoken of in Revelation 13. Then there is the infamous 144,000 (Revelation 7:4) claimed to be the full number of saints, otherwise called Jehovah Witnesses. The number was reached in 1914 according to them, but the end did not come.

What then are we to make of this book? Do we leave it to fringe groups and Christian sects to dissect, and keep on telling us when the world will end, or do we open it as another book of inspired Scripture and seek to understand it as we do the rest of Scripture? But it is not like the gospels or the New Testament letters you say, and you are right. It is a different type of literature, but not the only occurrence of it in the Bible as a whole. The clues to understanding Revelation are in the book itself.

Apocalypse/Revelation

The first word of this book in the original is *apocalypsis*. We have the transliteration as 'apocalypse'. This will not be the first time you have heard this word. You will see it in the title of many popular books these days. People use it to write about some future disaster or the end of the world. But what does this word really mean?

This book is 'the apocalypse of Jesus Christ'. This word simply means 'unveiling', 'uncovering' or 'revelation' – hence the title **Revelation**. The word has come to indicate dire events in the future but it simply means a revealing of things, in this case of things to come, *things which must shortly take place* (1:1).

If you have read any of the Old Testament you will be familiar with prophecy. This is also a book of prophecy (1:3). Both prophecy and apocalypse tell of things to come. It is just that apocalypse uses images and symbols rather than literal predictions. Was it because these were dangerous times for Christians that God communicated through visions? Was it so that some would hear and heed the message while others were left in the dark? *He who has an ear to hear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches* (2:7, 17, 29). Sounds like Isaiah, and Jesus himself, does it not? Well, it still is Jesus speaking to those who look to him and hear his voice.

Revelation cannot be read apart from the rest of the New Testament and the whole of the Bible. It is not at the end of the Bible by accident. ‘The great emphasis of Revelation is the already completed victory of Jesus. The great end-time battle of God does not lie in the future but in the past. The battle has been fought and won: Jesus is the blood stained victor’ (Barnett). Armageddon, mentioned only once (16:16), and the millennium, mentioned only in the penultimate chapter, are not the major themes of this book.

From Whom

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him (1:1). What is this revelation about? It is about Jesus Christ. The genitive is translated ‘of Jesus’ or ‘by Jesus’, but can also be understood as ‘about Jesus’. In fact the words come from God. God gave this revelation to Jesus to give to his servants or those who believe in Jesus. Although all Scripture is inspired by God, no other New Testament book claims what this book does – direct divine authorship. No other book promises a blessing as this book does either.

Luke wrote a narrative of what has been accomplished ‘among us’ based on facts obtained from eyewitness. The epistles begin with ‘Paul’ or ‘Simon Peter an apostle of Jesus Christ’. This book also has such words but they come in verse seven – *John, to the seven churches which are in Asia*. God gave this revelation to Jesus, who sent his angel to John, who passed it on to the churches and to us. This is a clear and solemn claim to divine authorship.

The John who wrote down this revelation was almost certainly John Zebedee, the apostle of Jesus Christ. On the basis that this book differs in style to the gospel and letters of John, some argue that it was written by another John; but the very fact that he does not identify himself more than simply ‘John’ indicates he was well known. John ministered in Ephesus in his later years and would have known these seven churches intimately – as the text indicates (e.g. 3:18).

John was exiled on the Island of Patmos when he received this revelation. He was there *for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus* (1:2, 9). Christians were under great pressure in those days. They were suffering at the hands of the Romans. Emperor worship was on the increase and Christians had to choose between the Caesar and Christ. Domitian who ruled from AD 81-96 took the title ‘Lord and God’. He had a great temple and 8m statue built for himself in Ephesus.

The Jews were still causing trouble for the Christians also. Although hated by the Romans, the Jews were prepared to report this sect to the Romans for their own benefit, or out of malice. Did not Jesus say *if they persecuted me they will persecute you also* (John 15:20). The Jews in Smyrna and Philadelphia had earned the name ‘synagogues of Satan’ because of this wickedness.

Heresy was also on the increase as these churches grew. False teaching was coming from different directions. Compromise with the world comes during times of persecution just as it does in time of prosperity.

It would be wonderful to visit these churches today there in the land of Turkey. But they no longer exist. There are few believers in that region and whatever buildings they used have been destroyed. The very cradle of Christianity, churches which the apostle Paul established and the apostle John nurtured, no longer exist. This is a message in itself to us today, to us in

the Western world which brought the Reformation 490 years ago, and the gospel to most nations of the world.

To Whom

This book is a God-given revelation and a prophecy. It is also a letter. It is a letter written by John and sent *to the seven churches which are in Asia* (1:4). This letter includes the whole book, not just the first three chapters. ‘A sound interpretation of the Apocalypse must take as its starting point the position that the book was intended for believers living in John’s day and age’ (Hendrikson). Christians in the first century were to read and understand this book and be blessed by its message. The blessing therefore cannot be dependant upon understanding specific fulfilment of a prophecy in WW2, or the invasion of Iraq or the like.

The book is also intended to read by us today, 2000 years later. We are also servants of the Lord. We are promised blessing if we read this book and keep the things written in it. The time was near then and it is even nearer now. The blessing comes from heeding this message. If you believe the time is far off then you are not listening to this word of the Lord. *The time is near* (1:3). We read here of things that *must shortly take place* (1:1).

What is this time? How could it have been near for John and still near for us today? Are you one of those who say ‘Oh? Not another message of gloom and doom; we have been hearing this all our life and look nothing has happened’. *Where is this promise of his coming? For since the fathers fell asleep all things continue as they have since the beginning* (II Peter 3:4). There are three great times we need to remember – the creation, the cross and the consummation.

The Cross of Calvary was when Jesus won the victory over sin and death, victory over the enemy of God, namely Satan. ‘But Satan is still active’ you say. Evil is still present in the world. Revelation acknowledges this evil and attributes it to Satan. Satan is permitted by God to bring destruction. But he is also ‘bound by a chain and kept in a pit’ (20:1-2). When Jesus returns on the clouds (1:7) Satan will be cast into the lake of fire, no more to harass the servants of God.

We are living in the last days, the days between Christ’s first and second coming. Victory was won and declared at Calvary. Sentence was passed on the enemies of Christ. But they are yet to receive final judgment. Followers of Jesus Christ continue to suffer at the hands of Satan and his agents but the time is near when he and his agents will be *cast into the lake of fire and brimstone...to be tormented day and night for ever and ever* (21:10).

May you find the promised comfort and blessing in reading this book!

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