

Session 1: The gospel of Christ for our times and places –

Revelation 1, 12

May 2016

Revelation 1:1-11

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

John, to the seven churches in the province of Asia: Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. 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.

“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

Revelation 12

A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on its heads. Its tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung

them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who “will rule all the nations with an iron scepter.” And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say:

“Now have come the salvation and the power
and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Messiah.
For the accuser of our brothers and sisters,
who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down.
They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb
and by the word of their testimony;
they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death.
Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them!
But woe to the earth and the sea,
because the devil has gone down to you!
He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.”

When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the wilderness, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring—those who keep God’s commands and hold fast their testimony about Jesus.

Introduction

PP1

I have recently stepped back into church leadership again as a primary task. This was something I had always imagined doing towards the end of my life, after a long engagement in the world of education, most recently tertiary education, up until the end of 2015 as the National Principal of Laidlaw College in Aotearoa New Zealand.

I have been thrilled to engage with the preparation for this conference. I have loved the biblical work as well as seeking to begin to apply God's message in my new context in Sydney's Blue Mountains in the Springwood parish and the three congregations within the mountain suburbs of Springwood, Winmalee and their surrounds.

PP2-3

An epoch of history that very significantly shaped the contemporary church, an era often referred to as Christendom, in which the church was recognised as a reputable and central cultural force, has "crashed like a wave on a shore and left the church high and dry", writes Michael Frost.¹

Frost contends that "we have been building churches for an era that has slipped out from under us. The Christendom era, like Rome, has fallen. Now church leaders find themselves cut off and alone in an increasingly foreign culture that is antagonistic to them. The church no longer occupies the high ground. Christianity is believed by many to have been tried and failed. Mike Riddell adds his voice asserting that "the Christian church is dying in the West. This painful fact is the cause of a great deal of avoidance by the Christian community."²

He continues: "The death of Christendom removes the final props that have supported the culturally respectable, mainstream, suburban version of Christianity. This is a Christianity expressed by the "Sunday Christian"

phenomenon wherein church attendance has very little effect on the lifestyles or values or priorities expressed from Monday to Saturday.³

PP4

Mark Sayers, in his recent book, *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience*, likewise contends that a great deal has changed. He writes of "**the disappearance of a mode of church engagement characterised by commitment, resilience, and sacrifice among many Western believers. In its place a new mode of disengaged Christian faith and church interaction is emerging. This new mode is characterized by sporadic engagement, passivity, commitment phobia, and a consumerist framework.**"⁴

Frost, Riddell, Sayers and many other leaders within the arenas of church, biblical studies, and theology, have effectively drawn on the experience and literature of "exile" – OT books such as Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah, for example – as they chart a way forward for the churches of our times and places, particularly in Western nations.

PP5

John the seer, John of Patmos, is in exile.

The book he has left us is wonderfully relevant and challenging for our times and places. It is to the book of Revelation that we will largely turn this week. Eusebius, a 4th century church historian, records an early Christian tradition that the provincial government during the rule of Caesar Domitian had banished John to Patmos in about AD 95. Legend has it that visions came to John in a cave that is now enclosed by a monastery. From the tiny island, John confronted the powerful empire of his day.

PP6

Revelation consists of words from God to seven small 1st century churches in Asia Minor: churches in Ephesus (the 4th largest city of the empire), Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

These churches were almost certainly living room-sized groups, nearly invisible in their cities. Perhaps neighbours were nervous about having members of a strange new religion next door, people who refused to participate in civic rituals of allegiance to the gods and the empire. But aside from occasionally arousing local suspicion, Christian churches largely played an insignificant role in the first-century Roman world.⁵

Scriptures – Revelation 1 and 12

What was John's message? What was the good news that he brought from his island of exile? What is the book's abiding good news for us in our times and places? Our consideration of Revelation will be shaped by the conviction that Revelation is not fundamentally a book for the future, rather a book for the church; the churches of John's era and churches of all eras, until Christ returns. Like all the books of Scripture, Revelation is most concerned with the gospel of Messiah Jesus, the church and discipleship.

Biblical scholar Michael Gorman asserts the following:

We read Revelation as words from a prophet-pastor (and ultimately from God), in order to be formed and transformed, not merely informed.⁶

PP7

Revelation commences:

The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

PP8

For Gorman, 1:3 is the interpretative key to the book: **“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.”**

Revelation is rarely thought about as book of blessing. However, it is. This is the first of seven declarations of blessing on disciples of Jesus in the book: 1:3, 14:13, 16:15, 19:9, 20:6, 22:7 and 22:14.

The book commences with blessing and ends with blessing. The prologue (1:1-6) and epilogue (22:6-21) function as bookends of blessing.

- 19:9 – Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”
- 22:7 – “Look, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy written in this scroll.”
- 22:14 – Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.

Revelation is a book substantially shaped by God's desire and intent to bless. The message of Christ is indeed good news for the world! But John's understanding of blessing is nothing like the trouble-free, comfort-demand, self-interest version that is promised by advertisers and sometimes on offer in triumphalistic, consumer-shaped churches of today.

John is in exile. He has been banished to Patmos. He introduces himself in Revelation 1:9 as “John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus”. He has on the island of Patmos “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus”.

Much of his message is shaped by deep awareness of three realities of life in the ancient world of which he was part with which I want to leave us in this first session and then return to subsequently.

PP9

Empire

John uses the language of thrones (x32), kings (x13), and kingdoms (x7) frequently. There is nothing of the rampant individualism that so greatly shapes our view of humanness and life in current times.

The letter commences with John's greeting in the following terms (1:4-5):

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his *throne*, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the *ruler of the kings of the earth*.

John tells the recipients of his letter that Messiah Jesus is the one "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." (1:6-7)

John lives in the era of Roman rule and Caesar worship. Allegiance to the empire and its gods is all-pervasive. Imperial Rome (named as Babylon in Revelation) boasts of its glory and luxury: "I sit enthroned as queen, I am not a widow, I will never mourn." (18:7)

Gorman notes that Revelation is almost certainly not a response to state-imposed, widespread persecution of Christians, rather to the challenge of "ordinary empire", that is, to the everyday evils, injustices and misguided allegiances of empire life. Revelation, he writes, is "a powerful wake-up call to those who have *taken for granted* beliefs, commitments, and practices that *should be unthinkable*."⁷

The empire and its values are all-pervasive. Complacency about Rome *was* the crisis, asserts one commentator. The book of Revelation was written to challenge this complacency and stir followers of Jesus to be faithful disciples of Christ in ordinary, everyday life under empire conditions.⁸

PP10

Idolatry

John makes significant use of the language of idols (x5) and images (x10).

In Revelation, the true God is known through Jesus Christ "the faithful witness" (1:5), "the Amen, the faithful and true witness" (3:14). God and Jesus are described in terms that are synonymous. Both are Alpha and Omega (1:17, 22:13), both are enthroned and worshipped (5:13), both are "coming soon" (1:7; 22:12, 20). What Christ does, God does, writes Richard Bauckham. Moreover, *how* Christ does is *how* God does.

Humans are called to be faithful witnesses to Jesus. In the church at Pergamum, Antipas, Christ's "faithful witness", had been martyred.

But the world empire is represented by its idols and images – "idols of gold and silver and bronze and stone and wood, which cannot see or hear or walk" (9:20). On each occasion that John uses the term "image", it is closely associated with the beast who demands universal worship and embodies the empire.

- 13:14 – an image in honour of the beast
- 13:15 – the second beast was given power to give breath to the image of the first beast, so that the image could speak and cause all who refused to worship the image to be killed.
- 14:9 – if anyone worships the beast and its image
- 14:11 – those who worship the beast and its image
- 15:2 – victorious over the beast and its image

- 16:2 – people who had the mark of the beast and worshiped its image
- 19:20 – who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped its image
- 20:4 – they had not worshiped the beast or its image

PP11

Evil

John of Patmos has a deep awareness of evil that is real and destructive to human life throughout the world of his day. In Revelation, there is an unholy trinity made up of Satan (the dragon), the beast (Rome and the Roman empire), and a second beast (the false prophet, religious and political institutions that promote emperor worship), that align themselves against God, the Lamb, God's Spirit, and those who follow the Lamb.

This is nowhere more evident than in Revelation 12. The great dragon – that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray (12:9) – seeks to kill the Christ-child as he is born, in the heavenly signs of Revelation 12.

God snatches the child to the safety of the throne; war breaks out in heaven; the dragon and its angels are hurled down to the earth; and John sees the enraged dragon waging ongoing war against “those who keep God's commands and hold fast to their testimony about Jesus” (12:17).

For John of Patmos, the world belongs to God. He has a robust understanding of the world as God's creation. In 4:11 the twenty-four elders worship at the throne with the words:

“You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created and have their being.”

However, he is equally aware that the world has become corrupted by an alternative expression of kingdom or empire, in which idols are worshipped, and evil is real, empowered by the Satan.

It is in this context – the context of empire, idols, evil – that the gospel of God's blessing is proclaimed. It is in this context that the churches are challenged to perseverance, love, and faithful witness.

PP12

John only specifically uses the language of “gospel” on two occasions in Revelation. The verb “to announce” is found in 10:7. And then in 14:6, John writes:

Then I saw another angel flying in midair, and he had the eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth – to every nation, tribe, language and people. He said in a loud voice, “Fear God and give him glory, because the hour of his judgment has come. Worship him who made the heavens, the earth, the sea and the springs of water.”

The “eternal gospel” of Christ's blessing for the people and nations of the world has a necessary and just element of judgement, given John's portrayal of alternative empire, idolatry and evil.

So what?

What about today? Is exile a helpful category from which to think about our discipleship?

Is empire a helpful category? What about idolatry? What do we believe about evil? And if these three terms describe important aspects of reality, then what sort of church will we need to be? What are the challenges that we face as we seek to proclaim the gospel of Christ faithfully in our place and time?

PP13

Life takes Visa

These are some of the issues which I hope will come under discussion during our times together. I will conclude this session with one of Gorman's summary statements regarding the purpose of the book of Revelation.

PP14

He writes:

Christian resistance to empire and idolatry conforms to the pattern of Jesus Christ and of his apostles, saints, prophets (like John), and martyrs: faithful, true, courageous, just, and nonviolent. It is not passive but active, consisting of the formation of communities and individuals who pledge allegiance to God alone, who live in nonviolent love toward friends and enemies alike, who leave vengeance to God, and who, by God's Spirit, create mini-cultures of life as alternatives to empire's culture of death. This is a Lamb-shaped or cross-shaped (cruciform) understanding of discipleship and mission.⁹

Endnotes

¹ Frost, Michael. *Exiles: Living missionally in a Post-Christian culture*. P. 3

² Ibid P. 7

³ Ibid P. 9-10

⁴ Sayer's Mark. *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience*. Loc 82

⁵ Kraybill, J. Nelson. *Apocalypse and Allegiance: Worship, Politics and Devotion in the Book of Revelation*. Loc 521

⁶ Gorman, M. *Reading Revelation responsibly: Uncivil worship and witness, following the Lamb into the new creation*. Loc 2092

⁷ Ibid Loc 938

⁸ Ibid Gorman quoting Howard-Brook and Gwyther. Loc 919-934

⁹ Ibid Loc 1912