

Session 3
Preaching and communicating for our times and places –
Revelation 4-5
May 2016

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.” At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it. And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne. Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. They were dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads. From the throne came flashes of lightning, rumblings and peals of thunder. In front of the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven spirits of God. Also in front of the throne there was what looked like a sea of glass, clear as crystal.

In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. The first living creature was like a lion, the second was like an ox, the third had a face like a man, the fourth was like a flying eagle. Each of the four living creatures had six wings and was covered with eyes all around, even under its wings. Day and night they never stop saying:

“ ‘Holy, holy, holy
is the Lord God Almighty,
who was, and is, and is to come.”

Whenever the living creatures give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say:

“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.”

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. And they sang a new song, saying:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.”

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and honor and glory and praise!”
Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth
and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:
“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!”

The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.

Introduction

PP1-2

“**Feel, believe and expect something**” – this sign catches the eye as one takes a bend on the Great Western Highway, driving towards Blaxland in Sydney’s Blue Mountains.¹ It is a billboard advertising the Penrith Panthers Rugby League Club, which is situated 55 kilometres west of Sydney’s centre. It displays much about contemporary mainstream culture.

- Feel – love or experience
- Believe – faith, trust in whatever you are feeling
- Expect – Hope, your longings will be met
- Something! Anything! It’s up to you. It’s your choice. Your choices are unlimited.

Love (feeling), faith (belief) and hope (expectation) are shaped by the Panthers NFL team’s games, the club, and the experiences one has in those locations. On their website, the Panthers uses the language of “inner sanctum” (a holy place) to describe its new gymnasium facilities.

- We live in a culture of the spectacle, the visual, the image
- We are encouraged to be entertained, to passivity, to spectate; we are voyeurs, watchers; we have new expectations and addictions.
- We live with a new gnosticism; elite athletes are among those who are highly paid and idolised. They have elite bodies. They are featured in media contexts. Young people aspire to be like their sporting heroes, who for a time have “perfect” bodies.
- In the background of this ad you can see the Panthers cheer-girls, the signage, the crowd being entertained.

PP3

According to Mark Sayers, we live in a society of spectacle, a term which **“describes a highly visual culture, in which citizens had been reduced to consumers and spectators, in which we were offered a never-ending**

parade of spectacular media events, which constantly distracted us from mortality, pain, and what it is to be human. In the society of the spectacle, politics is turned into theatre, sex into pornography, religion into consumerism. In the society of the spectacle, reality TV sits next to a terrorist attack broadcast endlessly on the twenty-four hour news cycle, intermittently interrupted by advertisements for the latest in teeth whitening.²

For those who wish to lead, influence, and create, the society of the spectacle is one of our greatest adversaries. It ultimately creates spectators and consumers rather than activists and creators. It fuels distraction and passivity. To lead in such a time, Sayers writes, one must break from the culture of passivity and spectatorship and be proactive; one must decide to no longer be slavishly controlled by a culture that pushes us toward passivity.

PP4

When today’s leader rejects the culture of distraction, she must then encounter the pain and brokenness that was present all along – drowned out by reality TV, social networking, and the constant hum of advertising. This is profoundly counterintuitive, but it is the true call of a leader.³

Scriptures – Revelation 4 and 5

In this session, and the next one, we will explore texts that usher us into a different way of being human together; a way of renewed imagination and real participation in the purposes of God through our lives and for the world. We turn to Revelation 4 and 5.

John enters an open door into heaven in 4:1. The vision of throne and God that he sees is the biblical response to overpowering, oppressive 1st century empire. It stands at the very heart of the book of Revelation, and we might argue, is the culminating vision of God in Scripture. John, henceforth has a God-view of earth and the empire of pretence.

John is “in the Spirit”, a phrase used on four occasions in Revelation (1:10, 4:2, 17:3, 21:10). One commentator remarks that John may be *on* Patmos but he is *in* the Spirit. He is encompassed, captured, indwelt by God; he is a participant, a speaking, weeping, worshipping, witnessing participant in the purposes of God for the entire cosmos. John is more than a spectator.

The one who speaks to John is Jesus, as it was in 1:10-20. Jesus speaks with the piercing clarity of a trumpet (1:10, 4:1). We desperately need, in our times and places, a renewed attention and deep knowledge of this Jesus and of God who is known in Christ Jesus, and of all things in Christ.

What can we say about the central images in **Revelation 4 and 5**?

PP5

Revelation 4:1-11 is a theophany (revelation of God), and a “symphony of Old Testament theophanies”. **The key image is the “throne”**. The word for throne is used 19 times in Revelation 4 and 5; it is used 43 times in the book. Satan has a throne (2:13); the beast has a throne (16:10). However, it is this throne in heaven on which the true Caesar is seated, ruling, almighty, for ever and ever.

John is *on* Patmos, *in* the Spirit. In Revelation 4:1-11 he sees and hears that the worship of God is the heartbeat of the cosmos, even when we humans on earth do not see it, participate in it, or value it.⁴

Revelation 5:1-14 is a Christophany (revelation of Christ). **The key image is the “lamb”**. The word is used of Christ 28 times in the book. It is the most significant and enduring image of Christ as the Scriptures come to an end.

John had looked for a lion – the lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David (5:5). It was this lion, the elder told John, who was worthy to open the scroll which contains God’s plan to judge and save the world. But John saw a lamb, standing as if it has been slain. The *Message* translates it as “slaughtered but standing tall”. The lion who is a lamb, has conquered,

overcome, triumphed. John uses the Greek word “nikē”, the name of the goddess of victory, close companion of Zeus, greatly loved in the ancient world, goddess Victoria to the Romans, worshipped by many including generals and their armies as they returned victorious from the battle field. The lamb that had been slain is a greater victor than Roman gods. The lamb is ultimately conqueror over all things.

The throne and the lamb – sovereignty, glory, power *and* sacrifice, love, weakness. Strength-in-weakness. Lamb-lion.

The lamb is at the centre of the heavenly throne. The lamb has seven horns and seven eyes (complete power and wisdom). The lamb enacts the future of the cosmos. The lamb’s people will reign on the earth. Everything, everywhere worships the one on the throne and the lamb. In the collision of empires, those of the beast and of the lamb, it is the lamb who is victorious. The ugly harlot and evil beast are destroyed; the adorned bride and sacrificed lamb usher in new heavens and new earth. To God be the glory.

Here the grounds for true love, faith and hope. Here are the grounds for renewed imaginations, resolute hearts and resilient lives as we participate in empire times, in the life of the Spirit, in our times and places.

So what?

There are wonderful opportunities for preaching and more widely communicating the gospel in our times and places. We are all aware of rapidly shifting contours in technology and communications.

PP6

What do we need to do? **What ought to characterise us as people and as church?**

- **Comprehensive knowledge of the Scriptures and the gospel of Christ to which they bear witness**

Revelation has been, and still is, subject to some bizarre interpretations, at least in part because of the failure to read it as the culminating book of the canon of Scripture. It has been neglected even by Christian theologians and writers. Gorman notes that Martin Luther was suspicious of it, and that it was the only NT book on which John Calvin did not write a commentary. In our previous session we noted that Revelation surpasses all other NT texts in its dependence on the Old Testament. Swete contends that of the 404 verses of Revelation, 278 contain references to the OT Scriptures – that is, nearly 70% of the text of Revelation; one copy of the Greek NT concludes that the text of Revelation alludes to, or incorporates, more than 500 passages from the OT.

Texts from throughout the full Scriptures are profoundly embedded in the book of Revelation. There is nothing wholly original in Revelation 4 and 5, or much of the book. But Revelation becomes incomprehensible or badly misunderstood when it is read without a deep knowledge of prior books such as Genesis and Exodus, Isaiah and Ezekiel, Daniel and Zechariah.

The sealed scroll of 5:1 draws on Ezekiel 2:9-10; the name “lion of Judah” (5:2) is previously found only in the prophetic words of Genesis 49:9-10; the name “Root of David” draws on the text of Isaiah 11:1-2 among others; the lamb standing as though slain (5:6) draws on Isaiah 53:7, 11; Zechariah 4:10 speaks about the seven eyes of the LORD that range through the whole earth; and as the lamb approaches the throne and takes the scroll, one cannot help but recall Daniel 7:13-14.

- **Robust engagement with culture and the cultural narratives with which the gospel of Christ contends**

Such engagement characterises John’s writing and God’s revelation. It is deeply shaped both by biblical texts and by its cultural context.

Undoubtedly John’s appeal to the numbers 6 and 7 in the book is initially shaped by the Genesis creation narratives. However, when John references the number 666 as the number of the beast, the number of a man, in 13:18, he is provocatively drawing on cultural narratives from his own day. John tells his readers that anyone with understanding will know to whom the number refers.

Kraybill includes a fascinating section in his book *Apocalypse and Allegiance* on gematria, the system of assigning values to letters of the alphabet. He notes some fascinating examples of gematria from the ancient world, for example, graffiti from the ruins of Pompey, destroyed in AD 79, that reads, “I love her whose number is 545”.

The gematrial sum of Nero Caesar in Hebrew lettering, is 666. Kraybill concludes that it seems likely John meant 666 to refer to Nero (and hence to Domitian, who was spoken of as a reincarnate Nero). However, Kraybill concludes, we need not limit the meaning of the number or symbol of the beast to just one demented ruler; any human entity that usurps allegiance that belongs to God is beastly. (There is even a technical term for the fear of the number 666 – it is **hexakosioihexekontahexaphobia**.)

PP7

Preaching, as I understand it, and our communication more widely, needs to have three points of focus, or three considerations. I think of it in terms of **TG21**. Preaching must be more than exegesis; more than exposition. The three points of focus are:

- **The text** – exegesis, exposition
- **The text as part of the full Scriptures** – canonical, covenantal, Christological
- **The text as part of the full Scriptures for today** – application, so what? Our prophetic posture as we bring God’s word to bear on today’s issues and the church’s responsibility

Our hearers must hear Scripture as bearing witness to the gospel of Christ; as contending with alternative narratives in their own times and places. There is work to be done!

PP8

What ought to characterise us as people and as church? The third point:

- **Committed participation in deep relationships and communities shaped by the gospel of Christ**

Faith. Love. Hope. Sincerity. Vulnerability. Confession. Repentance. Humour. Lament. Celebration. Waiting. Living and dying.

- **Deeply formed character and practices that are faithfully responsive to the gospel of Christ**

Richard Foster once said, “The desperate need today is not for a greater number of intelligent people, or gifted people, but for deep people.”⁵

Amen. Resilient. Persevering. Prayerful. Disciplined. Practicing and living out that which we say we believe.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.penrithpanthers.com.au/>

² Sayers, M. *Facing Leviathan: Leadership, Influence, and Creating in a Cultural Storm*. Loc 621

³ Ibid Loc 708

⁴ Gorman, Loc 2558

⁵ Richard Foster in Sayers, M. *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience*. Loc 975