

Session 2
The idols of our times and places – Revelation 17-18
May 2016

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the punishment of the great prostitute, who sits by many waters. With her the kings of the earth committed adultery, and the inhabitants of the earth were intoxicated with the wine of her adulteries.”

Then the angel carried me away in the Spirit into a wilderness. There I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names and had seven heads and ten horns. The woman was dressed in purple and scarlet, and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. The name written on her forehead was a mystery:

BABYLON THE GREAT
THE MOTHER OF PROSTITUTES
AND OF THE ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.

I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, the blood of those who bore testimony to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly astonished. Then the angel said to me: “Why are you astonished? I will explain to you the mystery of the woman and of the beast she rides, which has the seven heads and ten horns. The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come.

“This calls for a mind with wisdom. The seven heads are seven hills on which the woman sits. They are also seven kings. Five have fallen, one is, the other has not yet come; but when he does come, he must remain for only a little while. The beast who once was, and now is not, is an eighth king. He belongs to the seven and is going to his destruction.

“The ten horns you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but who for one hour will receive authority as kings along with the beast. They have one purpose and will give their power and authority to the beast. They will wage war against the Lamb, but the Lamb will triumph over them because he is Lord of lords and King of kings—and with him will be his called, chosen and faithful followers.”

Then the angel said to me, “The waters you saw, where the prostitute sits, are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages. The beast and the ten horns you saw will hate the prostitute. They will bring her to ruin and leave her naked; they will eat her flesh and burn her with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to accomplish his purpose by agreeing to hand over to the beast their royal authority, until God’s words are fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.”

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted:

“ ‘Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!’
She has become a dwelling for demons
and a haunt for every impure spirit,
a haunt for every unclean bird,
a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal.
For all the nations have drunk
the maddening wine of her adulteries.
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.”

Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

“ ‘Come out of her, my people,’
so that you will not share in her sins,
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;
for her sins are piled up to heaven,
and God has remembered her crimes.
Give back to her as she has given;
pay her back double for what she has done.

Pour her a double portion from her own cup.
Give her as much torment and grief
as the glory and luxury she gave herself.
In her heart she boasts,
'I sit enthroned as queen.
I am not a widow;
I will never mourn.'
Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:
death, mourning and famine.
She will be consumed by fire,
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.

"When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

" 'Woe! Woe to you, great city,
you mighty city of Babylon!
In one hour your doom has come!'

"The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves.

"They will say, 'The fruit you longed for is gone from you. All your luxury and splendor have vanished, never to be recovered.' The merchants who sold these things and gained their wealth from her will stand far off, terrified at her torment. They will weep and mourn and cry out:

" 'Woe! Woe to you, great city,
dressed in fine linen, purple and scarlet,
and glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls!
In one hour such great wealth has been brought to ruin!'

"Every sea captain, and all who travel by ship, the sailors, and all who earn their living from the sea, will stand far off. When they see the smoke of her burning, they will exclaim, 'Was there ever a city like this great city?' They will throw dust on their heads, and with weeping and mourning cry out:

" 'Woe! Woe to you, great city,
where all who had ships on the sea
became rich through her wealth!
In one hour she has been brought to ruin!'

"Rejoice over her, you heavens!
Rejoice, you people of God!
Rejoice, apostles and prophets!
For God has judged her
with the judgment she imposed on you."

Then a mighty angel picked up a boulder the size of a large millstone and threw it into the sea, and said:

"With such violence
the great city of Babylon will be thrown down,
never to be found again.
The music of harpists and musicians, pipers and trumpeters,
will never be heard in you again.
No worker of any trade
will ever be found in you again.
The sound of a millstone
will never be heard in you again.
The light of a lamp
will never shine in you again.
The voice of bridegroom and bride
will never be heard in you again.
Your merchants were the world's important people.
By your magic spell all the nations were led astray.
In her was found the blood of prophets and of God's holy people,
of all who have been slaughtered on the earth."

Introduction

PP1-2

Local park, granddaughter, play equipment, kookaburras, sunset, peace, health, family, good things ...

There are times I don't want to believe that the world in which we live is distorted and corrupted by evil; that evil is real; that there is a Satan; fallen angels; human empires characterised by what Gorman calls the "corporate corruption of covenantal obligations"; a God who is justly angry; people who are held accountable by an angry God and who desperately need to turn to the grace of God in Christ.

Many of us, much of the time, can get away with not believing those things in countries such as Australia and Aotearoa NZ, if we want to, if we have enough wealth and health, and naivety. But every so often ...

- The UK-based international charity Oxfam recently reported that the world's richest 62 people now own as much wealth as half the world's population. 62 people have a cumulative wealth of \$1.76 trillion, equivalent to the wealth of 3.5 billion of the world's poorest people. Throughout the world, economic inequality is morally obscene. The most common way the super-rich in low and middle-income countries have made their fortunes is through the open plunder of public resources; public funds siphoned off into undisclosed private accounts in Switzerland, Dubai, Singapore or the Cayman Islands. (Ramachandra)
- For the past decade in Aotearoa NZ, a child is killed through violence or neglect about every five weeks on average. Thirty-one young ones have died after a violent assault; kicked, punched, thrown, stomped or bashed. In the last half of 2015, Child Youth and Family recorded 8800 cases of proven child abuse and neglect.

The book of Revelation is written to awaken a complacent church who had surrendered their critique of "ordinary empire", who had too willingly compromised with the corruptions of the day, who had lost their appreciation of the radical grace of Christ, and the radical discipleship the gospel demands of those who seek to live faithfully in empire times.

PP3

The proclamation of Christ *culminates* the Scriptures – the promises, prophecies and events of Scripture, from the accounts of Genesis to the NT accounts of Jesus. It also, always *contends* with powerful, alternative messages which promote their own versions of the good life. Such was the case in John's day; such is the case today.

It *culminates* the Scriptures – it is fascinating that this last book of the canon does not include direct quotations from the OT Scriptures. Nowhere does it say, "It is written ..." in a way that was common to many of the other NT letters and writings.

However, Revelation surpasses all other NT texts in its dependence on the OT. 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 clearly draws on statements and images from the OT. One copy of the Greek NT concludes that the text of Revelation alludes to, or incorporates, more than 500 passages from the OT. The full Scriptures are profoundly embedded in the book of Revelation. This is truly crowning book of Scripture which must be read and appreciated from a deep engagement with the full Bible.

The good message of Christ *contends* with alternative versions of the good life, of peace, security, humanness, and hope promoted by empires of the day. In John's time, the Roman empire with its idols and images, was dominant throughout the world John knew.

John characterises Rome as Babylon; Babylon, the great city, the mighty city! The name of Babylon, throughout Scripture, has become synonymous with exalted pride and empire opposition to the LORD.

PP4

Many described Rome as glorious. Many were wooed by its wonders and power. Many worshipped the Caesar. The ancient author Suetonius reported the following incident that took place at Puteoli, a port of Rome, in about AD 14:

As (Caesar Augustus) sailed by the gulf of Puteoli, it happened that from an Alexandrian ship which had just arrived there, the passengers and crew, clad in white, crowned with garlands, and burning incense, lavished upon him good wishes and the highest praise, saying that it was through him they sailed the seas, and through him that they enjoyed their liberty and their fortunes.

“Caesar has obtained for us a profound peace”, wrote the philosopher Epictetus during the reign of Domitian (AD 81-96).

What does John reveal? What does he have to say about the great empire?

Scriptures – Revelation 17 and 18

We turn briefly to the stunning text of Revelation 17 and 18.

PP5

17:1-3 – an angel speaks. The angel tells John that he will show him the destruction under God’s judgement of the great prostitute who sits by (on) many waters, the one with whom earthly rulers have committed adultery; with whom people throughout the nations have been intoxicated. John is carried away, in the Spirit, to the wilderness where he sees ...

17:3-6 – John sees. He is astonished! Literally, the text reads, “I was astonished with great astonishment”. John is overwhelmed. John has already fallen down as though dead (1:17); wept bitterly (5:4). Gaining this knowledge; seeing these visions; fulfilling this ministry is indeed costly.

17:7-18 – angel speaks. The mystery is revealed, interpreted. The images can be understood. Wisdom is required (17:9). At the end of the interpretation we read: “The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth”.

The prostitute, gorging herself on filth, and drunk with the blood of God’s holy people, is Rome (17:18).

The beast is empire power that rules by force. Perhaps Rome (the harlot) is portrayed as the particular instance of what is permanent in world Empire (the beast). Such Empire is the supreme enemy of Christ, the kingdom of God, and the church. (17:8)

The waters are peoples, multitudes, nations and languages (17:5).

17:8 – the beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction (17:8).

These words parody the description of God as the one “who was, and is, and is to come” (1:4, 8; 4:8). Almighty God is from eternity to eternity, while the beast moves from being to nonbeing to being again, and finally to destruction. The LORD God is the one who deserves astonishment, admiration and worship. But the inhabitants of the earth are astonished by this beast, the one who once was, now is not, and yet will come.

17:16-18 – these surprising words portray the beast turning on the prostitute, hating her, and killing her. Empires like Rome, cannot remain. They are inherently self-destructive. Their cruel practices will see them wither from within.

Kraybill reflects on the demise of Domitian (AD 81-96), Caesar when the book of Revelation was written, assassinated in AD 96 having become “an object of terror and hatred to all.” His death was widely celebrated. Pliny describes the relief and jubilation that greeted his demise, as people spontaneously smashed statues and images of the emperor:

Those innumerable golden images, as a sacrifice to public rejoicing, lie broken and destroyed. It was our delight to dash those proud faces to the ground, to smite them with the sword and to savage them with the axe, as if blood and agony could follow every blow. Our transports of joy – so long deferred – were unrestrained; all sought a form of vengeance in beholding those bodies mutilated, limbs hacked to pieces, and finally that baleful, fearsome visage cast into the fire, to be melted down ...¹

Domitian was often spoken about as a reincarnation of Nero. As had been the case when Nero committed suicide, the Roman Senate passed a *damnatio memoriae* (condemnation-of-memory) decree after Domitian’s death, declaring that throughout the empire, every trace of his existence should be removed.

PP6-7

Gorman finds seven empire themes emerging from Revelation 17-18.

- **Empires are systems of domination that seduce the powerful and intoxicate ordinary people with promises of power, prosperity and security.**
- **Empires are expansive and self-promoting, making claims for themselves that are only true of God.**
- **Empires present themselves as aesthetically pleasing, seeking to mask their abominations.**

- **Empires are opposed to the true God and will do what is needed to silence faithful witness to the true God.**
- **Empire grows, in part, because those it conquers, acquiesce. They surrender to empire rule and cooperate with empire ways.**
- **Empires often perish because of self-inflicted wounds, and ultimately perish under the judgement of God.**
- **Particular empires are historical manifestations or incarnations of something much more powerful that we may call Empire.²**

A key statement in 18:4, spoken by “another voice in heaven” is “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins ...” God’s people must not identify with Babylon.

So what?

PP8

Vinoth Ramachandra writes: **“Modernity has come to encircle the globe, its effects felt in the most remote rural villages and not only in university campuses, urban shopping malls and government bureaucracies. It is not simply one civilization among others, but the first truly global civilization to emerge in human history.”³**

We live in empire times unlike any before. What are the idols of our times? Are we complacent? Compromised? What about evil in our times?

Mark Sayers discerns that the church is confronted by a new form of Gnosticism, one that has been in evidence and developing since the middle of the 20th century. His book *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience*, is well worth reading. Gnosticism, he writes is, in essence, the gospel of Self.⁴

Self is the only authority left in post-Christendom cultures, such as Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. This is the religion of Me, the new Narcissism. Sayers develops a table comparing ancient and contemporary Gnosticism with the Gospel of Christ.⁵

PP9-10

Ancient Gnosticism	Contemporary Gnosticism	Gospel of Christ
The world is inferior.	Your world is inferior.	Creation of a world that is good, groaning and waiting its full redemption.
Matter is the problem.	The mundane is the problem.	Sin and rebellion against God are the problem.
Escape from your body to perfect-spirit.	Transform your body into a perfect-looking body.	God's grace frees us from sin and death.
Look inward to find truth and the god within.	Look inward to find the real you.	God's revelation in Christ opens our eyes to truth
Escape the world to a perfect spiritual place.	Escape the mundane to the amazing life	Worship and serve God and love others
Move to perfection through finding hidden spiritual knowledge.	Move to perfection through tips, tweaks, hacks, and the secrets of success. Self-create.	Pursue Christlikeness.
You are a seeker, pursuing hidden knowledge.	You are a seeker, pursuing fulfilment through incredible experiences and pleasure.	You are a recipient of grace and are pursued and loved by God.
You are a god.	It's all about you.	It's all about God.

PP11

In light of this empire context, we are challenged to be:

- Creative minority communities
- People who choose to live with tension
- Learn to live out of a rhythm of withdrawal and return, not seeking to reduce tension through compromise and pursuit of relevance
- Deep people who have the capacity to critique, be resilient, persevere etc.

Some final words from Gorman:

Revelation is not primarily a book to be dissected but to be lived; that is the nature of resistance literature. Christian resistance, like warfare, is not passive but active. It consists of the formation of communities and individuals who pledge allegiance to God alone; live in nonviolent love towards friends and enemies alike; leave vengeance to God but bear witness to God's coming judgment and salvation; create, by God's Spirit, mini-cultures of life as alternatives to Empire's culture of death; and invite all who desire life with God to repent and worship God and the Lamb. The will of God is for all to follow the Lamb and participate in the present and coming life of God-with-us forever. A community that takes the spirituality of Revelation seriously will therefore be unashamedly evangelical, that is, proclaiming in word and deed "the eternal gospel" (14:6) and inviting others into the communion of the saints. Revelation offers us a missional spirituality.⁶ (Gorman)

Endnotes

¹ Kraybill, Loc 2879

² Gorman Loc 3485 ff.

³ Ramachandra, V. Loc 45

⁴ Sayers, M. Loc 171

⁵ Sayers, M. Loc 881ff.

⁶ Gorman, Loc 4366