

Message

Who will open the scroll of life?

Revelation 1:4-8

We are at a time in history where people are undoubtedly searching for meaning; meaning related to why we are here; how the world came to be made and what is our part in that world.

We are inevitably drawn to the meaning behind what happens to us during our lives – inevitable more when things are going badly rather than when they are going well.

Some are satisfied by the idea of **luck** or **karma** or **Gaia** to name but a few explanations. But do we really find these satisfactory? Do we as Christians summon up the courage to say such ideas are ridiculous as an explanation for the world, the universe and everything?

It comes down to the question: What do we believe in and why, what is the evidence to support it and how can we explain it to others?

Can you & I_ give a simple explanation of the Gospel which lies at the centre of Christianity? John could in a matter of four brief verses of Revelation, where we have a succinct statement, which when unpacked is the very essence of the Gospel.

So this was the **good news**, written to people under terrible risk of pain and death all those years ago.

What is the good news for us worshipping in a 19th century church in the 21st century at a time of both enormous Spiritual decline in established churchgoing as well as an enormous Spiritual hunger seen in both young and old around us, thoroughly dissatisfied by the witness and practice of many of those who call themselves Christians?

And do we believe this good news is applicable to every man or woman in the community round about us.

The gospel is real, the good news is real, but that good news which we have celebrated at Easter is the statement of God's part in the deal.

He has provided for us someone who has taken upon himself both the pain and the consequences of our failure to be what men and women were created to be.

Now the onus is on us and our acceptance or our rejection of the gift of Easter. We cannot soften the choice; God is not mocked!

Revelation tells us that however merciful we would like God to be to us and our friends and families, there will come a time where we will be separated into those who have believed and accepted the truth of the resurrection, and those who would rather go their own way, however inclusive or apparently all-encompassing that is.

But let us also be encouraged because John tells us that whatever happens to us in the interim: **God and goodness wins in the end.**

It cannot be clearer than that; and those who feel their God lies within them or that there are many ways to God via Mohammad or the Buddha, or the wise gurus of Hinduism, have to be asked where the evidence is for that belief.

We do not preach a gospel without evidence; we preach the evidence based gospel of a man whom history records really lived, who we firmly believe was God, and the real physical man died and was raised from the dead and whose spiritual essence can live in us if we choose to let him.

We learn of God from the evidence of His creation around us and from what we believe is His Word as well as the testimony of other people whose stories we read about in Scripture who have tested the promises of God and found Him faithful.

Contrast that honestly with the pronouncements and promises of men & women and I believe you would find them remarkably wanting in ultimate truth, not least because men and women keep on changing their minds on everything. Everything is relative, nothing is absolute – there is no absolute truth says the philosopher, it is only what you in your flawed mind perceives at the time.

God does not change His mind or His character as circumstances change. For as we have already read in Rev 1, He is the beginning and the end; He was present before the creation of the universe and will be here long after we have gone, until time does not matter ever again.

And what is that mind? God is bound by holiness, goodness and rightness.

That is why God cannot just forgive everyone everything they get wrong. If He did that he would not be a just and supreme judge, the lawgiver, the ruler of all.

As Michael Green wrote in his book on the resurrection: "The empty cross of Jesus".

God's laws are not arbitrary, they are truth. If God were to pat us on the head when we do wrong and say "it doesn't matter" – that would show Him to be indifferent to the difference between right and wrong. It would mean right does not matter, and society today is saying that loud and clear, and see where that is leading us personally and nationally!

With that warning ringing in our ears, let's move on with Chapter 1 of Revelation.

Although the churches in Asia Minor were under considerable threat they were also expanding rapidly. In a contemporary text, a Governor in northern Turkey wrote to the Emperor Domitian complaining that the pagan temples were being forsaken because Christians was spreading so quickly.

Now although we have said that the number seven indicate completeness, there were clearly more than seven churches in this part of the world. However these were the most prominent and strategic churches in the region. So as the letter was received, it would have been copied and sent on to more outlying areas.

In many ways this is the model of the spread of the Christian gospel throughout history. If you & I hear a truth about our faith, we should be setting it down, maybe on paper, maybe not, but we should pass it on. If we just listen and file it away, the message does not go anywhere, it does not grow or bear fruit. How selfish and sad is that.

Perhaps we should discuss it with our friends at the church fellowship after the service or we introduce it to our families or non-Christian friends in conversation.

So - this is a real letter sent by a real person to real people and I submit, one of the great pieces of evidence about the God we worship here.

There is evidence for this being a real letter in the practical order in which the churches are listed. If you look at a map you can see that the order would be a reasonable order for a messenger to take a single copy of the scroll to each of these churches in turn with about 50 miles separating them.



Ephesus; Smyrna; Pergamum; Thiatyra; Sardis; Philadelphia; Laodicea.

John writes "**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.**"

In that remarkable single sentence, John provides:

- A formal greeting
- A statement of God's omniscience

- A confirmation of the holy Trinity
- Three titles that describe Jesus's person

The words "grace and peace" remind us of the beginning many of St Paul's letters. It reminds us first of God's inexhaustible and undeserved Grace. God gives us so many things we do not deserve.

Have you ever thought about all the facets of your life in that way? Have you thanked God for all those things which you enjoy day by day, the love of family and friends, a good job, or release from it when you retire, and so on. Have you thanked God for the challenges to your life. Or do you believe you came by your prosperity and fulfilment or your troubles just by luck?

There is deep meaning in the words themselves, **grace** was to the normal Greek greeting and **peace** was the Jewish greeting, Shalom meaning *to be complete* or *to be sound*.

- It is not just the absence of dispute, but a dynamic positive state of mind which is wholeness and completeness.
- Wholeness of life or body (health)
- Right relationships between people or groups of people, often established by agreement or covenant.
- Success or fulfilment in life
- And only finally, victory over enemies and absence of war.

Thus when a Jew greets or takes farewell from another and says Shalom – a great deal is being said about what they wish for each other.

But as we have said already, this is not just the letter from John but a message from God himself through Jesus Christ.

So when God says to us "grace and peace" he reminds us of his own goodness and the undeserved gift that he brings us, that "amazing grace that saved a wretch like you & me".

Then John reminds us of the description of God that harks back to Exodus 3:14 when God answered Moses's question about how he was to describe him to the Israelites as "I am who I am".

In this God is saying, I was; I still am; and in the future I will be. In the context of writing to a troubled and persecuted church this emphasis of the changelessness of God was a great encouragement.

Do we, when we face difficulties in our day-to-day life, ever consider even for a moment, the timelessness of God and draw comfort from that when our own times may be bad?

It is so easy to wallow in our difficulties rather than try and put them in the context of a creator God who loves us and who knows what we are going through both individually and as a church.

We only have to look at the book of Job to see that faithful servant of God, suffering terribly, yet remaining righteous, and even cursing the day he was born. But he was not cursing the God that was, that is, and that will be to come when we are no more than dust in a grave or a distant memory.

I don't know how many of you have read the book called "*Come be my light*" – the private writings of Mother Teresa.

In it we learn again of her role as an icon of compassion to people of all religions; her tireless contribution to the care of the sick, the dying and the human detritus of the world that we can hardly imagine. Yet beneath that gracious smiling exterior was a dedication to a calling and to a God with whom for some reason in her later years she found increasingly difficult to communicate, whether in prayer or in that immediate sense of the Holy Spirit working in her life that was with her at the start of her life of service.

In a letter to one of her Spiritual mentors she wrote: *Now father – since 49 or 50 (there is) this terrible sense of loss – this untold darkness – this loneliness – this continual longing for God – which gives me that pain deep down in my heart. The place of God in my soul is blank.....Sometimes – I just hear my own heart cry out – "My God" and nothing else comes – the torture and pain I can't explain.*

Yet despite this anguish of the soul which was with her until her death, she did God's compassionate work, confident that God was and is and is to come.

She was able to accept whatever God did to her or within her heart, knowing that it would be for his own honour and glory eventually. Maybe it was to silence any pride she could have had in what she was doing; there are so many maybes; but we all know the dry period of the soul and it is opportune to remind ourselves that the God whom we serve is not there just to give us a good time, a warm feeling of "being saved" but we have to be able to say that it is **God's will** that has to be done and **not ours**; and last weekend we remembered how one so infinitely greater than us also had to accept **that He must do whatever God wanted Him to do.**

Next John confirms the three Persons of the Trinity many years before the theology of the Trinity was "confirmed" by the Church fathers.

But in his description of the Holy Spirit in this part of this greeting, he describes the "seven spirits before the throne." What can that mean?

We have already learned of the use of the number seven as representing completeness. Once again therefore we are looking at the complete multifaceted

person of the Holy Spirit. That spirit which indwells the believer, gives rise to the gifts that we need to use to do God's work; gives us the power to pray; gives us the faith to believe; and gives us Jesus's presence here on earth and more important within our personal lives.

Do you remember the Hymn verse:

*Come Holy Ghost, our souls inspire
and lighten with celestial fire;
Thou the anointing Spirit art,
who dost thy sevenfold gifts impart.*

The seven fold gifts – the best translation for the Greek word for gifts is shares. God is giving a share of His gifts to every individual and the idea of the sevenfold shares is that the Spirit contains all those shares that were ever issued for this investment company of life.

So we have both a blessing and a greeting from the three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, but you can see that the normal order is reversed so that we learn of the father and the spirit but then John wishes us to concentrate our focus on Jesus Christ, for that is the centrality of this letter.

If you yearn for jargon – this is a Christocentric letter, a letter which concentrates on the completion of God's plan by the role of His Son, Jesus.

John then describes Jesus by three titles:

- The faithful witness
- The firstborn from the dead
- A ruler is superior to all earthly rulers.

Jesus was the faithful witness when he was on trial before the Sanhedrin and Pilate. Remember Mark chapter 14 firsts 61b "again the high priest asked him, are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed one?"

"I am" said Jesus "and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the mighty one and coming on the clouds of heaven."

And then in chapter 15 Pilate asked Jesus "are you the King of the Jews?". "Yes, it is as you say,".

Jesus, the faithful witness, in modern parlance, says it as it is. He tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He can do no less as He is sinless. He is faithful to the truth and gives public witness to the truth.

We need to be faithful witness to our beliefs just as Jesus Christ certainly was.

And that is crucial in the role Jesus is to play at the end of time. To illustrate that let me give you Michael Greens paraphrase of Rev 5. John is in the midst of his vision of the end times.

John is bewailing the inscrutability of history, and the inability of anyone to pierce its inner secrets. And he hears one of the heavenly elders saying "Weep not; lo, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has conquered so that he can open the scroll (of human destiny). And to his amazement he saw not a Lion but a Lamb, with all the marks of slaughter upon him. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of Him who was on the throne and He unravelled the secrets of human destiny.

This is the ultimate mystery of God. The Lion of God's strength is the Lamb of God's sacrifice.

Self-sacrificing love is actually on the throne of the universe and is the key to the understanding of human history and destiny. Calvary displays in time God's attitude to sinners for all eternity. There is nothing more fundamental in the whole universe than the self-sacrificing love of God. This is the ground for Christian hope.

So Jesus was and is the faithful witness

But then John describes him as "*the firstborn from the dead.*" How can he say that? Even in antiquity many millions of individuals have lived and died. Even in the Gospels we learn of the miraculous raising of Lazarus and Jairus' daughter.

But this term "*firstborn from the dead*" so beloved of the early church represents the whole crux of what we celebrated last weekend on Easter Sunday, that Jesus was inaugurating the new kingdom of God on earth, that brought to us that guarantee that he also gave to the robber on the cross alongside him, that today he would be with him in Paradise.

The firstborn in any family has a special place of inheritance. Jesus as the firstborn of the dead has the first place of honour and glory; over the dead and the living, there is no one greater.

For those of us here who have lost loved ones whether recently or long in the past, this is the "good news" for us. We believe men and women of faith die and pass to a new state, one we call heaven.

Why so certain? Because Jesus promised it and His promises are true and secure, and He is in control over everything.

For the Christians in the churches of Asia Minor, facing the prospect of a violent death at the hands of the Romans, this was not just a fact of theological truth. This was something to hang on to, more than a statement of words but a belief that would strengthen their fearful minds.

For us, perhaps not facing violence and death but perhaps facing difficult times, perhaps fighting illness and a realisation that we will all have to face that one end to earthly life, any remembrance of the "*first born from the dead*" is a great encouragement.

Finally in this short list of titles, we have described Jesus as a ruler over all rulers.

- However powerful the legions of Rome were

- However autocratic the emperor
- God is Almighty and rules them.

And of course if Jesus dwells within us in His Spirit, however grandiose our current leaders seem; however small and insignificant we feel in social or political terms, our Jesus rules over all.

Can we give evidence for that belief?

Apart from the eyes of faith, who would have expected the fall of the Roman empire that was to come?

Apart from the eyes of faith, who would have expected the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of communism in Russia, with a great rush back to the public expression of Christian faith?

Apart from the eyes of faith who would have imagined that the scourge of apartheid would have ended without a bloody civil war which would have engulfed the whole continent of Africa.

Three of many examples that God truly rules over the rulers.

Having described three titles of Jesus John goes on to make three statements about his work in verses five and six.

He:

- Loves us
- Freed us from our sins
- Made us to be a kingdom and priests

We have already heard from the vision of Rev 5 that the secret of human existence is self-sacrificial love.

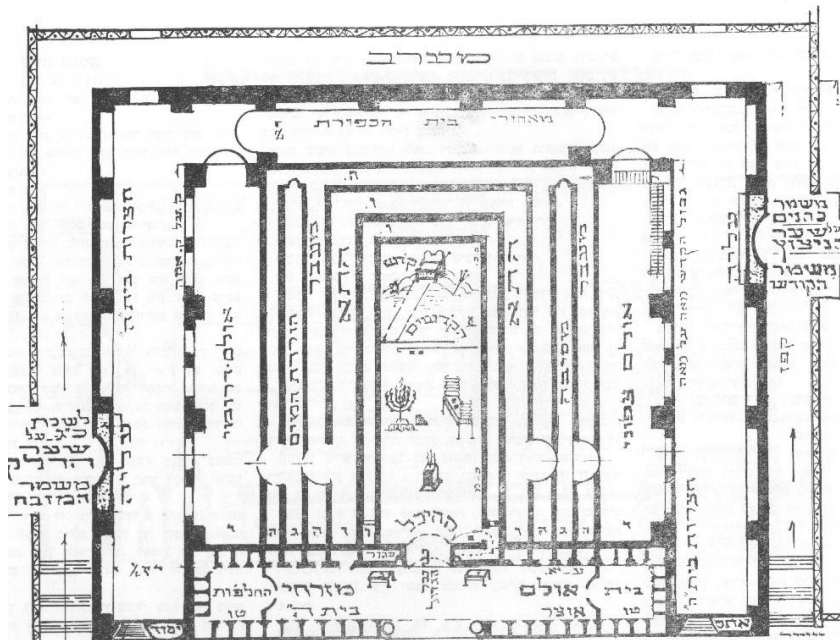
Surely at any time of trial, a remembrance of that love and the freedom that Jesus gives us from our sins is the starting point. We have heard again and again how Jesus saves us from our sins, but what is the purpose of that salvation? Jesus saves us for something.

Certainly not just to go back and sin again and ask for forgiveness on a sort of merry-go-round that leads nowhere.

No, Jesus frees us from our sins so that we can be God's kingdom on this earth. And not just to be in the kingdom but to be His agents, the people who will do His will – for we are God's kingdom on earth.

We have the task to change things for the better through God's love channelled through our actions.

But more than that - **we** are to be the priests! We must recall that John's audience were very aware of the Jewish role of the priest.



Do you recall the design of the Temple, with outer courtyards where anyone, Gentile or Jew could go, then an inner courtyard reserved only for Jews. Finally the very inner place where only the High Priest could go to meet with God once per year after ritual cleansing and bringing a sacrifice of an unblemished lamb.

The hierarchy of the Temple placed priests in between the people and God. Israel's mission was to be a kingdom of priests, the people who would be able to link their fellow men with God, and John was reminding the members of the churches that that role was still a reality, especially when they may have felt that they had deserted their Jewish faith.

But for us we believe that with the sacrifice of Jesus that central, hidden holy of holies is open for all to see as the temple curtain was rent from top to bottom at the time of the crucifixion.

The unblemished lamb has been sacrificed and the time of sacrifice is over. God's kingdom on earth has begun!!

Finally in this introduction John reminds his readers in verse seven that Jesus is coming again, and that there will be no doubt in anyone's mind, believer or nonbeliever, as to who he is. There will be no debate, it will be obvious.

And John closes with a re-statement of the omnipotence and omnipresence of God. The letters Alpha and Omega at the beginning and the end of the Greek alphabet, and the restatement of His presence before the universe was formed; during its development and evolution; during the present time and until the end of time as we know it.

Do you see now what I mean when I said that this revealing letter brings us a complete statement of the good news to men and women of all ages and times of history?

And if we were seeking to present a statement of what we believe in and what it means to our lives on earth as well as what will happen to us when we die to bring to those 95% of our local community who do not share in our faith maybe these verses are a good start.

In these verses :

- Our God is defined, his power is affirmed, his timelessness is emphasised and his loving grace and blessing is confidently stated to all who care to listen.
- The three Persons of the Trinity; Father, Son and Spirit have brought a greeting.
- Jesus's role as an honest and true witness to the meaning of life as resurrected saviour, and ruler over all earthly Powers is confirmed.
- Jesus's return in glory, visible to all and without doubt is confidently stated.
- The grieving of those who have rejected him throughout history will also not be in doubt.
- The God who began everything will continue to watch over all people through all time and nothing will be hidden from him.

This is the good news; this is the work started before time and that ended its design phase on the cross of Calvary. Whatever difficulties and tribulations the seven churches in Asia Minor were to face; whatever troubles, challenges, disappointments we have to face, we do so in the knowledge that God is there first and that he will overrule.

Next week we start with the visions proper and the first of the Churches to whom John has been inspired to write.

However, I want to end with a quotation.

John Stott wrote the following: *When men and women reject what they know of God, God gives them up to their own distorted notions and perverted passions, until society stinks in the nostrils of God and of all good people.*

John goes on: *Now Christians are set in secular society by God to hinder this process. God intends us to penetrate the world.*

Christian salt has no business to remain snugly in elegant little ecclesiastical salt cellars

Our place is to be rubbed into the secular community, as salt is rubbed into meat, to stop it going bad. And when society does go bad, we Christians tend to throw up our hands in pious horror and reproach the non-Christian world; but should we not rather reproach ourselves?

One can hardly blame unsalted meat for going bad. It cannot do anything else.

*The real question to ask is; **where is the salt?***

Amen