

Revelation 1: 1-4

NB These are sermon notes from the above date. Please use them as you wish to help your studies in Revelation. Any errors are mine alone.

I am sure you must all recall the story of Queen Victoria and the soup. You don't? Well, the story is told that Queen Victoria and Prince Albert was sitting having lunch. The footman brought in the soup; I suppose inevitably it was Brown Windsor soup!

Anyway all was silence as Queen Victoria and Prince Albert sampled it. After a few minutes Queen Victoria looked up from her lunch and said "one feels the soup disagrees with me".

After a pause Prince Albert was heard to mutter under his breath "**1 am surprised it had the courage!**"

And what does that have to do with the book of Revelation?

- I think I am also surprised that I have the courage to embark on a series upon a book of the Bible that is singularly difficult, often ignored in personal devotions and frequently also avoided by preachers.
- I will admit until recently I was part of what I suspect is the majority of Bible readers who were more familiar with the first three chapters of Revelation with the letters to the seven churches and then recall a few selective quotes from chapters 4 to 22, such as the glorious part of chapter 21 where John writes "then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and was no longer any sea." And so on.
- The rest of Revelation was a blur of imagery that seemed impossible to sort out: Lampstands, trumpets, bowls, and a confusing prophecy of the end of time.

If it is so difficult, **why** should we now spend a significant amount of time on it?

Let me give you a few reasons:

- *"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work."* 2 Timothy 3 :16,17. This does not say some of Scripture is God breathed; or those bits of Scripture that are easy to understand are God breathed. No, it is **all Scripture**. Thus we have no excuse to avoid any book of the Bible just because it is difficult.
- A second reason is that it is said that the **devil hates Genesis and Revelation**. Why -----because it tells where he or she came from and where he is going.

- A third reason can be found in revelation chapter 22 and verse 10
- (incidentally I hope that you will try to follow with me with the pew bibles because for reasons that will become clear, this is not a book that one can easily work through from beginning to end. In order to understand we will be dotting from passage to passage hopefully looking at overall meanings and messages.) Let me also say that it is my intention to have the text of each of these sermons available on the church website on the Monday following , so those with access to the internet can refer to it. Finally if anyone wants a complete printout, then they only have to telephone me or email me and I will get one to them.
- *Returning to Ch 22:7 “Then he told me, do not seal up the words of the prophecy of this book, because the time is near.”* If you and I never read or think about a section of Scripture, and we leave the book closed, then indeed we seal it up perhaps for ever.
- The fourth reason that I think we should look at revelation is perhaps the **most important**. When we read the Gospels, we learn of Jesus’s life as a man on this earth. We hear his voice as he preached and taught; as he served and prayed. But once he ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, we have only one book of the Bible which presents Jesus **as he is today**. Jesus is speaking very directly from his throne of grace and is still patiently saying to us *“let he or she that has ears to hear, let them hear.”*
- Finally, as a **positive** reason for studying Revelation, it is a book that is full of blessings for us.
- In chapter 1 :3 we read *“blessed is the one who reads 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”*. And in chapter 22 we read in verse 14 **Slide 6** *“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gate into the city.”* This latter blessing refers to the blessing of those who share the sacrifice and role of Jesus.
- In fact there are seven Beatitudes; seven blessings that come from reading (and putting into practice what we read) that occur in the book of Revelation and we will be studying many of them in more detail as we work through the text.

What We are Not About

If we think of these blessings that we will receive from a study of Revelation, there are also terrible risks involved in the misinterpretation of what is written here. If there are those here who hope that I am going to spend a great deal of time predicting the date and form of the end of the world, then you are going to be disappointed. What I

will do, in a later sermon, is tell you something about those who have been misguided enough to go into the last times or rapture prediction business.

No - I prefer to obey the direct teaching of Jesus to his apostles in Mark 13:5 when he says *“watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, “I am he”, and will deceive many. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen but the end is still to come”*. And then in verse 32 *“no one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven nor the Son but only the Father. Be on guard. Be alert. You do not know when the time will come.”*

Jesus is saying that all the books of predictions and the current crop of films about the rapture are useless and indeed may deceive many to their great cost.

I believe these warnings tell us all we need to know about our attitude to the end times. But if you need more persuasion may I remind you of the terrible story of David Koresh and the branch Davidians in Waco, Texas?

You will recall this was a small sect of the seventh day Adventist church which broke away and rapidly became a cult around the evil personality of their leader David Koresh. He was eventually unmasked a seriously deranged paedophile who brainwashed his group into believing that he indeed was the lamb who was entitled to open the 7 seals of the scroll of life.

As we will learn later, these seals represent God’s judgements on humankind for our sins and failings, and the only person who will judge us is our Lord Jesus Christ, and only Him. In any event, David Koresh and more than 150 members of his sect died in a clumsily executed FBI attack on his church buildings, and I am sure that he will have to answer for both his blasphemy and for those terrible crimes he committed on many of the children of that place.

So in some ways -- here we really are dealing with **fire**, and if I wanted any further warning about my responsibility I turn again to chapter 22 and verse 18 *“I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him that plagues described in this full. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him is sharing the tree of life and in the holy city which are described in this book.”*

Well, with these warnings ringing in our ears let us turn in a conventional way to look at the who, why, where, when of this prophetic book.

There are two very different views about who wrote this book. From as early as the second century, it has been held that the John of revelation was the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, called to be Jesus’s disciple in Matthew 10. That John certainly wrote the gospel of John and the letters of John but the certainty of his authorship of

Revelation has been questioned. Indeed by the 2nd century an authoritative opinion appeared suggesting that Revelation was written in such a different style, in such a different language that it had to have been written by another John.

When you think about it, revelation is headed "*the revelation of John the Divine*". The word used for Divine is better translated as *John the theologian*.

One would not have expected an apostle like John would not call himself anything other than an apostle of Christ.

The late Professor William Barclay, that great Greek scholar and communicator reinforces the second view by saying that "*he would hardly have put such emphasis on the fact that he was a prophet if he had been an apostle. Further, he speaks of the apostles as if he was looking back on them as the great foundations of the church. He would have hardly spoken of them in that light had he been one of them. Finally, he emphasises that the Greek of revelation is rugged and a vivid, but notoriously incorrect.*"

Finally John of Revelation claims that he is a prophet and further that the risen Christ has commanded him to prophesy and to give his witness to the church round about him. It is as a prophet that John claims the right to speak and not as a direct apostolic witness to Christ's life.

Whichever John wrote this we can be sure that he was Christian living in Asia Minor. He was certainly a Palestinian Jew with an encyclopaedic knowledge of the Old Testament. Throughout the book of Revelation there are more than 250 snippets of Old Testament writings or thoughts. This would make the book immediately familiar to the audience for which John is writing, and emphasises that this book was not just a quick account of John's vision, but was written with great thought and study by the author before sending it out to those who would read it first.

The second dispute about the creation of the book of Revelation is when it was written. Some feel that it was written round about 65 AD and others about 95 AD. Is that important? In AD 70 the Romans totally destroyed the city of Jerusalem, scattering the Jewish remnant to the ends of the known world. The destruction of the Temple was complete leaving only the Western Wall that we see today.

There are two positive lines of evidence that suggested the later date, and again there is importance in understanding the reason why John felt he had to write down his vision.

- It has been consistently stated that John was banished to the island of Patmos at the time of the Roman emperor Domitian. And it was only after the Emperor's death in that John was released and able to come to Ephesus where he wrote down the visions he had seen during his imprisonment.

- The second piece of evidence is the attitude of the book of Revelation to Rome. You will recall that during the writing of Paul's letters, Paul was able to claim proudly that he was a Roman citizen, with rights to Roman justice. In Acts we read of Paul being rescued from what might have been a lynching by a Roman tribune. So in general the epistles are quite positive about Rome. In contrast John considers Rome to be "*Babylon, the mother of prostitutes, drunk with the blood of the saints and the martyrs.*"
- What have been the reason for this tremendous change of attitude? Well, over the latter part of the first century the Roman emperors were increasingly accepting Caesar worship as a state religion. This was politically expedient in that the vast Roman Empire contained many different peoples and religions, and therefore could not be held together as an empire without a national religion. You can see the parallel in our present day in the British Commonwealth. The Queen is the common denominator that identifies all the various nations and religions represented in the Commonwealth.

In the Roman Empire, citizens were free to worship their own gods but also Caesar and this became a test of political loyalty. In the first three quarters of the first century a number of emperors exercised this Caesar worship to a lesser or greater extent, but when the Domitian came to power in AD 81 he demanded Caesar worship and started a terrible persecution of all those who want not worship him as Lord and God.

And this political situation was the stage upon which the book of Revelation was written. Imagine the situation from the Jewish point of view --- The Jewish faith was sorely tested; the Children of Israel, elect of God had been scattered to the four winds by the Conquering Romans; the Holy Temple had been raised to the ground; the promised Messiah had **not** come and rescued them from the might of Rome as so many of them had expected.

Then imagine the situation for the young Christian Church sown in the shallow soil of Asia Minor; young and inexperienced; lacking strong leadership; and falling into many traps of belief and practise as we will see when we consider the individual churches.

This letter was written to that frightened population of the young churches, desperately needing confirmation and support for their faith in the face of possible or perhaps likely death at the hands of the Romans. And it is in this context that has been identified over the centuries since for this book to be book of encouragement to the churches struggling either with heresy within or external attack from society. This brings us to our current situation.

So let us consider a context for reading this book that might be closer to our own experience. Imagine the year is 1946 and Hitler is ruling from Buckingham palace. The country is decimated by the loss of the war and a collaborators' government is in place. Chancellor Hitler has crowned himself emperor of Europe and the British Empire. Religion is allowed only in state approved churches, and at the beginning of each service we are commanded on pain of imprisonment and death to offer worship to our Lord and God Hitler who has saved us from the crimes of the Jews who were in our midst but now have been erased from history finally.

Or page forward to 2050. We now live in a worldwide Muslim state, where Sharia law is the rule. We are not allowed to mention the name of Jesus other than as a great prophet and worship in our own way is forbidden. Imagine the churches being pulled down and mosques built in their place. Imagine remembering the life of Killlearn and the service in our lovely church over 200 years and now that has gone for ever.

Do you see what I mean? The Book of Revelation, or more strictly the Letter of John to the fragments of churches that still survive is an immediate source of encouragement and inspiration to a battered and fearful remnant of the Christian Faith. And whilst we may not immediately be under such stress, make no mistake about it, our very faith is under great attack not only from the muscular atheists like Richard Dawkins but from the efforts of so many, perhaps well-meaning members of our churches who continually seek to water down the gospel to make it more acceptable to the changes which society demands.

Let me illustrate the overall message of this very encouraging book with a story I heard recently. In a Bible college somewhere a football team had been formed from all the students and they trained regularly in a gym one night a week. As with all students of whatever discipline they were if anything rather cocky about their knowledge, and in this case, their knowledge of Bible interpretation.

As they trained, the gym cleaner used to sit in the corner every week, reading a book until they had finished and he could lock up.

One night one of the students went over to the cleaner and asked what book he read every week, and was told it was the Bible. Not to lose an evangelical opportunity, the student asked the man what book within the Bible the man was reading and whether he understood it. O, yes said the cleaner; I always read the book of Revelation and I really understand it well.

The cocky Student: "You understand the book of Revelation fully?" (perhaps in both a patronising and sarcastic tone.)

Yes said the cleaner: It says that Jesus wins in the end!!

We need again to claim the belief written in Revelation; that time will end; that Jesus will come to rule the world and restore it to the way God intended it; that **we will be judged** for what we have done and not done.

We need again to claim Christ as our spokesperson before God, and claim the forgiveness He brings for all our sins.

Only then will we have that peace that passes understanding and only then can we claim that assurance for eternity.

Now you may reasonably be impatient by this time that this long introduction is all we will need but I am afraid from time to time we are going to need to consider the context and characters further.

However, we are ready to launch into the first few verses of Chapter one of Revelation together.

Verses 1-3 of chapter one gives the authority of John and the method by which he was commanded to write the letter. The Revelation is **“of Jesus Christ**. “Now that does not mean “about Jesus Christ” but it means it has come directly **FROM Jesus Christ**. And who gave that revelation to Jesus? None other than his Father God.

This reveals the gracious love of God for His Son, Jesus and for humanity. The heart of the gospel is God’s gift of Jesus, and through Him and the Holy Spirit, God provides for what we need in whatever situation we are in. Amongst these gifts of God are wisdom and courage for times of hardship in the church or by individual believers.

The heart of the context of Revelation as we have already learned is hardship and thus the first message of the letter is that God understands and cares and acts to help.

Revelation = Apokalupsis= Apocalypse = Revealing

The word Revelation is a translation of the Greek for Apocalypse, meaning an unveiling or a revealing. And although we often think of the book as revealing only what will happen in the end times, as we will learn it is more than that.

It is

- a revealing of **God’s will** for our actions, day by day
- a revealing of **God’s truth** to men and women of our sinful and needy state

- a revealing of **God's mysteries** especially in the incarnation of Jesus as both man and God, to resolve that need
- a revealing of **God's power and holiness** which all will see at the end times

John is **testifying** as a true witness to all he saw in his vision which he has no doubt came from God to Jesus and then via an angel. And you know that the Greek word for testify is **martyreo** - soon to be used to describe those Christians who testified to their faith and became **martyrs** for it. **To testify you become a martyr.**

If you ever doubted the power of one individual man or woman, think of the responsibility on John's shoulders. He hears directly from God and shortly sees the resurrected Christ in His glory, and it is John's responsibility to write it down and spread the message that the vision brings. Not only that but he brings a revealing of "the things which must **soon** take place"

Soon - this must have meant that John felt the second coming was near - or is there another interpretation?

It is good that the word **soon** did not really mean at the end of the first century, as many in John's time believed would happen. If that were the case we would have apparently missed the second coming!

We will be dealing with false anticipation of the end times later in this series, but the interpretation of "Soon" is controversial. Clearly it did not mean imminently as 2000 years have passed since this was written.

Some feel that the meaning is that when the events of the end time begin, they will proceed rapidly. The completion of the plan is in the future, but once Jesus had lived on earth, the advance of his kingdom through the actions of individuals and churches is very much the present tense, urgent and immediate. Not only that, there are many who think that the tribulation that precedes the end of all things might indeed have started in John's day in the persecution of the Church by the Beast of Rome or the whore of Babylon (Nero).

We must also be very careful when we think about predictions of God's time. We make a grave mistake to consider time as only we see it: in seconds minutes, days and years. We are trapped in a linear concept of time that links our birth to our death at exactly the same rate.

Other cultures think of time as circular. And this does not only relate to ideas of reincarnation. Look at our opening slide again.

But time is entirely variable as Einstein showed us and as he speaks of the space/time continuum which can be distorted

God's scheme of time is very unlikely to be the same scheme that we use.

Remember 2 Peter:3 *“With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day”*.

So if a great physicist can demonstrate time is variable, dependent on your point of view, we must understand see that time for God does not have to be limited to our concept of time.

You and I and the writers of the Scriptures speak and understand from our own very limited perspective of creation. God does not have any such limitation. So we may best be content that God’s promises are true and His plan has a clear and detailed timetable involving all of us, however little we understand of it now, and we should be patient, dealing in that waiting time with the feeling of imminence as well as timelessness of God’s actions through the universe.

Now in closing I want to give you some homework before we next meet on **30th March**, God willing - and I hope He is willing! Put it in your diary and tell you friends you are exploring the most wonderful and imaginative part of the Bible!!

Could I ask you to read chapter 1 several times before then, and let me give you a few clues to the imagery and symbolism which we will find initially a confusion, but with help it becomes quite clear.

- **The number 7** is highly symbolic and not to be taken literally. Whenever it is used, it means completeness. It is an all-inclusive term. So when John writes of the seven spirits before God’s throne, he is actually describing the **totality of the Holy Spirit**. And when he writes to the seven named churches in Asia Minor, he is also writing to every church that was and would be created - to the complete Christian church then and now, thus - to us in Killearn in 2008.
- The other piece of imagery is the use of the word Lampstand in v 12. This refers to the golden seven branched lampstand that sat in the tabernacle and to Zechariah’s vision of a lampstand again all of gold. This was yet another OT reference. For our reading today we should consider that it means **all** the denominations and the churches of Christ’s church on earth. Just substitute that in the text and you will find it easier to read.
- Finally I would like to leave you with a thought about those non- Christian Jews who would probably also read this letter from John. We have already put ourselves into the minds of the young Christian churches of Asia Minor. But imagine you are a faithful unconverted orthodox Jew- you firmly believed that you are a member of God’s chosen people. You further believed that this would lead to world political supremacy following the intervention of a Messiah of the line of David.

- Now History had shown a catalogue of disasters from which it was clear no human intervention could save them. The Northern kingdom had disappeared never to return and the Southern kingdom had been enslaved by Babylon, the Persians, the Greeks and now the Romans.
- Because of this disastrous series of events their mind set had been to divide history into the “Present age” - of trouble and destruction, from which only God’s coming in power could rescue them.
- They started to write many Apocalyptic documents which you can still read like:
- Enoch, the Sybilline oracles, the ascension of Isaiah, the Assumption of Moses
- Books with imagery equally as strange to us as is our own Revelation of John. They saw the need for God to strike a blow for the chosen people and come in mighty power to restore them to their place in command of the earth.
- **Our Revelation** is the only truly Christian Revelation of things to come.
- But **we** must not be deceived into thinking that the present times that we are facing, of decline in the church, aggressive atheism, apathy and apostacy, is a similar sort of present times about which we can do nothing.
- We have the **risen Christ** at our head; we hopefully understand his role as the true Messiah, not one who comes with the might of military power but with the power of God’s Love. So in one sense the end times have started with His Incarnation, and we must work through our lives to help to bring the fulfilment of the kingdom on earth **in the present** and not just abandon the present to look only for the **future glory** of the second coming as so many misguided sects have done.

John wrote the words of the risen Jesus: Blessed is the one who reads 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.

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