

Message: Who do you say that I am?

Revelation 5: 1-14 The Scroll and the Lamb

As I said at the outset this is the first Sunday in Advent. When I looked in my notes of the sermons that I've preached during this season over the past few years, it is no surprise that we have frequently spoken of the contrast between the crowds in the shops, the Christmas lights, the fun, the laughter, the family times, all those things that we do enjoy about Christmas, and the real meaning of this midwinter celebration, to the love of a young mother and caught up in the divine will; to the silence of the stable where a birth occurred 2000 years ago which changed everything forever .

As Christians, of course there is a conflict in our minds between the undoubted excesses of the commercial Christmas season and the simplicity of the Christmas story. And of course having fun and family times is in no way contrary to the Christian message of love and joy at Christmas.

But one of the ways that this season really challenges us as we meet non-Christians is the question that Jesus asked his disciples as they walked the roads around Caesarea Philippi. "Who do people say that I am?" And then "what about you, who do you say I am?" For it is that which really determines what Christmas means for you and I.

In many ways our current society seems very happy to take the "nice" parts of the Christian message of Christmas; the images of the Christmas season like the baby in the manger, the Angels and the Shepherds on the hillside, the wise men and the animals.

All of us can fit these images very easily into a celebration of the midwinter solstice; which was an ancient time to celebrate the fact that we are halfway through the winter; a time for partying and for forgetting both the troubles that beset us personally or nationally.

At that level, the baby in the manger does not challenge us, or at least does not get through our worldly preoccupations.

But as we believers or seekers of the Christian faith, prepare ourselves for this season, we really do have to examine our inner hearts and minds to answer honestly the question “who do we say Jesus was and is.”

The same question was facing the members of the seven churches in Asia to whom John the theologian wrote in his letter we call Revelation. The difference was that they were not facing just an economic melt down; they were not facing repossession of their houses; they were not facing unemployment and the credit crunch.

No, they were facing their own imminent death because of their faith; they were being forced to put into context their belief in who Jesus was as they chose whether to agree to worship the Roman Emperor and live or worship Jesus and die.

The question is all the more poignant because we know their fears were entirely justified. The seven churches in Asia to whom John wrote were largely razed to the ground and most of the faithful put to death in the most terrible ways.

Disaster struck and in human terms God did not protect them from their oppressors. And this reminds us that God is not necessarily the physical protector of his people – God demands our faith, our trust and allegiance whatever troubles the world throws at us. Had they not died; and John not written this letter would we in the 21st century have known very much about them?

But God did not stand back from His people despite the knowledge of impending disaster. He chose to give them an unique and eternal message through the visions of John as a source of comfort and encouragement to help them hold firm to their faith at a time of human oppression, pain and death.

On St Andrew's day it is to our shame that the numbers of Scots attending church regularly has fallen gradually over the last 10 to 20 years. But if we were to carry out a questionnaire of the our non-churchgoing friends, people whom we love and respect but to do not express a Christian faith in their lives, I think we would find that most believe Jesus lived; most will agree that he was a great teacher of moral truths whose ideas and examples transformed the world; most will believe that he was put to death by men jealous of his success in capturing the hearts of the people.

Some would correctly comment that Jesus' message was that of self-sacrifice and love, a moral antidote to the selfish standards of the present day.

It is only when we move past there, to the supernatural elements of the story; the virgin birth, the miracles and the resurrection; as well as the claims and evidence of the presence of His Spirit in people today and the promise of eternal life after death -- that their easy agreement fails.

And this is where Scripture comes in. We say we believe the Bible is the word of God but if we do not read the Scriptures regularly; if we do not try to understand what it is telling us, how can we expect to know about God?

If our children do not hear the basics of the gospel from Sunday school, church or youth group or indeed in school, how else can they make a reasoned decision as they grow up about faith in God?

If a brain surgeon was planning a detailed operation to remove a brain tumour do you think that watching a few programmes on the Discovery Channel about the brain, perhaps singing a few jolly songs about brain surgery, or doing some role play where he plays the surgeon and other people play the patient and the nurses would be adequate preparation for doing the operation?

Of course not! The surgeon will have read all the books that detail the anatomy and physiology of the brain. He or she will also have read many research papers telling of peoples' prior experiences of the operation. He or she might talk to the one expert in the world who knows most about that particular operation and get their insight. Finally, if he is a Christian, he will pray a lot!

It's exactly the same situation when we search for information about our faith. In Scripture we find descriptions of the anatomy and physiology of the created world we live in. We find in the Old Testament many descriptions of the interaction between God and men and women. Just like the surgeon's research papers, they tell us how people have interacted with God in the past. Then we have the benefit of talking with and listening to the person in the world who knows most about faith in God, our own saviour Jesus Christ. Finally, we have the opportunity to pray about our faith and seek the help of the Holy Spirit to make it real in our lives.

Thus with this long introduction in mind, we can approach the answer to our question of who Jesus is to us by studying the scriptures in this next passage in the book of Revelation.

Turn with me to the book of Revelation chapter 5 which is entitled "the scroll and the lamb."

As I have already said in past sermons, to make this difficult book understandable we must think of it not just in a literal sense but as symbolism. We must remember that we are reading a vision granted to one man steeped in the culture and language and knowledge of a devout Jewish theologian imprisoned on the island of Patmos in the first century AD.

We cannot expect the detail of his vision is to be familiar to us here in the 21st century without interpretation.

Past dreams and visions are very different in importance, we know that they can overlap. The angel came to Joseph in a dream telling him to take his wife and newborn infants to Egypt.

Let me for a moment then equate John's vision with one of our own dreams. If we analysed the contents of the dreams you had last night, - we all dream probably four times every night. The problem is that those who say they never dream just forget them before they wake up.

Dreams normally contain a mishmash of our past and present experiences of our immediate history, however long a life we have led so far.

They might contain images of travel perhaps by car or plane. They might contain images of houses built of brick and stone. They will contain people dressed in ways familiar to us. – and so on.

Such dreams would be as foreign to John as his vision is to us. However John is quite clear that his vision was brought to him by an angel messenger from God and therefore is quite clearly different from a random dream, being directed by God as an encouragement and as spiritual support and teaching for the churches to whom he is writing.

In chapter 4 John has described seeing God sitting on the throne in glory. He has tried to describe the wonder and appearance of his image of heaven in terms of the most valuable things known to John - precious stones and metals. He also sees powerful physical experiences of the elements ---, lightning and thunder, a blazing light, a sea that is still like glass.

How rarely we see the sea in that form, as I can vouch for my last two crossings of the Minch to the Outer Hebrides this last month. The description I would give is of watery chaos, of movement in every direction (all at the same time), of wind and rain – and an uncertainty of stomach!

Do you remember the story of Jesus sleeping on the boat on the Sea of Galilee and how the wind rose so rapidly, funnelled by the mountains that line that Lake causing a storm that produced great fear in his disciples.

The image of a rough sea was familiar to the Jews. In Isaiah 57 we read “the wicked like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud”. I think that is very evocative and describes much of the influence of evil in our present day. You only have to listen to the news of the various cases coming to court in the last few weeks to emphasise the mire and the mud that humanity cast up.

But in that storm on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus is woken by the fearful disciples and he commands the wind and the waves “*peace, be still*”. And here in the glorious image of God in heaven the sea is still, like glass - peace and order reigns, God is in control of everything.

But God holds in his right hand a scroll. And it is that scroll that we will concentrate on from now on. The first thing to say is that the characteristic of scroll would have been entirely familiar to John’s readers. This was roll of papyrus made from many sheets joined together horizontally with a wooden roller at each end. Usually it would be written on one side. But note at the end of verse one that this scroll is written on both sides. Even that piece of information tells us that there was so much writing on it that every space had to be filled.

It was also sealed with seven seals. Again that has a certain resonance and significance for those who would read this document. Under Roman law a will was sealed with seven seals with the mark of one of seven witnesses on each of the seals. It was only when all the witnesses were present, identifying their seals and therefore accepting that this was the document that they sealed could they break them and open and read the will.

But this is no ordinary will, this is the final will and Testament of God’s will; the final settlement of the affairs of the universe.

To avoid confusion – we often talk about the “Book of Life” – God’s record of His people, the elect, and when we accept Jesus our name, previously known to God is highlighted.

This scroll is quite different. It contains God’s plan, not just for the church or the believers. It contains His plan for the whole of creation at the end of time – both the saint and the sinner- the saved and the unsaved.

You know when people argue with Christians and say – you are free to do what you want, but don’t apply your rules to us. They might find this very difficult to accept, but we need to be sure that we can say – OK – you do not want to believe, but one day, the one true God is going to burst into your soul whether you like it or not and He will judge your life by His rules, and will complete His final plan for the earth. This is the true “Final Solution”.

Back to the scroll itself. God is sitting on his throne and holds the scroll of human destiny in his right hand emphasising that everything is still under God’s control but that the last times have yet to unfold.

But wait a minute you say, God is so powerful, he has control of everything, why can’t he unseal the scroll and pour out his judgement on his creation?

The answer to this question brings us right back to the very dawn of the story of humanity. When God created man and woman in his own image initially his plan was of earthly beings who would be his partners in the running of his world.

Wherever and whatever the Garden of Eden was, the image in words was to emphasise a beautiful and sinless place with an active and communicating relationship of love between the creator and his created.

But as we know sin entered the picture. And I think we must find a deeper meaning than just a description of a woman giving an apple to a man, encouraged by a snake and thereby disobeying God.

In seeking the knowledge of good and evil, humankind were seeking to become gods. And the devil knew that once God's perfect created beings entered into competition with their creator, evil and confusion would enter the world to the Devil's great satisfaction.

I think much of what is wrong in the world today is because men and women still think that they have a right to be Gods; that they have a right to choose what they do without reference to anyone or anything else.

In understanding the story of Adam and Eve we come to a primary and vital concept of our relationship with God and that he is that he gives us free will to do and to choose what we wish. This is clearly a risky business on God's part because he knows that we will get it wrong, frequently.

We will choose things that are evil. We will choose to reject him. But you know this is the answer to the question people often pose as to how a loving God could allow the suffering caused by war or by the carelessness and greed of some men oppressing the weak and the poor.

God has allowed the men of war and the men of evil to make a choice.

But this is not to say that he does not support and help those who are oppressed by their fellow man.

Consider for a moment the alternative. If men and women did not have free will then we would surely be robots, acting out a predetermined program throughout life. How could God receive the free love and praise of his creation if that were the case?

Far better that he should take the risk of allowing us free will and then receiving our faith, our love and sincerity expressed freely and without compulsion.

You might wish to compare that with many current religious themes from other faiths, where a strict adherence to a set of rules or laws brings the devotee closer to God. Do you think that is free will? Do you think that emphasises the grace of God familiar to us? I don't think so.

So why am I going on about free will when we are thinking about the scroll in God's right-hand?

Because God believes in free will; because the scroll of human destiny belongs to humankind. The cry rings out "who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" In other words, who can tell creation about God's final plan for the universe? We need someone who is fully a man yet is able to be present in heaven.

And heaven falls silent at the question "Who is worthy?"

John realises the implication, for if the scroll of human destiny remains closed for ever then God is not in control, a gulf develops between God's will for man in the future; and so it follows, because of man's freedom, God's will may not be done.

And John is upset, he begins to weep and indeed the word used for his weeping is the most extreme form of mourning.

But even in his sorrow, there is comfort at hand. One of the elders approaches him and points out that the Lion of Judah, the long-awaited Messiah first recorded right back in Genesis 49 verses nine and 10 is able to open the scroll of our destiny for He is The Messiah, the Christ who is wholly man and wholly God.

Jesus as a man can open the scroll of the future and as God he has every right to be close to the throne of glory – the problem is surely solved.

Jews always pictured the Messiah as a lion, the king of beasts, majestic and unapproachable. Which of us would walk close to an uncaged lion?

Well I can tell you what it is like! Many years ago I was in Masai Mara Tanzania with Chirsty and the children who were quite young then.

We were in a van which developed a puncture and slipped into a deep run in the track. So the driver and myself got out of the van and worked underneath

it to jack the van and then the wheel up. Chirsty and the children were told to remain within the van.

Suddenly they were shouting that a lion was approaching us and that we must get back into the vehicle. I have a film of the lioness as she walked within six or 8 feet of the vehicle, ignoring us completely. There is no doubt she would not have ignored us had we still been working under the vehicle to try and position the jack.

No I would not like to approach a lion! How much more fearful was the lion of Judah.

But something extraordinary happens in heaven; the lion disappears and in his place walks a sacrificial lamb. The lamb with the knife cuts of the Temple sacrifice; the lamb with the fatal wounds of the Passover sacrifice on its body; the lamb with the print of the nails and the spear in its side.

This is the true Christ, the true Messiah of the new covenant with God whom we men killed.

This is Jesus returned from his earthly work - man yet God -sacrificed yet alive - the devil's work that began in the Garden of Eden, bringing sin and evil, death and corruption into the world has been defeated for ever!

Jesus has overcome and we and John's churches need not fear the grave. For the lamb was slaughtered and is now qualified to open the scroll of human destiny.

And here we have some further symbolism to explain; the lamb has seven horns representing first the fact that only male lambs were sacrificed at the Passover and second that horns were a familiar Jewish word used to represent power.

That there were 7 reminds us of the complete Holy Spirit that Jesus released as he left the earth after the resurrection.

The lamb also is described as having seven eyes- again that just emphasises that Christ sees everything, understands everything, and has the power to complete everything.

In reading these symbolic passages may I encourage you to understand the detail of the symbolism but then not to try to create an image in your mind?

Nothing would be more strange than to see a real lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. That would be grotesque! But can we not imagine Jesus with the wounds of the nails in his hands and the spear in his side preparing to tell both heaven and hell and the earth beneath what will befall them before time will end. The time that began before the big bang and with the glory of all those who believe in that wonderful place where many of our loved ones have gone and we have the confident hope that we will join them one day.

So the lamb approaches the scroll and takes it from God's right-hand, opens the seals and all heaven rises in praise, -from every tribe and language and people and nation. Not just the Jews but all races who love him. Not even just those who represent men and women but the Whole of creation.

And the rest of the chapter contains a peon of praise and glory. And joining the Angels whose number could not be counted (the meaning of the phrase numbering thousands upon thousands, and 10,000 times 10,000) joined by the elders and the four living creatures who are referred to first in chapter 4 verse seven.

What are the living creatures? They are symbolic of all that is noblest, strongest, wisest and swiftest in nature. "The lion is supreme among beasts, the Ox is supreme among cattle, the Eagle is supreme among birds and the human is supreme among all creatures".

So there we are, the scroll and the Lamb. What is the message for us today?

- God is in control
- He gives us free will to choose or reject him, but He will eventually be judge of all humankind.
- We can never believe we are independent of His will.

- He is God, not us.
- God has a plan for the end times but only Jesus is uniquely able to release that plan and set it in motion.
- Jesus loves us; He has overcome by dying for us and He has made the sacrifice to cover all our deficiencies.

I pray that all of us may approach our own end times, either personally or when Jesus comes again, with what has been called the confident hope of faith, that God is in control and that He will not let even one of His people perish.

- Finally remember the theme of the book of Revelation that I told you many months ago. However black the skies become and however mired in sin the world becomes ----Jesus wins in the end.
- Amen