

E100 week 20 Revelation 17th July 2011 am
Readings Rev 1; 2-3; 4-7; 19-20; 21-22

Well, we have come to the end of our journey through the bible looking at the Essential 100 readings from the Bible. Next week we will review some of the things we have learnt, and rather than me talking the whole time, it would be great if some of you were able to share what you have learnt over the past 6 months. It doesn't have to be a mini sermon, it could be as simple as being reminded that God is a God of love. I think it would be really encouraging if quite a few of us were able to do that. So there isn't 30 minutes of silence because no one has anything to say, it might help me to prepare appropriately if you let me know during the week if you have something you would like to share.

So, this morning, we are looking at the last book of the bible, Revelation. Sometimes called the Revelation of John, although it would be more accurate to describe it as the Revelation of Jesus, as John makes it clear in the opening verses that he is simply the scribe, writing down what Jesus has revealed to him.

Revelation is one, if not the most controversial book in the bible. It is without a doubt difficult to understand and has been subject to all sorts of bizarre and unhelpful interpretations over the years. But, as my friend Simon Woodman reminded us when he came and spoke about Revelation several years ago, as we read Revelation it is helpful to remember that it would have made sense to the people it was written to. We know that because if it didn't it wouldn't have been kept.

When we read it today, it is full of mind boggling pictures and descriptions that seem to defy our understanding – but it isn't a secret code that needs a super computer to crack – it is letter written to a specific people at a specific time, that would have been understood and seen as relevant by them. As we read it again this week, it is helpful to keep that in mind.

It is also helpful to bear in mind that one of the reasons we struggle to understand Revelation is because we read it in the same way as the other books in the bible, Paul's theological letters or Luke's history. But Revelation isn't written in the same style – Revelation belongs to a type of literature known as Apocalyptic, and communicates through the use of symbolism and metaphors, colourful picture language – stars and mountains and monsters and demons – and complex number schemes. Which is very different to say Paul's letters, which are well argued fact or rhetoric. And so we need to read it and relate to it in a different way.

Revelation was written to engage the reader's imagination, to engage the reader's feelings, Revelation is primarily a book to be experienced, rather than a text-book to be studied.

Rather than get bogged down in the detail we need to stand back and admire the big picture. Many of the weird and wacky readings of Revelation have emerged because people have begun with the detail, and have become obsessed with the detail, rather than appreciate the book as a whole.

If you are not sure what I mean, think of Revelation as a painting. If you zoom in to examine the detail of the painting, to examine each brush stroke, or try to find meaning in why the painter used red for the person's coat or why he chose to put a bush or tree in a certain place, you will probably not appreciate the scene the painter was painting. You need to step back and view the whole painting to understand what the painter was trying to convey. And that is the best way to approach Revelation.

So, as we read Revelation this week, what is the big picture that we need to look out for?

Revelation was written somewhere around AD95, 60 or so years after the ascension of Jesus. The church had seen explosive growth through the witness of the apostles and more recently Paul, but, it had also seen significant opposition and persecution, which had increased dramatically in recent years.

As more and more time went by and Jesus didn't return to establish his kingdom, some Christians began to fall away, they lost faith, they lost hope. And as the persecution increased and the uncertainty grew, the church was facing a crisis of confidence. And Revelation was written for this struggling and persecuted minority church to encourage them and to give them hope for the future.

As most of you know, 5 weeks ago Sarah gave birth to our daughter Grace. And as is expected, I was there for the whole birth thing. And as an observer, it was an amazing experience. The one thing that I want to share with you this morning is the role of the midwife. She was amazing, she helped Sarah get through what was a painful and traumatic experience. She helped Sarah focus on her breathing, helped her stay calm, and she constantly reminded Sarah that the pain wouldn't last forever and that the end result was a baby. It was a brilliant bit of psychology, getting Sarah to change her perspective, to try to get her to stop focussing on the pain now and focus on the brilliant end product in the future, so that she could endure the pain in the present.

And that is exactly what Revelation attempts to do. Revelation was written to give the persecuted Christians hope by reminding them that in the end their enemies would be destroyed and they would be triumphant. They were on the winning side and no matter how things looked at the moment, no matter how hard things got, God was sovereign, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus, Satan had already been defeated, and at some point in the future, Christ would return in glory, Satan would be finally overthrown, and through their faith in Jesus, they would share in his victory. Things would not be like this forever, and in the end, they would receive the blessings of God and they would reign with God forever.

And the hope of the writer was that this would help them to change their perspective, that it would help change their focus from their present problems and onto their glorious future, so that they would be able to endure their present troubles.

That is the big picture of Revelation, and in our readings this week we see how that picture is fleshed out with some of the details.

In our first reading, chapter 1 verse 4, we are reminded that Jesus, is and was and is to come. Then verse 7, Look he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him. So shall it be. Amen.

Jesus is coming back, he will return. Fact. It may be taking longer than the first Christians expected or hoped, but that didn't change anything, it didn't mean that their hope was in vain, Jesus was absolutely going to come back.

Secondly, in the vision of Jesus among the lamp stands we are told that he held seven stars in his right hand, which we are told in verse 20 are the seven angels of the seven churches. It has to be said, who or what these angels are is something of a mystery but the fact that they are held in Jesus right hand is a picture of political authority, symbolising the fact that the destiny of the seven churches rests in God's hands, not the Roman authorities.

While the churches may be struggling and persecuted, under extreme pressure from the Roman authorities, the spiritual reality was that Christ was in control, he was sovereign, he was Lord, and so things would not remain like this forever.

Thirdly, in our last but one reading when we look at chapters 19 and 20, we are reminded that in the end, all evil will be defeated. It may not look like it now especially when we see some of the awful things that happen in our world, at times it does seem like the devil has the upper hand, and it certainly seemed like that to the Christians that Revelation was written to – but the message that Jesus communicates through John to them and us is that the devil has already lost the decisive battle at the cross, and because of that his doom is guaranteed.

And fourthly, another reality of the end is judgement, recorded in chapter 20 verse 11 to 15. If you remember this has been a theme that has run right through the bible, God is a holy God and although evil people often seem to prosper in the short term, in the end, God will judge them. And those whose names are not written in the book of life, those who do not have faith in Jesus but have rejected him and his ways, they will share the same fate as Satan.

But fifthly, more positively, chapter 21 and 22 at the end of time, when evil is defeated and satan is destroyed, God will make all things new. And all those who put their faith in Jesus will dwell with him forever. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes, there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.

What an amazing picture Jesus paints of the future we have to look forward to.

And as I said, the hope that Jesus has as he reveals this to John is that it will encourage, inspire his people to hold fast, to remain faithful, because the prize is worth it.

And as we read these chapters, we share the same future. Whatever issues we face now, whatever pain or hurt we are going through, for our faith or otherwise, our future is one of perfection. And so we fix our eyes on the things to come – and hold onto God and his promises and stay faithful to him.

But, that doesn't mean that our troubles now are not real or significant. It doesn't mean that we shouldn't weep or mourn now. We need to be real about how hard life can be sometimes. We need to learn how to hold onto the truth of these promises while being real about life.

To return to the giving birth illustration, the joy of giving birth helps to get through the pain of labour, but it doesn't stop labour being painful and it is right and proper to be real about that pain, without focusing on it.

Does that make sense? We have a new perspective and the hope we have helps us face up to our troubles now so that we can endure through them, but they are still troubles and it is ok to say you are struggling.

A second thing that I would like to mention this morning, is that alongside the positive psychology of focusing on the amazing future we have to help the believers to remain faithful, in Revelation there is also a warning about what will happen if they don't remain faithful. There is an interesting balance between carrot and stick if you like in Revelation. Thankfully our midwife only used the carrot approach, although I have heard stories of other midwives who were more stick than carrot but that is another issue.

Revelation makes it clear that while there is a promise of eternal life for those who remain faithful, there is also the risk of judgement for all those who do not endure, who give up on Jesus. The letters to the seven churches for example, all contain a comment about the condition of the church (what they are doing well and where they are failing).

Then there is a challenge to the church – those that are falling short need to repent, they need to sort it out and do the work that Jesus calls them to do, to stay faithful, to remain committed to him.

There is a promise of reward if they do that, but there is also a consequence if the church doesn't meet the challenge. For example to the church in Ephesus there was a warning that their lamp stand will be removed. But all seven warnings essential amount to the same thing, if you abandon your faith, then you will miss out on the reward of salvation, eternal life,

The point of the message is not to scare the readers but to warn them so they don't experience this. Jesus talks about a parent disciplining a child not because they don't like the child anymore, but because they love the child and want the best for it. Jesus is warning the readers of Revelation about the risks they face, so they won't face those consequences – Danger Cliff Edge – do not cross.

And those warning signs are written for our benefit too. As we read Revelation, perhaps particularly the letters to the seven churches we would be wise to pay attention to the criticisms of those churches, and where we see the same or similar short comings in our life or fellowship, we should resolve to repent and turn back to Jesus.

But it would be wrong to end this morning with the stick, because Revelation really is much more carrot than stick – so I want to end with one final point that shines through the whole of Revelation, that all the promises are dependent on and because of Jesus Christ, who is the lamb who was slain for us. It is because of his sacrifice, his blood that was shed on the cross that we have been forgiven, that we have been set free from sin, that we can be heirs with God.

And so He alone is worthy to be worshipped, and in Revelation more than anywhere else in the scripture Jesus is worshipped as God, He is the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End. He is the Lord of Lords and king of kings. He is God Almighty. And so like John, we not only follow him, stay faithful to him, we fall on our knees and worship him.

Rev 1:12-19

12 I turned around to see who was talking to me, and I saw seven gold lampstands, 13 and among them there was what looked like a human being, wearing a robe that reached to his feet, and a gold band around his chest. 14 His hair was white as wool, or as snow, and his eyes blazed like fire; 15 his feet shone like brass that has been refined and polished, and his voice sounded like a roaring waterfall. 16 He held seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp two-edged sword came out of his mouth. His face was as bright as the midday sun. 17 When I saw him, I fell down at his feet like a dead man. He placed his right hand on me and said, "Don't be afraid! I am the first and the last. 18 I am the living one! I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever. I have authority over death and the world of the dead.