

Service at home sheet for 20th August 2023:

A dip into Revelation: WOW!

Prepared by Pat Fry

During this summer and autumn Methodist churches have been encouraged to spend four weeks looking at the material for Bible month. The book chosen this year is Revelation. As no-one else has tackled this for the worship at home sheet, I thought you might like to sample something of what has been shared in several churches in the circuit already, and will be explored at St Andrews in October. This week I would like to share what stood out for me from the first five chapters. There are two themes here; Firstly John's visions of Jesus, and secondly Messages to 7 churches.

Revelation is a very challenging book, full of references to obscure Old Testament stories and fantastical images that were wonderfully evocative to people at the time it was written, but bewildering to us. So I want to begin with a text, one verse from chapter 2, so if you find these passages difficult to understand, hold on to this much loved text from Revelation ch. 2

Jesus said; Listen, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, and opens the door I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.

A prayer: Lord Jesus, Help us to be open to experiencing your presence with us wherever we are. Help us to recapture a sense of wonder at who you are, and what your love can mean for our lives. Amen

Hymn of Break thou the bread of life StF153:v1

Break thou the bread of life,
Dear Lord to me
As thou didst break the bread
beside the sea.
Beyond the sacred page,
I seek thee Lord
My spirit longs for thee
O living Word. Mary Artemisia Lathbury 1841-1913

John's Visions of Jesus

Reading: Rev 1: 9-19

I think it is very easy for us to misunderstand this passage because we think in 21st century terms, and do not realise the picture it might have brought to mind to people at the time.

I am convinced the writer does not mean Jesus had hair turned white with old age, or pale pink skin of the people of northern European tribes they might have heard about, or seen as slaves taken in battle.

I think they might have imagined radiant, dazzling white light. In the days before electricity, before street lighting, a cloudy night was pitch black, their house was lit by firelight, simple candles and small oil lamps, all giving a rather yellowy light. In comparison sun light was white. Have you ever woken up on a sunny morning after heavy snowfall? Can you recall the quality of the light then, its different, isn't it?

I think the writer invites us to picture Jesus radiant with the clearest brightest light we can imagine. Later, we have another picture.

You can read it in detail in Chapter 5, but I am going to summarise it, as I visualised it, because I think it is essential to hold these two pictures together. For me that is the really powerful message of the first five chapters.

The writer sees God, enthroned in glory, holding a scroll that is sealed, and needs to be opened, but there is no-one worthy to do so. Then one of the elders says, yes there is one person, worthy for this great task, the Lion of Judah,.... The writer expects to see lion, the king of beasts, he's shaking in his shoes But no lion appears..... The speaker continues... you know... the descendent of David who has won the victory, He is worthy. ... And I guess the writer expected to see the figure of Christ he had seen earlier... But no.... To his amazement the figure who stands immediately in front of the throne is neither of these powerful figures, but a lamb who has been killed, but is now very much alive. Not the sort of frisky newborn lamb we see playing in our fields in Spring, but a more awe-inspiring figure, yet

still just a lamb bearing the marks of having been killed, and this figure inspires a response of joyful worship throughout heaven and earth, praising the Lamb for his sacrifice that has redeemed people throughout the world. For me, the best way to sum up the message of these passages is WOW!

Wonderful, Overwhelmingly, Wonderful

Prayer:

Living Lord Jesus, When we try to think about who you are king of Glory, our crucified Saviour, and yet our ever present friend we are lost for words. We can only use pictures and metaphor to try to express something of the wonder we feel, and we accept that words that are deeply meaningful for one person may be of little use to another. So we pray that you will help us each to hold on to a picture, a vision that we can treasure, reminding us that you are both the compassionate Jesus of history who lived and worked in Palestine 2000 years ago, the Saviour who sacrificed himself and rose again, and our ever present friend, and King of Kings in glory., Amen

Hymn Meekness and Majesty StF 362

<https://youtu.be/gBonpqR7ay0>

Meekness and Majesty, manhood and deity,
In perfect harmony, the man who is God.
Lord of eternity, dwells in humanity
kneels in humility and washes our feet.

*O what a mystery, meekness and majesty,
Bow down and worship, for this is your God, This
is your God.*

Father's pure radiance, perfect in innocence,
Yet learns obedience, to death on a cross.
Suffering to give us life,
conquering through sacrifice,
and as they crucify cries "Father forgive".
O what a mystery.....

Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible,
Love indestructible in frailty appears.
Stooping so tenderly, lifts our humanity

to the heights of his throne.

O what a mystery

Graham Kendrick born 1950

Messages to the churches

In Chapters 2 and 3 we hear the content of the letters being sent to the seven churches represented by the seven gold lampstands we read about in Chapter 1. They are very long chapters, so here is a paraphrase of 3 examples; you may like to read it in full later.

This is the hidden meaning of the seven stars in my right hand and the seven gold lampstands. The stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the lampstands are the seven churches. To the angel of the church at Ephesus write: This is the message from the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven gold lampstands: I know how hard you have worked, how you have held fast to the truth, how you have suffered for my sake. So far, so good. But you do not love me as you did at first; you have lost your enthusiasm. You need to be re-energised, to regain that enthusiasm, or your church will fade away.

If you have ears to hear

Listen to what the Spirit says to the churches

To the angel of the church at Smyrna write: This is the message from the one who is the first and the last, the one who died and lives again. I understand your troubles; you think you are poor, but you are spiritually rich. Do not be distressed by those who speak against you, they are mistaken. Some of you will suffer for my sake, but only for a short time; those who stay faithful will be rewarded with victorious life.

If you have ears to hear

Listen to what the Spirit says to the churches

To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: This is the message from the Amen, the faithful and true witness, who is the origin of all that God created.. You are as useless as the lukewarm water in your pipes. You are no use to refresh or inspire others, you have no ability to heal or cleanse. You think you are rich in things, but you are poor in the things of the Spirit. Come to me

in humble repentance, seek the good gifts I can give, for otherwise you will be of no use to me at all.

But those who do win the victory will have the right to sit beside me on my throne.

If you have ears to hear

Listen to what the Spirit says to the churches

Jesus says” Listen, I stand at the door and knock, If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them and they will eat with me.”

A bit like school reports...Remarks like: could do better. ...

Two churches are praised and encouraged, two come in for severe warnings, and three get a mixed response, good in parts but problems need addressing.

We live in very different times, our church life is very different, so we cannot apply these letters directly to our situation. But we can consider the underlying principles and how they might apply to us today.

The churches that escape criticism are perhaps the smallest – one says it has no influence, the other that it is poor. But both are commended for facing up to persecution with courage and faithfulness. We are not facing that challenge – but our Christian brothers and sisters in many countries are doing so, and this scripture will be deeply precious to them, assuring them of Christ’s loving concern. We should be remembering them more in our prayers.

Three churches get mixed reports: they are doing some things well, but failing in other ways. Some are conforming too much to the customs of the pagan society in which they live.

Deciding where science, medicine and social awareness encourage us rightly to move away from Biblical ideas, and when we should stay with the traditional view of Scripture was not simple then, and is not easy now.

We generally agree that Paul’s teaching on the role of women in church was appropriate for that time only,

But when it comes to same sex marriage – we have to accept that after careful thought and prayer, some Christians sincerely believe that to honour a loving commitment between two people of the same sex is right and proper, in the light of the inclusiveness of the Gospel, and some Christians, equally prayerful and thoughtful, are equally convinced that this is quite unacceptable in the light of Biblical teaching. Sometimes we have to recognise that we will differ in our views as to the right way to apply the teaching of Jesus in our very different circumstances.

I think the letter challenges us to think carefully and not just go with the crowd, but make our lifestyle decisions in the light of what we know of the Gospel.

One of the churches is challenged about its lack of enthusiasm, and another for looking good on the surface but having no real spiritual life.

We all have times, particularly when we are unwell or struggling in some way. when church feels like a dull routine, its lost its spark. Don’t be discouraged by this passage from keeping going through those times, for where there is a deep desire to find faith alive again, opportunities will come. What is being criticised here is an empty habit, complacent and self-satisfied, with no longing for anything more.

The church at Laodicea is an interesting one. Some towns had cold water springs., water from the mountains, ice cold, wonderfully refreshing and invigorating. Some towns had hot water springs, not thirst quenching, not tasting good, but with medicinal properties that were used in healing.

Laodicea had its water piped from elsewhere, so it arrived murky and lukewarm, neither refreshing nor healing. So the writer is not saying you are half-hearted; he’s saying you are useless. So the hard question for us is:

Are we fit for purpose, showing God’s love and compassion, sharing the good news of the Gospel?

Phew, it’s a tall order; we are called to

Perseverance, to Humility in obedience to Jesus, to Endurance in the face of persecution...

If all that make you feel inadequate, take heart. Throughout the chapter, each time the statement is not you have had it, you are doomed, but you would be doomed if you carry on in the same way, take this opportunity to change for the better.

What will keep us going? The Wonderful promises of Jesus, the promise of his ultimate victory over evil, eternal life with Him, and more immediately, his presence here and now, for he is moving among the lampstands, moving among his people in spite of all our failings. PHEW!

The wonderful text we began with comes at the end of the rant at Laodicea's failures

Listen I stand and the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and answers the door I will come in and eat with them, and they with me.

May we respond to that invitation. Amen

Prayer of confession

Gracious God we thank you for the opportunity to make a fresh start. For your call to us each week to start afresh on the next step of our journey of faith.

We think back over the past week, and recall something we regret, may be a hasty word, or an opportunity lost.

We ask your forgiveness, the assurance of your presence, and your help to walk more closely with Jesus in the week ahead. Amen.

Prayers for ourselves and others

Holding the visions of Jesus in mind, pray for Christians facing persecution today. In particular for Christians in Northern Nigeria, and Manipur, India, where churches are being burnt down, whole village destroyed this summer, violence so severe it has been reported on our television news.

Holding the visions of Jesus in mind, pray for churches in our own land, not facing persecution,

but facing indifference, seen by so many as irrelevant and out of date.

Holding the visions of Jesus in mind bring your personal concerns, for yourself and people you know before God, trusting in the promises of Jesus who walks among his people, now as then.

And bring your prayers together with the prayer he taught us Our Father....

Hymn: Be thou my vision StF545

<https://youtu.be/DoFvVw8Lby4>

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart,
Nought be all else to me save that thou art.
Be thou my best thought in the day and the night
In waking and sleeping thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word,
Be thou ever with me and I with thee Lord:
Be thou my great Father, thy child let me be,
Be thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the fight,
Be thou my whole armour be thou my true might
Be thou my soul's shelter be thou my strong
tower,
O raise thou me heavenward, great power of my
power.

Riches I heed not, nor man's empty praise,
Be thou mine inheritance, now and always.
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart.
O Sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou heaven's bright sun
O grant me its joys after victory is won.
True heart of my own heart, whatever befall
still be thou my vision O Ruler of all.

Irish 8th century, translated Mary Elizabeth Byrne 1880-1931
versified Eleanor Henrietta Hull 1860-1935 altd.

Blessing

May God bless us;
May Jesus bring us peace and joy in believing;
May we rest in the Spirit's care and reflect God's
love in our daily lives. Amen.

adapted from Iona Wee Worship Book

CCLI: 30794