

Revelation 14:1-5

Redeeming God

A few years back when I was buying my electric nylon strung guitar, the man in the shop plugged it for me to try and I was amazed at how well it sounded. What I didn't figure was that he'd plugged it into one of the best "off-the-peg" amps you can get, and of course, inevitably, over the coming weeks, I realised that I had to have the amp as well, which I eventually found secondhand. It's one of the oldest tricks in sales: show them the top of the range and they'll find it hard to settle for less. Comparison is a powerful tool, and as I read the beginning of Revelation 14 I find a whole range of comparisons with the chapter before - dramatic contrasts between the Beast and the Lamb.

It all begins with the first three words: "**Then I looked...**" - or "behind these things, I looked." John has had a terrible time in the previous chapter witnessing the awesome naked power of the Beast - but then he's given a glimpse behind all of that, and he sees something completely different. There are only five verses, but at least seventeen points of contrast, and in this sermon I want to simply present them to you and ask who you will choose this day.

The Lamb - Pure and Simple

Point No.1: We see "**the Lamb**". The image is a simple one: just the Lamb. The beasts were outlandish amalgams of various animals put together to instil fear. The Lamb we know: simple not slippery, who he says he is, and trustworthy.

Mount Zion - Place of Coronation

Point No.2: The Lamb is "**standing on Mount Zion**". The beasts rose up from the sea and earth - they were surging pretenders, but the Lamb has been installed on Mount Zion. It's an image of messianic enthronement. He's been placed there. It's as if, during a period between monarchs, some rebellious army has begun a march on the capital, only to find on arrival, that the rightful king has already been crowned.

Stillness

Point No.3: Chapter 13 was full of wild actions and crashing sounds, but here we meet a picture of stillness. The Lamb has no need to rush about. His position on Mount Zion leaves nothing more to prove. Yes, there will be action to come, but the contrast right here is one between dinful racket and the assured stillness of deep peace.

Dignity

Point No.4: the assurance and stillness conveys a stature and dignity - the Lamb was **“standing”** on Mount Zion. It's the same pose as we've seen before in Chapter 5, where the Lamb was **“standing in the centre of the throne.”** Mount Zion's the place where God's enthroned among the praises of his people, and, unlike the feverishly performing beast the Lamb is simply **“standing”** there.

A Special People

Point No.5: with him are **“144,000”**. It's a symbolic number representing the whole people of God. Here they contrast with those duped into following the Beast. He had **“the inhabitants of the earth”**(13:8) **“everyone small and great”** (13:16). But the Lamb has a special number of people, personally called and redeemed: A deep quality of relationship is sought for and given.

The Gift of Order

Point No.6: The number conveys order. It's a square number: twelve times twelve - times many, and we'll come across it again in John's vision of the New Jerusalem. And we see that whereas the beast causes chaos, the Lamb brings peace. I love that story in Mark where Jesus heals a demoniac who used to live among the tombs, cutting himself with stones, breaking his chains, and crying out. We read, **“They saw the man who had been possessed by a legion of demons sitting there, dressed, and in his right mind.”** (Mk 5:15). As people of the Lamb we're being transformed by the renewal of our minds, and, unlike the victims of the Beast who are merely mesmerised, our chaotic inner worlds are being gently ordered.

Named not Marked

Point No.7: the 144,000 **“had his name and his father's name”** . It's a direct and deliberate contrast with the **“mark of the beast”**. The sharing of the name symbolises personal commitment and union. When you put your name to something you have no shame in it, and here God's saying he has no shame in his people. Just listen to those words spoken now: God says, “I have no shame in you” because you are redeemed and sanctified. Unlike the mark of the beast, this isn't about greed and ownership so much as delightful union.

Written by Hand

Point No.8: the name has been **“written”** rather than “received” or branded (13:16-17) - and writing in the ancient world was always done by hand. As I thought of this I was reminded of the beautiful henna designs lovingly painted on the hands of a bride to be. In Christ, God descends, bends low, kneels down, to the level of each of, to carefully write his name on our foreheads.

Delicacy Valued

Point No.9: a tremendous sound is growing **“like the roar of rushing waters and a loud peal of thunder”** but it’s **“the sound of harpists playing their harps.”** Chapter 13 was also full sound, but they were sounds of barked orders, dazzling wonders, sizzling branding irons - all emanating from one tyrannical source. The sound heard in Chapter 14 is no less powerful yet produced by thousands of delicate strummings. The brute power of the one is nowhere to be seen. Rather we see the beautifully interconnected exquisite power of a harmonious new creation - where each detail of each contributor is held in high regard. That’s how God thinks of, values you.

A New Song of Victory

Point 10: the people **“sang a new song”** and in the Old Testament the singing of a “new song” was always associated with God’s victory over the enemy. So while the beast, we read in Chapter 13, is **“making war against the saints and conquering them”** (13:7), the saints themselves are rejoicing in victory. Now, at first that might seem a bit foolish, but what John sees is that no matter how much the people of Christ are defeated on this earth our victory is hidden and secure with him in heaven. Just as Jesus himself was hammered to a cross, so the people of the slaughtered but standing Lamb join with him in resurrection. No more panic, no more fear: we sing a new song of eternal victory.

Joyful Praise

Point 11: the 144,000 are happy. They’re praising God **“before his throne”** - their energy and joy is such a contrast with the hunger and desperation of those who couldn’t buy or sell

unless they had the mark of the beast. These people are at rest from the labours of the marketplace - they're at peace, living the Sabbath, cared for and joyful. And this points to the truth of the different promises held out to by God and by the beast - the one way leads to life and peace, the other to an everlasting slough of drudgery.

The Patient Process of Learning

Point 12: the people are happy because the song has been **“learnt”** by them rather than **“forced”** - as in the way of the beast. God's a teacher. Time and again the gospels show the patient teaching of Jesus among his disciples. Once again, we see the on-going the journey, the delightful opening up, the joyful growth we have in relationship with God through Christ. The other day I read about someone who had failed their driving test nine times - imagine going out on the road with them after that! It's not always easy to learn the song of Christ, but in Jesus was a perfect teacher who never, ever gives up on us.

The Sacred Song

Point 13: **“No-one could learn the song except the 144,000”** in other words there's a specialness or sacredness about their singing, and the song they sing is bound up with their special relationship to the Lamb. By contrast, the beast has nothing special for its followers: they're simply herded, shoved, drugged and manipulated. When we turn to Christ, however, when we find ourselves in him, we learn a song that can be learnt in no other way but by following him. Sometimes the following's hard; sometimes the path is stony, but there's only one way to learn his victory song, and that's by attaching ourselves - fusing ourselves - with Jesus Christ and his way.

Redeemed not Seized

Point 14: the 144,000 have **“been redeemed from the earth”** unlike the captives of the beast who've been seized. To redeem someone or something involves personal cost. If I take my watch to the pawn brokers, in order to redeem it I have to pay more than they gave me for it in the first place. The beast uses its to take what doesn't belong to him; the Lamb, Jesus Christ, gives of himself to buy back what should never have been taken away.

Purity, Faithfulness, Focus

Point 15: Chapter 13 is replete with sin, seduction, and sleight of hand. Chapter 14 is a picture of purity. Verse 4 may seem troubling at first sight: **“These are those who did not defile themselves with women, but kept themselves pure.”** However, the words aren’t intended to suggest either that women or sex are dirty. The image harks back to the Old Testament regulations for holy war. Often soldiers on campaign will visit the local brothels wherever they are, and this was no less the case in ancient times than it is nowadays, but in the Old Testament the holy army of God was instructed to remain focused and faithful. So this verse, while culturally conditioned, isn’t intended as misogynistic, but as an image for us all - a reminder of our call to a different kind of warfare, a robust sense of morality, a focus on our calling and a dedication to our God.

Freedom

Point 16: the captives of the beast have been led to entrapment but the 144,000 **“follow the Lamb wherever he goes.”** This speaks of freely given and glad devotion. It’s up to us if we want to follow Christ. No-one’s forcing anyone, and no-one *can* force anyone. As soon as force comes into it we begin to smell the beast - so here we sense the passion for freedom which lies in the very heart of God - his freedom and our freedom: freedom to choose what’s good and leads to life, rather than being forced into what simply leads to death.

Integrity and Courage

Point 17: people of the beast have been bound into a web of lies, but the 144,000 **“are blameless - no lie was found in their mouth”** - and this speaks of being grounded in integrity - like the Lamb, Jesus Christ our Leader. They’ve been tried and found truthful. That’s what being attached to Jesus Christ does for us: our integrity is challenged and strengthened and deepened.

Who will you choose?

Seventeen points of contrast between these two passages. Seventeen ways of showing the gulf between the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, and the beast which reeks of the devil. Seventeen indications of the life, freedom and joy that are ours in Jesus - as against the way of the world and the self-seeking intentions of the destroyer. So let me ask you: who will you follow this day?

Bob Dylan infuriated his fans in 1980 when he sang "You've Gotta Serve Somebody" - "it may be the devil or it may be the Lord, but you've got to serve somebody." The choice he gave may have been stark, it may seem crude and lacking nuance, but ultimately it's the Biblical choice - the choice we all face. The Bible commands us to "**Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and with all your strength.**" The temptations of this world seem attractive, beguiling, or simply impossible to refuse. But if you would choose freedom, if you would choose personality, if you would choose purpose, if you would choose dignity, if you would choose humanity, or joy, or meaning, or depth of love - then choose, and choose again, Jesus Christ.