

## **Revelation 4**

One of my Christmas presents was a book of funny advertisements, such as the tourism brochure which read, "*Mt Kilimanjaro - the breathtaking backdrop for the Serena Lodge. Swim in the lovely pool while you drink it all in.*" You get the feeling you be a little bloated when you climb out. Or there's "*Wanted: widower with school-age children requires person to assume general housekeeping duties. Must be capable of contributing to the growth of the family.*" Or for the hygiene-aware members cooks among us, "*Wanted: preparer of food. Must be dependable like the food business, and be willing to get hands dirty.*" Doesn't sound too appetising. Then there's my favourite: "*Wanted: Used paint.*" Just what does that mean?

These adverts are funny because they can be read in different ways, and there are all sorts of ways to read the book of Revelation. But always, when we read Revelation, we have to understand that this book intends to reveal things to us. The word "apocalypse" means "unveiling" - a drawing back of the curtain. So as we go through this series, I wonder what Revelation will reveal to you.

### **Ways to Read Revelation**

What are some of the ways in which people approach Revelation? Some look at it from a *literary-theological* point of view, tracing the multiple references and allusions to the rest of the Bible. Others read it against its *historical* background, to make concrete sense of the obscure language.

Others study it from a *sociological* point of view - to show how it functions as a hope-giving rallying cry for powerless people. Some find within it a *prophetic critique* of the world in which they live. Others still read it as *spiritual encouragement* for contemporary Christian living. And others yet read it as a kind of prophetic *road map*, taking us through the last days of history.

There are many ways of reading Revelation, and as we go through some chapters together, we'll be taking some of these perspectives. But always I want to be asking the question: "What is this text, this verse, this image, this revelation, saying to us?" And not just to us as individuals, but us as a church - a body, a people, a movement with a mission to serve God, to extend his kingdom, to reach out into *this* area and *throughout* London, bringing people to Christ and Christ to people.

Sometimes Revelation is seen as a Key to unlock certain mysteries. But what kind of mysteries are these? When Revelation is seen as a key to unlock mysteries of future events I think this reading is nearly always wrong. The book does contain a vision of future hope, but I

don't believe it sets out a programme for getting there, and nor do any of the fifteen major commentaries I've read. It's far better to see Revelation as *a key to spiritual and theological truth*. What do power and dignity look like? The answer's in Revelation. Is good worth holding onto over against evil? The answer's in Revelation. Is anyone in control of this chaotic world? The answer's in Revelation. Is it worth persisting in our faith? The answer's in Revelation.

Sometimes Revelation is seen as a Source of knowledge, inspiration, encouragement. But what kind of knowledge? Again, I would say that it's not historical knowledge about the end of the world. We make a big mistake if we use Revelation to chart a course of future events, and an even bigger mistake if we then fit contemporary realities into that course - concluding that we're living in the very Last Days. You may believe that, or you may not, but to extract such a conclusion from the Book of Revelation is very insecure deduction. Revelation *is* a source of knowledge - but it's knowledge about the character of God, the person of Jesus, the challenge of being a Christian, the calling of the church, and god's vision for his creation.

### **A Ship in a Storm**

I want to offer you a basic framework for reading the book of Revelation which begins by reading it against its historical background. The title of this framework is "A Ship in a Storm" and you won't find it in any commentaries yet because I made it up a few years ago when I was teaching Lay Readers in Southwark Diocese.

The book was written while John was exiled to the Island of Patmos, and it was written to churches in what is now Western Turkey - Christians who were under intense pressure for believing in Jesus. Some were even being killed. Others were probably imprisoned, having their houses ransacked, losing their jobs for not joining in the religious practices which went with being a member of that company. This is the storm happening on earth, but John's invited to look through the curtain and see what's happening in heaven. And as he does so, hope rises within his heart.

So here's the outline:

**Chapter 1 - Meet the Captain** - John has his first, startling vision of Jesus - he's completely overawed, yet at the same time, reassured by grace;

**Chapters 2-3 - Instructions to the Crew** - in the form of Letters to the Churches, Jesus gives specific messages for the Christians of Western Turkey.

**Chapters 4-5 - The Bridge** - John gets a privileged view of the command headquarters of heaven, and in many ways these are the central chapters of the whole book.

**Chapters 6-19 - The Storm** - you can't see it's a big one from the sheer length of the stormy chapters, but in one way after another they show how the church faithful to Jesus will be taken through.

**Chapters 20-21 - The Farther Shore** - it's a vision of the place we're headed, but in some ways it also tells us of what the church is right now.

A couple of years back we looked at Chapters 2-3, Instructions to the Crew. In *this* series we're going to look at The Bridge, and some of The Storm.

So let's get our imaginations working, because Revelation is a book of visions - it's like a film or a dream with wonderful, constantly changing things to see and sounds to hear. You can't *just* read the words. You *have to* imagine. You *have to* enter in.

Let's look at Revelation chapter 4.

### Look Again

**"After this I looked..."** Not so long ago there was something I was really upset about. I poured out my heart in some e-mails to friends, and then, in the dark of the night I sat down and looked at Revelation 4. **"After this I looked..."** God invites us to look - to look again - and again - into his place, his heavenly throne room - to come back to the well, to draw inspiration. The words **"after this"** can actually be translated "Behind these things." When I suggested this to my tutor in Cambridge, who'd written one of those major commentaries on revelation I mentioned earlier, he said the translation was technically bad, but it completely captured the meaning of Revelation.

"Behind these things..." *Behind* what we see in this world. *Beyond* the mysteries and the situations we simply can't get our heads around or hearts to embrace - what's that light faintly flickering, that half-caught moment of a shadow? **"Behind these things, I looked."** Today God calls each of us to look, and look again. What are we going to see? **"There before me,"** says John, **"was a door standing open in heaven."** It's a fabulous invitation! **And a voice... Said, 'Come up here and I will show you...'** Are you ready to look?

### A Throne

John sees before him, **"a throne in heaven, with someone sitting on it."** It's an image of regality, of sovereignty, there's a stillness and a majesty. In his vision he sees glittering jewels - **"jasper and carnelian"** and an **"emerald rainbow around the throne"** - always the Biblical symbol of God's grace and mercy.

What are you facing at the moment? Revelation invites us to look again through the door of heaven to see God's peaceful, poised sovereignty, full of mercy and grace. What do you think of this world - is it out of control? Does it seem there are no answers? Look again through the door of heaven and gaze on the one who has all things in his hands. Revelation paints a picture for us to drink in deeply.

### **One People of God**

Then John's peripheral vision takes in some more details: **"twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them, twenty-four elders."** (v.4) Probably this refers to the twelve apostles of the Church and the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Now, when John was writing, the church was still new - Jesus had only been crucified a few decades previous. So he's placing something very new alongside something quite ancient, and so he knits the church of his own day into the Great People of God.

We can draw inspiration for that. When someone becomes a Christian it's not just a private matter - an individual conversion. We become fused into the great movement of God's people that ranges over continents and stretches through time. And when we come to church on Sunday or think of ourselves as members of St James, we need to look beyond our individual needs to catch sight of our calling to one strong *movement* of Christ.

### **The Church Ablaze with the Spirit**

And before the throne he sees **"Seven lamps blazing - the seven spirits of God."**

Now, what are these **"seven spirits"** ? The number seven, in the Bible, is the number of completeness. So it's a phrase that speaks of the fulness of God's Spirit. Yet the spirits blaze as lamps on seven lampstands. In Chapter 1 of Revelation, when John meets Jesus, the Captain, he sees him among seven golden lampstands, and as we read on we discover that each of these lampstands refers to one of the churches in Western Turkey. So here, in Chapter 4, before the throne of God, are the lampstands of churches ablaze with the Spirit. And I believe *our church* is there too - St James the Less - joining the completion of God's people, lit and blazing with his Spirit. That's the picture - will we live it - burning as a church for Christ!

### **Wise Worship**

Then John sees these extraordinary **"four living creatures... covered with eyes..."** (v.6) The eyes represents complete vigilance. There's nothing that happens which is unknown by

these creatures - whether it's on the earth or under the earth or in heaven. Nothing that's unseen - not even the state of our hearts. Yet notice what they're doing: **“Day and night they never stop saying, “Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty. Who was, and is, and is to come.”**

Let me ask you, how do deal with the problems of life? Who ever experiences sleepless nights? I do. Who ever frets about things, turns them over again and again? I do. Who ever can't get something out of their head because you're anxious about it? I'm like that. These creatures see everything that's happening, but they focus themselves on the powerful presence of God - *day and night!*

### **What sort of God?**

What an inspirational picture for us. Look again! Look through the door of heaven! Be inspired by the vision of God! And worship him - “I give my life to you,” we sing, “I fall down on my knees.” This phrase, **“who was and is and is to come”** - I love it! We often think of it as describing God's complete embrace of all time, but it's much more than that. This phrase tells us so much about God's actual character. A literal translation would be **“the was one, the is one, and the coming one.”** In other words, when we approach God and worship him, we draw near to one who always has the wisdom of the ages - the one always, who was. Yet we also encounter one who *is* - he's always fully with us in the present - a great affirmation of the fact that God's beside us, beneath us, with us. And at the same time, through this wonderful mantra, we need allow hope to rise in our hearts because he is the “coming one”. This phrase doesn't place God in the future. I pictures him coming *from* the future - *always breaking into our lives and our world by his Spirit.*

Why don't we say these words together now? Speak them out! We have a great calling as a church to share the message of Christ and to declare God's reign in this neighbourhood - the setting of St James. We need to draw together upon the promises of the “was one”, the presence of the “is one” and the salvation of the “coming one.”

### **Heavenly Concert**

And then we read that **“Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits of the throne, the twenty-four elders worship him, laying their crowns before him.”** (vv.9-10)

It's interesting isn't it - we don't read “twenty-two of them worship, but one was shopping and the other stayed in bed.” What a contrast between the worship of heaven and the worship we often find on earth. There's power when we do things together. There's power when we

come to church purposefully, ready - not just on time, but *in* good time. I was talking with someone the other day about discipline, and it's not a word I find easy to warm to. But this picture of heaven is one of disciplined worship - in concert - and it would lose its power completely if it were ramshackle or going off at half cock.

The twenty-four elders *give* themselves to worship, *with* the four living creatures. It's a sacrifice of praise. It's costly to be in concert with others because it means that we're giving ourselves as individuals to the greater power of what we can achieve in concert. Tonight we're here as individuals who have come to St James the Less. But God's calling us to something far greater than my individual journey or your individual quest. God's calling us to join with something that stretches back through the ages and goes on past the end of time. He's calling us to extend his kingdom through this church. He's calling us to worship together, to pray together, to focus on him together, to seek him together, to move together, to serve together, to engage together, to catch the vision together, of his glory in this place.