

Revelation 5

It's been a bad week for the aptly named Robert Fidler, a Surrey farmer who tried to get round the planning laws by hiding his illegally built, mock Tudor castle behind a huge stack of hay. Fidler and his family secretly lived in the castle for four years, hoping that because no-one objected during that time, they would be entitled to a certificate of lawfulness. The Council ruled that it didn't count "because of the hay." Today we're continuing with our series in Revelation, which is all about bringing to light what would otherwise be hidden.

You'll remember from last week that Chapter 4 has ended with this terrific and united hymn of praise to God. It's important to remember that context. The next chapter is full of drama and high emotions. Again, imagine what it would have been like to be John receiving this heart-bursting input. The personal cost of being a prophet is easily underestimated - to bear such revelations in the first place, and then to have the task of conveying them and hoping that they'll be received and understood. Every part of the process requires extraordinary vulnerability - don't imagine that it takes place without pain. So as we read Revelation, I really thank God for John, and I thank God for, and admire, those who continue to exercise anything approaching that kind of prophetic gift.

The Scroll

The passage begins with the words "**Then I saw...**" What we have here is the next thing John sees, but it's not the next event that takes place in some unfolding of the Last Days. Something's caught his attention - a scroll in the right hand of the one who sat on the throne with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. What can we say about this scroll?

Firstly, it belongs to God - held "**in his right hand.**" It could, of course, be something God had previously been handed, but because we're not told this the assumption has to be this scroll belongs to God and has originated with him. It contains his thoughts, and as we shall see, his judgements. Through this picture God's saying, "I *do* have an opinion. I *do* have thoughts. And they *will* be made known."

The scroll is "**written on both sides.**" That was unusual in the Ancient World. The fibres were aligned differently making it more difficult to write on the back, so you only turned over if you ran out of room. This aspect of the picture tells us that God has a *lot* to say. We can be so complacent about this world and the way we live in it. We think God's not really bothered sometimes. But this picture, which picks up imagery from Ezekiel 2:10, tells us God has a *lot* to say.

It's sealed with "**seven seals**". As I said last week, seven is the number of completeness - so the scroll is completely untouched. It's been rendered tamper-proof until the right time of its

opening, and this high security surrounding the scroll underlines the significance and complete authority of the one who *will* open it. It's a bit like the code for firing a nuclear weapon - highly encrypted so that *only* the president is able to key it in.

Now, in the ancient world, lots of important documents were sealed, but the kind with six seals, or occasionally seven, were usually legal documents, and especially wills. Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews employs the same image when it describes the first covenant between God and his people as a will, superseded by a later will - an everlasting covenant. The writer explains **“In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it,”** (9:16) and he then shows how the death of Christ releases the blessings of God upon his people. Later in Revelation 5 we read of Jesus, **“You are worthy to take the book and to open its seals because you were slain.”** God's will for the world - his blessings and judgements - can be released because God himself in Christ has died.

Who is Worthy?

“Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” comes the next question. The question's about moral honour, but also legal standing. For whom is this will intended? Are the recipients all gathered? Is there an heir? Is there one to take forward the will of God? Certainly, the recipients are gathered. They comprise the total population of the cosmos before whom John imagines this taking place. He doesn't describe the throng but he implies their presence by saying **“but no-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside.”** (5:3) God's will - his judgements and blessings - are aching to be revealed. The people are desperate, on the edge of their seats, standing on tiptoe at the back, straining to find out. Yet there's no-one with authority and right to open the scroll.

John says, **“I wept and wept...”** (5:4) Again we have an insight into the overwhelming emotional investment of the prophet. He's in floods of tears because no-one can be found to reveal God's will and gather his people. Do you ever experience that grief of the soul? Oh that we would have such a desire for God's kingdom - his reign - to be made known in our experience! Not all of us would weep for it with the likes of John or Jeremiah, but to desire it that strongly, however the desire showed itself, would truly transform us into a passionate people.

Do Not Weep!

But God says through one of the elders, **“Do not weep!”** (5:5) These are words I specially associate with the saving love of God in Jesus Christ. To the widow of Nain, before raising her son in Luke 7 he says **“Don't weep”**. To the mourners of Jairus' daughter in Luke 8 he says again,

“stop weeping.” To Mary, in the light of the resurrection he asks, **“Why are you weeping?”** Isaiah, looking forward to the final day of salvation says, **“The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces.”** (Isaiah 25:8) And at the end of Revelation John himself prophesies that God **“will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”** (Rev.21:4) So many people in this world have lost hope or find it draining away so that the fibres of their soul harden. Here in Revelation 5, through these simple words, the precious gospel of true comfort is laid bare: **“Do not weep!”** Have hope! What a message we’re entrusted with to take to the people of God’s world: the Saviour has arrived. The Redeemer’s come! And in John’s vision he now takes centre stage.

See the Lion

“See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” (5:5) The image of the Lion of Judah was one which many Jews of the day would have associated with the Messiah. Based on an obscure verse in Genesis 49, it carries with it a sense of the returning hero who rightfully takes up the mantle of kingship. And so we have this developing thread - we’re about to witness the one who’s worthy, the legitimate heir, the rightful person, the only one who is able to pull the sword from its stone.

“Then I saw a lamb.” (5:6) It’s one of the most breathtakingly dramatic moments in the whole of Scripture. He hears “Lion” but sees “Lamb”. And this whole book of Revelation is remarkable for the way in which things *seen* interpret things *heard*, as well as things *heard* interpreting things *seen*. What is this lion like, this victorious Saviour, the one who comes to claim his sceptre? In the words of one commentator, quoted time and again by scholars since: *“The lion is a lamb.”* (G.B.Caird).

Seven Horns and Seven Eyes

But it works the other way as well. As John looks he sees the Lamb, bearing marks of slaughter, blood drenched wool at the front, **“standing in the centre of the throne.”** This is an invincible creature who has overcome death itself. **“He had seven horns and seven eyes.”** The book of Daniel uses the “horns of a beast” as an image of power, but there it’s a proud, human, forceful power which over extends itself and fails. Here once again, John employs the number seven to convey a perfection and completeness of power - and the source of that perfection is shown in the combining of “seven horns” with “seven eyes.”

The **“seven eyes”** image has its background in the book of Zechariah, In this book the prophet is longing for Messiah to come bring cleansing to his people. In Chapter 3 v.9 God says, **“See the stone I have set in front of Joshua! There are seven eyes on that one stone... And I will remove the sin of this land in a single day.”** (Zech 3:9). But what have “seven eyes” got

to do with removing sin? Well, the word Zechariah uses for “eye” can also mean “fountain” - through tears, our eyes become the watering holes not only of our bodies, but our souls. Indeed, where those are tears of penitence there’s a strong connection with the forgiveness or removal of sin. Later on in Zechariah 4:10 he talks of **“the seven eyes of the Lord which range throughout the earth”** or alternatively, “the seven fountains of the Lord which flood the earth.” And so there’s sense in which this cleansing spreads through the whole of creation.

Let’s go back to the Lamb. It has seven horns: perfect, complete power. And this power is perfect because it’s combined with seven eyes - or perhaps fountains - which bring forth running water to flood the whole earth. This isn’t power that grabs for itself, but power that gives of itself. In jaw-dropping way that mirrors the helpless tears shed by John just two verses previous, here the tears of Christ have been shed to cleanse each of us from sin. This is the Lamb who was slain. He is the proof that a death has taken place, and with that proof he can open the seals and read the will.

Seven Spirits

But as we read on, John himself interprets the seven eyes as the **“seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.”** How does this fit in?

The idea of the eyes or spirit **“sent out into all the earth”** clearly links with that text from Zechariah where the seven eyes or seven fountains range over or flood the whole earth. And throughout the Bible, not least in Jesus’ teaching, the Spirit is described as cleansing water. So that clearly connects. But last week in Revelation 4 we noticed that the seven spirits were blazing as torches on the seven lampstands of the church. So this imagery of the cleansing Spirit spilling and flowing into all the world brings us back once again to the mission of the church - *our* mission - *us* - filled with the Spirit, *empowered* by God for bold and joyful witness, absolutely connected to Christ, being the place in which his eyes are set, his fountains open, his grace is lived, his healing is offered, and his gospel announced.

People don’t need a war-mongering saviour. Cruise missiles won’t save anyone. People need one who will meet their tears with his tears - who will cover their bloodshed with his shed blood. That’s how the Lamb is revealed to be a Lion. And this is why the Lamb is worthy to unfold the will of Creator God - because he is Saviour not through taking life but through giving it.

“When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... And they sang a new song.” (5:8-9) We know from the psalms that worshippers in the Temple often marked a special occasion with a new song, and this is the new song to end all new songs. It’s never been heard before because there’s no-one like Jesus - no Saviour comparable to him, and here, Jesus’ self-giving death on the cross is revealed for what it is: the central saving act of history.

This vision of John's is given for us - to inspire us and thrill us, and urge us to join that heavenly celebration of *our* Lord. And as we echo the song and let it fill our hearts we realise it's because the Cross of Christ has found *us* as well: **“with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language, people and nation.”** The cleansing Spirit, the eyes of God, the refreshing fountain, has flowed into all the world and found you and me. And she wants to flow out further *through* you and me.

The Lamb is the Lord

Finally, in yet another dramatic turn of events, John hears the voices of ten thousand upon ten thousand angels, and all the company of heaven singing in a loud voice, **“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength, and honour and glory and praise... To him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!”** (5:11-13)

It's the same song that was sung to God himself just a few verses earlier in Chapter Four. The Lamb is God; the eyes of the Lamb are the Spirit of God. Whoever said the Trinity isn't there in the Bible? Here it is once again, breaking out of the pages of Revelation like crystals within a shattered rock. The will is read because in Jesus God has given himself to death. And the will is received because in Jesus the rightful living heir steps forward. This is the power of God. This is resurrection power!

“And the four living creatures said “Amen” and the elders fell down and worshipped.” (5:14)

Justin Martyr describing worship in the Second Century said the Amen was a “shout in applause”. With this word we bind to ourselves the reality of what God in Christ has done for us. It's a word of hope, a word of faith, a word of conviction, a word of courage, a word of joy, a word triumph, a word of victory. It's not something to be mumbled at the end because we don't really know the grammar of prayer. It's a word of affirmation: “This is true!” “Let it be known!” “Let God's glory be revealed!”

Today, will you join that heavenly throng? Will you join *with* them, lifting your eyes, voice, and heart to honour and worship this Lamb who is actually the Lion of Judah - the one who gave himself to be slain for us, yet now alive and worshipped in the centre of heaven's throne? This is the one who is worthy to unfold the very blessings and judgements of God - this is the Lord Almighty.