

Revelation 6

God who Holds Calamity

I was going to begin this sermon by playing the Day of Wrath from Verdi's Requiem, but as I listened to it I realised it's virtually no longer seriously playable having been used as the background music for so many melodramatic and often tongue-in-cheek horror scenes, not to mention the menacing allusions to it in the James Bond theme. Just in case you can't quite place it from memory, here's a snatch conducted by Claudio Abbado.

Apocalyptic Cartoons

I think Verdi might be quite distressed at the cartoon-like quality his music has now taken on, and it's certainly lost some of its original power through "hollywoodisation". But the same can be said for many images of the book of Revelation - of which the Day of Wrath in chapter 6 is one. Another is the "Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse." For some people that phrase immediately evokes End Times preachers with their dire warnings of doom and gloom. Others may recall the Spitting Image parody in which these four characters repeatedly pop up in the midst of tranquil English picnics and the like, just to spoil the party. For others it's a hideous song by Heavy Metal band, Metallica. But as soon as we try to describe these creatures in their mythic state they become static and lose their power. Nor does it help to describe them as belonging to the Last Days. In this sermon I want to show that all of these images were elements of John's own day, and that the challenge for us is to get to grips with them in our day.

So let's look at the breaking of each of the seals in turn because the vision revealed things about *John's* day and we have to ask what does it reveal about *our* day. As the Lamb breaks each of the first four seals, John hears **a voice like thunder**, from each of the four living creatures, saying "**Come**". And each time a fearful horseman appears, possibly having been summoned and sent, but more likely I think, having been released like a horse at the start of a race.

The White Horse: Invasion and Conquest.

The first is a "**white horse. Its rider held a bow and he was given a crown, and he rode out as a conqueror bent on conquest.**"(v.2). Probably this alludes to the Parthians from modern day Iran, who with their famous mounted archers, repeatedly invaded the eastern Roman Empire. Their sacred colour was white, and they made a point of including white horses in their armies.

But what we have most of all in this image, is the idea of *invasion*. This rider is simply a **“conqueror bent on conquest.”** He doesn’t care about rights and wrongs. He’s simply an empire builder who will supplant anything in his way. John’s perspective is Jewish. For most of their history, Israel and Judah were at the mercy of empire after empire: Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and whoever would follow. The Christians John was writing to in Turkey more or less shared this perspective: For centuries they’d been dominated. Yet the image of the white horse shows the futility of these empire builders. Each of them thinks they’re the last, but each will succumb to another like them. And this whole futile process, laden with falling pride and weighty vanity, is held and only allowed by the sovereignty of God.

But what we have most of all in this image, is the idea of *violent invasion*. This rider is simply a **“conqueror bent on conquest.”** He doesn’t care about rights and wrongs. He’s simply an invader who will supplant anything in his way. John’s perspective is Jewish. For most of their history, Israel and Judah were at the mercy of empire after empire: Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and whoever would follow. The Christians John was writing to in Turkey more or less shared this perspective: For centuries they’d been invaded and dominated. Yet the image of the white horse shows the futility of these empire builders. Each of them thinks they’re the last, but each will succumb to another like them. And this whole futile process, laden with falling pride and weighty vanity, is held and only allowed by the sovereignty of God.

How do we apply that to our own day? The last time England was successfully invaded was 1066. It’s hard for us fully appreciate the message. Yet over the past 100 years the world has been littered with violent invasions and takeovers by both empire builders and pretenders: the Nazis, the Soviets, the Japanese, some would say the USA. And then there are the commercial empires: Shell, for example, account for around half of Nigeria’s daily oil production. Such invasion brings prosperity for some and bitterness for others. Since 2006, Shell’s output has been slashed by 25% because of unrest in the Niger Delta - you might say the action of modern day Parthians. More recently, BHP Billiton, who if they manage to take over Rio Tinto will completely dominate the global production of iron ore. We’re pawns in this game, but it’ll affect our lives eventually as prices are controlled by the conquerors.

But take this theme to the microcosmic level and we’re looking at bullies in the family, school, workplace, or community. We hear a lot about gang culture; stories of sexual and other personal abuse crop up regularly in the news; then we see the same reporters baying for the blood of easy targets. These are contexts of invasion, takeover, dominance: conquerors bent on conquest. But John sees that the Lamb of God himself *holds* all these awful situations. He’s been *to* the wall and *through* the wall, *to* the cross and *through* the cross, and now he *holds* those on-going situations, calling upon us to trust in him.

The Second Seal: Empire, “Peace”, and Power

The second horse is “**a red, fiery one.**” (v.4) I think this refers to an actual empire - the Roman empire of John’s own day. So the first horse was all about Empires in the broad sense, but second horse is a specific political reality - and Rome, indeed, is referred to in a hidden way at many places throughout the book as a whole. Red was very much the colour of Rome - especially if you were most used to seeing their armies. We read of the horseman, “**To him was given a large sword**” which in Rome symbolised the ultimate imperial authority, the power of life and death for capital punishment. Indeed, the emperors wore a dagger or sword to show this status.

In the middle of the verse we read, “**Its rider was given power to take peace from the earth and make men slay each other.**” This seems a tell-tale indicator that Rome is in view, because the Empire founded by Augustus marketed itself on having brought the *Pax Romana* or “Roman Peace.” Through Revelation, John sees that this empire has actually “taken peace” from earth. From his perspective on Patmos, John was fully aware of the division and hatred among Judean families and communities over their allegiance to, or rebellion against, Rome. It ended in a bloodbath, not least with the mass suicide of 936 rebels at Massada in 73 AD.

The application? This is about the power of Empire - some of them more totalitarian than others. Nearly all of them profess to bring peace and prosperity, yet through dominance and the rule of absolute power, they end up destroying lives and making gods in their own images. Look at the British Empire. It brought many good things to the rest of the world. In Ghana, the first African country to gain independence, they speak very highly of the British way. The phrase “Pax Britannica” was even used to describe what we brought. Yet the troubles in Zimbabwe are a direct legacy of the effects of Empire and colonialism in Africa.

And look at the parcelling up of land following WW1 and WW2, done by the allies in the name of securing peace. Look at the legacy left by fading empires in the Balkans or Palestine and Israel - here we see where peace has been taken “**from the earth to make men slay each other.**” Or take the example of Iraq - the Pax Americana. These are terrible, terrible realities of human power and vanity. Yet the key thing revealed to John is that however terrible it is to live on the ground through them, God is still in ultimate control.

The Third Seal: Famine

The third horseman rides a “**black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, “A quart of wheat for a days wages, and three quarts of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine.”**” (v.6) Notice the voice comes from “among” the creatures. In other words, John simply hears it as part of the soundtrack to this picture.

The “**scales**” aren’t those of justice, but scales of rationing - this is a famine. The grain is estimated to be five to fifteen times the normal price so inflation is wreaking havoc in the lives of ordinary people. The bit about oil and wine may refer to Emperor Domitian’s attempt to cut down provincial vineyards, partly to grow grain for the famine, and partly to preserve the Italian market. The move was fiercely and successfully resisted in John’s area of Western Turkey, and possibly this cry represents an echo of that campaign.

It’s four hundred years since the last major famine in England, although the Irish famine of the Nineteenth century wiped out a quarter of the population in death and migration. We have such little experience of hunger that we assume John’s Horseman is a thing of the future Last Days. Yet for people in the rest the world famine is a daily fact of life. It’s estimated that 25% of the population of Sudan are malnourished. Many have never known anything else. John was praying and writing *in* that situation. This passage isn’t about the Last Days - it’s about *these* days. The sound of impossible prices and starving people was ringing in his head. The desperate remedies of ruining vineyard or olive groves that would take decades to re-grow were shouting in controversy. Yet through this vision he still knows that God holds all things in his hands.

I don’t see these Four Horsemen as the agents of God’s punishment on the world. The impression I get is rather that they’re released by God - allowed the awesome freedom to do their damage. Yet God is still on the throne, and the seals are being opened by his Lamb - in other words, one who has entered that self same world, suffered at its hands, and burst through in resurrection. That’s why the Lamb is qualified to allow these sufferings to continue - because in Jesus he’s been there and through it.

The Fourth Seal: Death.

Hot on the heels of Famine is the fourth “**pale horse**” of death. When we see the footage of malnutrition, war-mongering, and empire-building across the world, we see the open jaws of death swallowing up all in their path. The fact that God is Sovereign shouldn’t lead us to be complacent about the sufferings of the world. On the contrary, it should give us greater courage, in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ, to do all we can to help the weak and vulnerable and to be passionate about our gospel mission.

The Fifth Seal: Martyrdom & Vengeance.

The fifth seal’s opening gives John a cutaway view of Christians who have been martyred for their faithfulness to Jesus. “**Under the altar I saw the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.**”(v.9) It’s not easy to imagine what John actually saw when we read of these souls under the altar, but I’ll come back to the significance

of that later. The souls are crying out for vengeance: **“How long, Sovereign Lord... Until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”** (6:10)

You and I, by definition, are not in the situation of these martyrs, but many of us have given up things for Christ, and some of us have lost friends or been badly treated because of our faith. It's easy to want some sort of payback - and how much more so in parts of the world where people have houses burnt down, relatives murdered, and so on. John's revelation shows God speaking directly to this situation, and he's fully qualified to do so because he himself bears the marks of slaughter - it's the Lamb who opens the seals.

Consistent with everything else we've seen about this book, John sees what lies “behind” the things of this world. In this world, Christians are persecuted and sometimes killed. What kind of a God can minister to their souls in a meaningful way? The answer is “*Our* kind of God. Because *our* God has himself been murdered for the truth, and has burst through death in resurrection victory. And who can speak to any of us as we bear the cost of Christian commitment? Only the Lamb of God is worthy to open this seal.

But notice how the martyrs are answered: **“Then each of them was given a white robe and told to wait a little longer.”** (v.11). The white robe is probably a symbol of cleanness, healing, freshness, and they're told to wait, or “rest” a little longer. The scene reminds me of tending to a child in the night. I remember years ago when one of our sons had a terrific fever: all the sheets and pyjamas were soaking wet and he had terrible nightmares. I think we changed most of his bed clothes and he settled back down. Here the Lamb, who himself has gone through martyrdom, settles the unquiet souls of the saints who follow him.

But notice that he *doesn't* say they will actually be avenged. Sometimes in our fury, we ask for things God can understand but wouldn't grant in the way we ask. Justice will come of course, and with it a judgement. But he doesn't assure them of a response in the way they seek. Again the question arises: “Who has the moral right *not* to give vengeance?” Only one who has suffered in the same or greater way and who has the same, or greater perspective. That's why only the Lamb of God is worthy to open the seals.

The Sixth Seal: Earthquakes and Guilt.

With the sixth seal there comes **“a great earthquake.”** (v.12) The imagery is fabulous and once again, from our safe perspective we automatically assume this is an End Times picture of the Last Judgement. But that partly shows nothing but our own ignorance. The region John was based had suffered major earthquakes and volcanic disturbances throughout the First Century. In 79 AD Vesuvius erupted. Pliny the Younger described how the sun was darkened and the air smelt of sulphur. John uses more stock in trade prophetic language, but he's certainly describing an experience close those known by his readers.

So what's all this about the Day of Wrath? Notice that it's the people who identify this calamity as God's Day of Wrath - this isn't a title coming from the Lord himself. As happens so often, calamity evokes guilt in us, and we assume we're being punished for all the things we'd previous "got away with." Their reaction is to hide and let the hills cover them but of course it doesn't have to be like that and we don't have to see natural disasters as direct punishments for our sin. The one who allows this disaster to happen is standing right there - Jesus the Lamb of God.

So now contrast the people shown at the breaking of these last two seals: The martyrs are under the altar. They've died, and yet they're safe. The earthquake victims are under the hills. They're alive, yet they're not safe at all. And it raises the question of where are our lives truly safe. And this question comes up time and again throughout Revelation. The Lamb of God is uniquely qualified to pose this question because he took the risk of radical obedience to the Father. It led to his apparent abandonment and certain slaughter, but ultimately vindication and new life.

The Lamb holds the Centre

So let me draw things together. This chapter is a chapter of calamities. In some parts of the world, some of them are every day occurrences. How much more then, should we give thanks to God for the peace and prosperity we enjoy in this country. How much more should we accept the challenge to share radically with those in need. How much more should we stop holding onto our own plans and ambitions and give radically to God's kingdom here at St James, in our neighbourhood, and across the world. How much more should we join in concerted prayer for the needy.

Yet there are ways in which we find ourselves embattled, threatened by the empires of others, or maybe under attack from our own inner world - our own mental or emotional health. There are ways in which we find ourselves starving spiritually or relationally. There are costs we're challenged to meet as part of our Christian commitment. And there are times when bad things happen to us evoking fear and guilt for all the things we ourselves have done wrong.

What John sees as he peers through to this heavenly vision, is that the Lamb of God holds the centre in all these calamities. We can turn to him and find strength in him, and that in turn will enable us to be centres of peace for others. There's nothing unusual or new in any of the situations described in this chapter. What is truly remarkable, and demands our fullest response, is that Jesus, the Lamb of God holds all things in his hands.