

Revelation 1:1-20

The book of Revelation has had a more dramatic effect on its readers and hearers than nearly any other book in the world. Extreme millenarian movements have been inspired by it to wreck destruction. Selective interpretations have shaped major political decisions. Wars have been waged in order to fulfil it. People have constructed an imaginary world of persecution, and then lived as persecuted, because they find authentication to do so from within its pages. A simple Internet search will reveal over 6,600 pages devoted to the meaning of the number 666 and world-wide conspiracies to control the world through bar-coding and chip implants. You might think, “Why read this book that has caused so much harm?” “Why bother with a book that has caused so much craziness?”

Why Bother with Revelation?

The answer is *not only* that this book is in Scripture, so we *must* attend to it; the answer is *not only* that this book has *inspired* countless godly Christians to steadfast hope and courage over thousands of years; the answer is *also* that this book provides a *critical key* for understanding the *spiritual processes* behind our surface world *at any time*; the answer is *also* because this book gives us a *powerful vision* for justice and peace in the kingdom of God; the answer is *also* because this book reveals the heart of God’s mission as *self-sacrificial offering* in order to bring wholeness to his creation; the answer is also that this book challenges us as Christians to live lives that are *different* and lives that *make a difference*.

As we look together at Chapter 1 I just want to work through it and comment on some of the phrases and images John uses.

Revelation of Jesus

The work is designated right at the start, “**The revelation of Jesus Christ...**” It is an unveiling which has been handed to John *through* Jesus Christ. It is a book which bears Jesus’ stamp. Some of the more bizarre interpretations of this book are to do with the occult and magic, but that is *not* how it is intended to be read. This is a book given through Jesus, and every true understanding of it therefore will reflect his love.

The work is the testimony of John, who’s written down what he saw and heard. No-one knows exactly who John was - it’s unlikely that he was one of the Twelve Apostles, though he was clearly familiar with the Fourth Gospel. His work may at first seem to be full of spontaneity with one image tumbling out after another. Yet closely examined we see that it has been very carefully crafted with minute attention to detail. John has experienced life-changing visions, but he has also

processed these deeply in order to convey the fulness of their meaning, and woven them into a complex tapestry of Scriptural allusion and interconnected themes.

Asia

He was writing to **“the seven churches in the province of Asia.”** That is the Roman province, of course: modern day Turkey. We know for a fact that there were more than seven churches here, so why does John limit it to this number? The reason is that throughout the book “seven” is used as a number of completeness: he is writing to *all* the Christians of Asia. Why Asia? Probably because this was where his own ministry had been.

In v.9 he says he is **“on the island Patmos”** - a small and rugged isle that the Romans used as a prison for dissidents. Most likely John had been exhorting Christians to hold back from worshipping the Emperor and getting involved in local pagan cults. But this was considered highly antisocial - indeed, it could be seen as incitement to social unrest - whilst others believed that failure to give honour to civic deities courted danger and hardship, earthquake, crop failure, plague and famine. John was insistent on maintaining the *truth* about God, even if it meant that he stood out from the crowd, and even if he was exiled for it.

Back to vv. 4-8. John has been really knocked back on account of his faith. Any career prospects have long since gone. So what is it that keeps him going?

What keeps John going?

First of all he is *inspired* by Christ **“the faithful witness”** (v.5b). John has been imprisoned because of *his* witness to Christ, but he’s inspired to keep going because Jesus himself is a faithful and true witness to the gospel. Reflecting on the courageous ministry and death of Christ gives John an example to follow and a mentor to look to.

Secondly, he is *upheld* by Christ **“the firstborn from the dead”** (v.5c). There may well have been times when John felt his faith had led him up a dead end. How did it seem when he was on the boat over to Patmos, never again, perhaps, to see the Churches to whom he had so far given his life? But with Jesus there is always hope: he is the one who has triumphed over death, and therefore John was upheld by faith rooted in the fact of Jesus’ resurrection.

Thirdly, he is *encouraged* by Christ, **“the ruler of the kings of the earth.”** (5d) John knew that all power is relative to God’s power; that whatever happened to him was only *permitted* by the supreme power of God; that however much our lives are in the hands of employers, landlords, governments, cultures, or individuals, Jesus Christ is the ruler of all and worshipping him alone releases our souls from every spiritual shackle.

Fourthly, he is *roused* by Christ: **“to him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood...”** The Book of Revelation is punctuated with rousing songs of praise, called forth again and again by the self-giving love of Christ. Things do not always look good for Christians: our faith is misunderstood; our attempts at sharing the gospel are rejected; we are looked down upon sometimes. But when we look to Christ we see one who *loves* us, who has *given* himself for us, and who has *set us free* to stand tall and dignified before God our Maker. That’s when we feel a song rising in our hearts - and no wonder!

Fifthly, he is *commissioned* by Christ: he **“has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father...”** (v.6) No matter how weak, feeble and insignificant the church seemed to be, John could see a glorious purpose and future: **“to be a kingdom”** - people serving God. What is it that motivates our daily lives? Is it to get on in our careers? Is it to put food on the table? Is it to raise a family? Is it to live happy lives? As Christians our primary calling is to *serve* God. We may well do that through these things, and in all sorts of other ways, but that is our core commission: to *serve God*.

Sixthly, he is *looking for the coming* of Christ: **“Look, he is coming with the clouds...”** (v.7) For John, Jesus’ closeness wasn’t so much a matter of *timing* as of *imminence*. Time and again the Bible says, “Don’t become preoccupied with when and where - but *know* that God is so close he could come at any time.” John was a man who lived in the fear of God, which doesn’t mean his primary relationship with God was *defined* by fear, yet he knew God was the judge of all things and all people, and the judge was close, watchful, true, and very just.

Seventhly, he is *rooted in the eternal character* of Christ - and of God: **“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”** (v.8) Alpha and Omega means “beginning and end.” It’s a phrase used with deliberate poignancy of both Almighty God and Jesus Christ throughout the book of Revelation. He is the one who has *always been*. How much more stable can a person be than if they are *rooted* in the one who has been here since before the foundation of the world? He is the one *who always is*. How much more secure can a person be than if they are *held* by the constant presence of the one who is here? He is the one who is *always coming*. The word John uses does not point us vaguely to the future, it describes God as the one who *by his character* is a coming one - always breaking into our lives by his Spirit; always enter our world, whether seen or unseen. How much more *hopeful* can a person be than if they are *convinced* of the coming of God? He comes to answer prayer; he comes even when we neglect prayer; he comes because he is concerned; because he loves; because he *owns* the whole world.

These are some of the things that keep John going. Let’s look at where he was when he first had these life-changing visionary experiences.

Where and When

V. 9 says he was **“on the island of Patmos”** which I’ve already talked about, but v.10 says he **“was in the Spirit.”** On Patmos but in the Spirit - the one phrase refers to his external environment, and the other phrase refers to his internal being. And to be able to make that distinction is so crucial to successful living as human beings - to be able to be at one with God, to hide ourselves in him regardless of the hostility of our external environments.

He says it was **“on the Lord’s day.”** Surely John was a man who prayed everyday, but exiled on Patmos, thirty-seven miles off the Ephesian coast, keeping the Lord’s Day was especially important for him: this was the day when his sisters and brothers in the mainland churches would be meeting to worship. Keeping this day was a way, not only of marking the passage of time, but of maintaining his spiritual linkage with the rest of the body of Christ. Sunday for us, too, is a day to set apart: not only for our own personal sake, but because we are part of a world-wide body of Christ - some of whom meet in easy circumstances, and others of whom meet with extreme difficulty and sometime in real fear of persecution.

The Vision

Then John hears **“a voice like a trumpet... [and] ... turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me.”** Time and again in Revelation we find this pattern: John *hears* one thing, and then *sees* another. The voice is a summons from the Almighty. The vision is the voice interpreted: Jesus, the crucified and risen one, standing among his church and tending their candles.

There are many times when the church looks feeble, weak, or vulnerable but the one who stands among us, the one around whom we gather, is one who has also been feeble, weak, and vulnerable - and now he is acclaimed rightfully as the Almighty God. He is *“immanuel - God with us.”*

He was **“like a ‘son of man’ dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.”** The phrase **“one like a son of man”** would have immediately pointed John’s readers in three directions at once. Firstly, it would have told them that John saw a *human* figure - opening up the Christian discovery that God has come amongst us as a human being; secondly, it would have connected with Jesus’ own self-designation **“the son of man”** - confirming the Christian claim to worship him as God; and thirdly, with the rest of the description, it would have reminded many of the prophetic vision in the book of Daniel, Chapter 7 v.13, in which a “son of man” who represents the people of God comes forward to receive dominion over the whole world. So in one phrase we see the complete solidarity of God with his people through Christ: he is one with us through becoming human flesh, and he is one with his people, through whom we have victory.

He was seen **“among the lampstands”** which represent the church. Jesus may no longer be on earth in the flesh, but he *is* on earth in the church - so long as we remain faithful. He *cares* for the church. He *wants* us to live *for* him, to be *like* him, to be *true* to our calling. He is here by his Spirit to strengthen us. But we have to accept the kind of strength he gives, for his purpose: our victory is something we *only* truly gain through Christ.

The **“golden sash around his chest”** is an indication of his priesthood - his service to God on behalf of God’s people: that’s how dedicated he is to us. His **“head and hair, white like wool”** suggest age and wisdom. His **“eyes like blazing fire”** suggest complete knowledge: this is the one who knows everything about us, seeing right through to the core of our being. His **“feet like bronze glowing in a furnace”** suggest purity of faith and living. This is one who has been through the fire, and also one upon the heat of whose feet all impurities burn instantly to a cinder.

In his hand he holds **“seven stars”**(v.16), relating to the seven churches and possibly overturning the Roman imperial myth of the Emperor’s son who died and was said to now rule over the stars in heaven: Jesus holds them in his hand. It’s worth reflecting on the great and powerful or emerging empires of our day: The United States, Microsoft, AOL-Time-Warner, China: they seem to be so powerful, or will do in the case of China. Yet Jesus holds all their power in his hands. And what about the little powers that do so much to control you and me in our daily lives? The weaknesses and temptations; our economic straight jackets; and so on. Jesus is so much more powerful than them - so let’s offer our lives afresh to him. **“Out of his mouth came a sharp, double edged sword”** - because he is the judge of all. **“His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.”** This is no reflected glory. The glory of Christ shines from his very core, for it is truly the glory of God. **“When you have seen me you have seen the Father.”** said Jesus. And John’s vision confirms this: He *is* the Lord.

John's Response

What does John do when we sees this person? We’re told in v.17: **“When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.”** John is overwhelmed. How heavy is your vision of God? Lord, give us a greater vision of you! At the end of Revelation, twice, John sees angels and falls before them as well. In both cases they rebuke him: “Worship God only!” they say. But here we read that Jesus **“placed his right hand on me and said, “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever.”** Here is there is no rebuke - for it is quite correct to worship Jesus: He *is* the First and Last, the Alpha and Omega, the Living One who *is*. Yet he says **“do not be afraid.”**

What words is he saying to *you*? And what do *you* want to say to *him*? In a moment we’re

going to pray. Let me invite you to focus on the presence of Jesus. How do you visualise him in *your* spiritual imagination? How do *you* respond? And what do you want to bring to him?

Let's pray.