

Revelation 2:1-7

The Book of Revelation is not an easy book. Theories abound regarding it, but I love this cartoon by Rob Portlock. Here a nervous punter, checks his name against St Peter's register, faced with a bewildering variety of doors. Does the Heavenly City come *before* the tribulation, *after* the tribulation, in the *middle* of the tribulation? These questions trouble many people, anxious to make sure they have an accurate map of the future. Of course, as the cartoon shows, it's all a bit of a nonsense. Both map and doors are our own constructions.

So how can we get a handle on this extraordinary book? Well one way is fairly much the same as we do with any other book of the Bible: By reading it against its historical background, by listening to how it might have spoken to its first readers, and by applying that message to ourselves.

One of the great assets for any student of Revelation is the rich archaeological heritage, of the area to which it was written, and this helps us imagine what life was like for the early Christians reading this book. They were living in a time of enormous cultural expansion, ambitious building projects, fantastic patronage. Wealthy citizens vied for the *honour* of paying for new stadiums; cities competed for the *glory* of building temples of the Imperial cult; every inhabitant, every employee, every tenant, neighbour, friend was expected to *pull their weight* and contribute to these efforts - even if it was simply by offering a sacrifice, saying prayers to the gods, or turning up at the parade and joining in.

Ephesus

Revelation begins with letters from Jesus to the Seven Churches of Asia. The letter we're looking is to the Church in Ephesus, so let's look at some pictures from that place and try to imagine what it was like for Christians, who tended to be social and religious dissidents, going against the flow of society.

The city was highly prestigious. It was officially designated the First Landing place for Emperors visiting the Province of Asia. You can imagine how the entourage would be met as they sailed into the harbour. Look at this magnificent pavement made of pure marble!

The pavement, with its colonnade, led to the Great Theatre. It seated over 24,000 people - a remarkable achievement (*) that took over 60 years to build.

This triumphant archway was dedicated to the Divine Augustus, the first of the Roman Emperors, around the time of the birth of Christ. Augustus was canny enough to rarely claim divinity for himself - it was enough of a political gamble to get himself recognised as sole Emperor

and ruler of the world. But he certainly *accepted* the accolade, and so this shows the *eagerness* with which people offered praise and worship on human rulers. Later Emperors, of course, made their worship into a tool for enforcing political and social obedience - which is partly what the book of Revelation is about: how do we maintain allegiance to Christ alone?

This is the magnificent Library of Celsus, built a little after Revelation was written. Imagine the wonder and awe that would be generated by such an achievement. Imagine the pressure of being drawn into the project.

These enormous pillars belong to the Temple of Domitian. Domitian was the Emperor most scholars think was reigning when Revelation was written...

and among the ruins have been found a colossal head and forearm belonging to Domitian's statue. The figure itself would have been some 25m tall - that's over 80' high.

This is a smaller screen theatre called the Odeon, from the 2nd Century.

And here is a brick carving of Nike, the goddess of victory. These carvings, which were everywhere, were not simply decorative. They were dedicated to the gods. They were miniature shrines. They were like talismans.

This row of sculptures simply shows the variety. For every trade, for every occasion, for every transaction and every event there was a dedication to the gods, a prayer offered, a libation poured out. If you wanted to make sure your post arrived intact and on time, you didn't just make the courier promise to pay compensation. You might make him stand with one foot in the water and the other on the land, calling down shipwreck and disaster upon himself should he be dishonest. These were powerful, personal, real and regular ways of binding one's life to the matrix of a pagan world-view. Christians stuck out sorely.

Here is an artist's impression of the Temple of Artemis - one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The platform on which it was built was over 100,000 square feet.

And this is a famous statue of the great Goddess Artemis - worshipped all over the region, but whose greatest Temple was to be found in Ephesus.

Look at those breasts! Eat your heart out Page 3! But this not about titillation....

Look at all those children lined up in her womb: this is about *fertility!* And so commitment to Artemis (or Diana as she was known among the Romans) was absolutely essential for anyone with a longing for fruitfulness or simply a sense of responsibility to the family and society.

But Ephesus was also in danger. They had a great claim to be the foremost city of Asia, yet their harbour had been silting up for decades. All hands were needed to build the civic pride; every commitment was called upon to prevent them being overtaken in prestige by rival cities. Imagine being a Christian in that environment! Your calling was to build the kingdom of God, but

everyday those around you were urging you to build the city of Ephesus. Your commitment was to worship God alone, yet every day you were required sacrifice or pray to any number of other deities. Well, we can easily imagine it can't we - our own lives are not that different. How easy it is for our Christian passion to die down - for us to lose our first love.

Just imagine living there: a handful of Christians worshipping Christ alone - trying not to be drawn into what everyone else was doing, trying to have a new vision of the true reign of God, trying to live out their lives as an alternative heavenly city in the midst of this self-promoting earthly one.

Let's look briefly at some of the message this Church at Ephesus.

Sovereign Lord

Like the other seven letters of Revelation, Jesus begins with a description of himself. In the case of Ephesus he says, "**These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the golden lampstands.**" What an extraordinary image! What a powerful place to start! Here we have transcendence and immanence brought together. "**Him who holds the seven stars...**"

This is God above everything. As I said last week, the Emperor Domitian, whose colossal statue we just saw the remains of, had a son who died young. Domitian had him declared divine and coins were minted showing him playing with the stars. The Roman Emperor was the most powerful man in the world. He could make declarations like that. From then on, worship at the imperial shrine would include honour given to the dead son. But here the Spirit says *not* the Roman Emperor, nor in fact any earthly power, but one who was *despised* by earthly power and *crucified* under Roman rule - *Jesus* - is the one who holds the stars in his right hand: *Jesus the rejected God*, worshipped by a handful of social, political, and religious dissidents, a minority interest is *God above all things*.

And yet this God also "**walks among the golden lampstands**" which represent the church. This is God among his people. This is Jesus with those who love him. This is the Spirit in the body. Not only is the *rejected God* seen as the *true God*, but his *marginalised people* are seen as the *ones among whom God walks*.

Then he says, "**I know...**" "**I know your deeds...**" He knows because he is God and he knows because he is with us. God who is simply transcendent might be too far away to truly know. God who is simply immanent might be too involved to truly know. Jesus is both, and he *knows*. He knows your life and mine. He knows our pressure points. He knows our weaknesses. He knows our desires and our aspirations. He knows all the good things we do and have done.

Faithful Church

And the Church in Ephesus *were* a good church, but they were using too much energy in maintaining correctness. The pressures on them to compromise had perhaps led to an over-emphasis on building and maintaining walls. **“I know your hard work, your perseverance... I know you do not tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles...”** This was a church that put a great emphasis on maintaining the safety of truths - and that's not surprising when surrounded by such temptation to compromise. **“You have persevered... endured hardships... not grown weary...”** You have maintained distinctiveness - kept the evangelical flag flying. Well done!

But you have lost your first love.

It is so easy to spend so much energy on the stuff of maintenance that we lose our first love. One writer said, *“We mistake the journey for its end and the love the road instead of the one who called us to walk on it.”* (Dawn) The Spirit says to the church: **“Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.”** *“I hold this against you!”* Have you forsaken your first love? Have I? Would Jesus perhaps say this about *us too*? Have our lives become too complicated? Has *our* relationship with God simply sunk back into the routines of living a Christian life? The Christians of Ephesus had so many pressures to juggle that their simple love of Jesus had shrunk down to a smoulder. What about us? If you think that Jesus' words could apply to you, then keep listening because this whole service is about trying to find a way to rekindle our passion for Christ.

Peter was a man Jesus had called *away* from his nets. Peter was a man who'd *left* the boat to walk on water. In both cases he had seen Jesus “out there” and he had gone to be with him. Yet in the darkness of the crucifixion Peter had watched Jesus go several places he simply couldn't. He'd boasted he'd never leave him, but when Jesus asked him to pray even for a hour, Peter fell asleep. He'd boasted he'd never forsake him, but when Jesus was undergoing his mock trial, Peter denied knowing him three times. He'd boasted he'd never abandon him, but when Jesus hung on the cross Peter was far away. Peter was a good man, but his first love had run dry. He was no longer *propelled* by Jesus before him. In the days after the death, Peter retreated into the routines of basic living.

Then Jesus appeared to them by the Lake. Once again, he was *outside* the boat. Once again he was talking to them - standing apart, yet standing among them - transcendent yet immanent. Then Peter felt the surge of his first love returning. **“Remember the height from which you have fallen.”** Jesus' Spirit would say many years later through the Revelation to John. Peter flew from the boat, carried by the wave of passion renewed.

Renewing the Vision

Let me just pinpoint five things that were crucial for the renewal of Peter's passion - they may also be significant for us:

Firstly, he caught a *glimpse* of Jesus - in the early morning light of sea shore. And from time to time we too catch a glimpse of Jesus in the grey of our routine existence. Peter caught a glimpse of Jesus and he allowed his heart to be stirred by it.

Secondly, he heard a *voice* of Jesus - "throw your nets over the other side". From time to time we too hear the voice of Jesus - just as he spoke by his Spirit to the Ephesian Church. Is he speaking to you tonight? "Come on: rekindle that first love!"

Thirdly, he accepted *encouragement* towards Jesus: "It is the Lord!" said John. It's so easy to push away the encouragement offered by others: to remain cold and distant, stuck in the boat of our safe isolation. Peter *accepted* the encouragement, and this letter in Revelation was written to encourage us today.

Fourthly, he had stirred a memory. "**Remember the height from which you have fallen!**" wrote Jesus to the Ephesians. Peter *remembered* the joy of being close to Jesus, and his heart was stirred by it. Earlier we saw that clip from Rocky. Of course, as the film progresses Rocky, too, has his memory stirred - the memory of the dream, the memory of the hope, the memory of the possible, and it stirs his heart. Do you have a memory of your former love for Jesus? Let it stir you today.

Fifthly, Peter gave himself to the movement. A wave of energy was pushing him out of the boat and towards the Lord, but Peter had to give himself to it. Later in the Rocky film there's another scene of him training, and instead of being defeated he gives himself to the dream of victory which carries him along. Suddenly he's surrounded by a crowd of children cheering him on. The writer of Hebrews said, "**Since we are surrounded by such a cloud of witnesses, let us let go of everything that hinders our race, and the sin that so easily entangles....**" If you want to have passion rekindled, you must *give* yourself to it.

Will you do that this evening?