

Week 9

A series in REVELATION

10 August Monday

Read Revelation 13:11 - 18

We are introduced to another beast in our reading today. This second monster does the first beast's bidding, building a statue of it (echoes of Nebuchadnezzar's statue in Daniel should definitely be heard here), commanding people to worship it and establishing an economic system enforcing it.

As has been mentioned before, the emperor cult was significant in the time and areas to which John writes. Local government and temple priests (the second beast, some suggest) variously sought to enforce it – at times through sanctions around buying and selling – and may have policed it through some sort of mark showing participation (or lack of) in worship. Those who wanted to stay faithful to Jesus were going to find it came with a cost.

Returning to the first beast for a moment – on several occasions, the first beast has been described as having a mortal wound and coming back to life. A good number of scholars see this as a reference to the Roman Emperor Nero, whose death spawned the myth that he would return from the dead at some point.

Nero's candidacy for the role is strengthened further by the infamous number 666, which, according to Gematria (a Hebrew cipher system), spells Nero's name.

But alongside the 'who's who' of all this, we must pay attention to the series of 'parodies: the dragon, first beast and second beast become a horror-parody of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – sometimes called the 'unholy trinity'; the number 666 is a parody of perfection, which in Revelation's symbolism would be 777; the second beast has two horns 'like a lamb' drawing our minds to a distorted image of Jesus; the first beast is described as fatally wounded and

We are introduced to another beast in our reading today. This second monster does the first beast's bidding, building a statue of it (echoes of Nebuchadnezzar's statue in Daniel should definitely be heard here), commanding people to worship it and establishing an economic system enforcing it.

As has been mentioned before, the emperor cult was significant in the time and areas to which John writes. Local government and temple priests (the second beast, some suggest) variously sought to enforce it – at times through sanctions around buying and selling – and may have policed it through some sort of mark showing participation (or lack of) in worship. Those who wanted to stay faithful to Jesus were going to find it came with a cost.

Returning to the first beast for a moment – on several occasions, the first beast has been described as having a mortal wound and coming back to life. A good number of scholars see this as a reference to the Roman Emperor Nero, whose death spawned the myth that he would return from the dead at some point.

Nero's candidacy for the role is strengthened further by the infamous number 666, which, according to Gematria (a Hebrew cipher system), spells Nero's name.

But alongside the 'who's who' of all this, we must pay attention to the series of 'parodies: the dragon, first beast and second beast become a horror-parody of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – sometimes called the 'unholy trinity'; the number 666 is a parody of perfection, which in Revelation's symbolism would be 777; the second beast has two horns 'like a lamb' drawing our minds to a distorted image of Jesus; the first beast is described as fatally wounded and yet alive again, in ghastly parody of Jesus death and resurrection; and the mark of the beast parodies the 'seal' on God's people in previous chapters.

The problem with parody is that it is deceptive. It acts like the real thing – promising all sorts of things – but it isn't. Jesus said, 'Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves.' (Matthew 7:15) And so we must. In our world, like theirs, there is much that promises life, but only one true source; all sort of voices claiming truth, but only one that is the Truth.

Prayerfully consider, are there places that you have sought life – that have promised life – but have ultimately proved false? Are you aware of any such things currently whispering persuasively of life outside of Jesus?

11 August Tuesday

Read Revelation 14

Sometimes we come to passages that are simply not comfortable. One option is to ignore them. Another is to do some interpretative gymnastics to make them palatable. While another is to allow for the possibility, having thought and studied and prayed, that the Bible may not reflect, at all times, my preferences (acknowledging that if it did, then I have very likely read it poorly somewhere!). In moments where it doesn't, we should allow the clearer parts to keep us centred, and entrust our wrestles, struggles and discomfort into the hands of a good God, revealed to us most clearly in Jesus Christ. This, and the next few chapters, may well be candidates for such passages.

There is much we can and must say, and have said, about genre, imagery and symbolism. Of hyperlinks, of vivid, shocking and cosmic brush strokes, and the importance of avoiding literal interpretations where they are clearly not warranted. There is also much we can say about the need for humbly held opinions considering the breadth and variety of them along with the complexity of the text.

However, we must also acknowledge what is there: in our passage and those to come, at least two things. We must acknowledge something of the weight of God's anger over sin and his commitment to judge and deal with it, however uncomfortably that strikes us. Similarly, we should also acknowledge the wide reservoir of mercy that, victims of wickedness in particular, may equally struggle with. For some, God may seem too merciful and for others not merciful enough. One of the challenges is to try our very best (however imperfectly) to allow the Bible to speak, rather than filtering it through what we think it should or should not say.

Today's passage contains important things. It speaks of the mercy of God that is continually available, the first angel shows that. It speaks of God's faithfulness

to those persecuted – those who resist ‘the beast’ (verses 1-5 show that). And it speaks, in classically apocalyptic terms, of the judgement of God over evil and those who persist in weaving its dark thread in the world (verses 6–20 show something of that).

For the churches in the 1st century, the contrast between those who worship ‘the beast’ and those who don’t, would likely have been key. Following the lamb may lead to death and, what looks like loss, in the immediate – but life and victory in the end. Following the ‘beast’ may look like life and victory in the immediate – but it will lead to loss and death in the end. To a suffering church, this is a magnificently encouraging thought. The question may have reared its head – did I pick the wrong team? We seem to be losing! Is Rome just too strong? The answer is unequivocal; no. No matter how much it looks like the dragon, or the beast, or whatever power structures they animate, are winning, God is working all things towards his purpose of ridding the world of the poison that has infected it. He will be merciful, he will be just and, he will do what is good and right. Don’t worry. Be patient. Hold on.

We can rest in that too. When we see injustice, when we notice the world turning a blind eye to corruption, when manipulation and deception are seemingly rewarded with success and favour, when abuse turns a profit, when deceit pays and integrity costs... we can trust that God is not unmoved by such things but that he is at work and one day will deal with it all. Once and for all. We can trust that he will do what is right, whilst avoiding the temptation to jump too far in our conclusions as to what exactly that will look like.

12 August Wednesday

Revelation 15

The song in the middle is fascinating; it says that the nations will worship because of God's judgements. We tend to see judgement negatively, but this song doesn't. N.T. Wright points out that, 'when the Bible speaks about God judging... it is as much a cause for celebration as for anxiety.' Psalms 96 and 98 speak of all creation singing and rejoicing because God is coming to 'judge the earth'. Judgement is welcomed because it is synonymous with God putting things right, fixing what has gone wrong, banishing all that destroys – making a way for life. It is a good thing – in the same way that weeding a flower bed and removing weeds (particularly those weeds that choke plants – I have a recurring one in my garden) is a good thing, because it creates the environment for flowers to live again.

In the same way, good judges are needed: to arbitrate between the powerful and the weak, to ensure that criminals are held to account, that disputes are resolved, the rights of the marginal are upheld, and that society isn't choked by unchecked weeds. For God to act as judge is a 'good thing' – a 'needed thing'.

Today's passage sets up the next few chapters. The story of God's emancipation of Israel from slavery in Egypt is in the air all the time: it is the song of Moses that the faithful are singing; the Egyptian plagues are in view again; and the 'tabernacle' or, 'portable temple', that Israel carried after being liberated from Egypt, is visible. That whole story is the image bed for much of what is to come.

There are many situations in the world today that cry out for some balancing justice. There may be things in your own life crying out for justice too. Perhaps spends some time bring them to the Lord. Be encouraged; God sees and God cares.

13 August Thursday

Read Revelation 16

The theologian Richard Niebuhr once characterised the ultra-liberal wing of the church as teaching that, 'a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross'. N.T. Wright comments, 'we might have preferred a gospel like that, but it certainly isn't the one we've got... and it certainly doesn't match the world we've got.' The 20th century alone brought us communism, fascism and apartheid. No – we have deep, running problems that require invasive surgery. We must recognise that if God is not angered by such things, then he really cannot be good. Equally, if he doesn't do anything about them, then he really cannot be loving. God, in these passages, is not quick tempered, petty or monstrously vengeful, as some might be tempted to suggest. No. We have here the God who made and loves the world, who came to it and died on a cross to overcome the evil in it, and will not stop until he has rid the world of it, ever holding out his hand of rescue to any who will receive it.

In today's passage, we see the 'bowl judgements', which are remarkably similar to the trumpets of chapter 8 and their vivid use of imagery from the plagues in the Exodus story. In powerfully symbolic terms – with metaphor after metaphor, hyperlink after hyperlink and, at points, in almost 'comic strip' style – it paints a desperate picture. A picture in which grace remains available the whole time, though, in parallel to Pharaoh in the Exodus story, it is refused again and again. The final three bowls show the 'unholy trinity' spreading their dark deception and influence with the amassing of armies at 'Armageddon'. The word can

either refer to an actual place or indeed can simply mean the 'amassing of forces'. The Euphrates River, similarly, having functioned geographically as a protective border, carried the sense of protection. So, its drying up symbolises both the loss of protection, whilst also activating the Exodus story again (i.e. the drying up of the Red Sea as the Egyptian army pursued Israel). With the final bowl, we hear the word, 'it is done' and the finality of it is pictured in geophysical terms. But, as Wright clarifies, 'this is not the collapse of the physical earth, this is the only way to describe the collapse of the entire social and political system on earth.'

There is, then, a bringing to the head of evil and its opposition to God's purposes in the world and those who faithfully work with him. But God is not caught unawares. In fact, there is something of his exposing of this darkness for the very purposes of dealing with it – to 'draw it out'. The next chapters zoom in on this moment, but for now it is worth remembering that whilst Rome was squarely in view, it was also representative of dark oppressive power. This dark power has whistled its tune again and again, which Jesus came to destroy and which his faithful followers were, and are, no strangers to: the devil and all his works. But we should take heart: it is because of God's goodness and God's love that we have chapter 16. Perhaps take some time to thank God for his love – a love that is not soppy or timid but fierce in its pursuit of us, a love that will not allow darkness to have the final word.

14 August Friday

Read Genesis 3: 1 - 15

Take some time to notice the Old Testament backdrop to images and phrases that John uses in the book of Revelation. For those to whom it was originally written, these things would have been immediately clear; the images would have functioned like hyperlinks opening a whole world of meaning. It reminds us, like John Bodily mentioned in talk 1, of the important principle: whilst this book is for us, it was not originally written to us. As you read today, notice the internal links and referencing within the Bible itself.