

Week 11

A series in REVELATION

24 August Monday

Read Revelation 19:1-10

We will all be familiar with one love story or another. It is a central motif of many of the greatest stories, songs, poems and pieces of art in the world. It is the relationships between characters that create the thick texture that compelling stories need, that make them 3D, that bring them to life and keep us interested. Love stories are all around us. And today's passage reminds us of the type of story that we are in. People make the mistake all the time: seeing Christianity as mainly about 'dos and don'ts' or the Bible as primarily a list of rules, 'shoulds and shouldn'ts' or a manual for 'getting into heaven'. Now there are all sorts of things in the Bible, but today's passage reminds us that the most important, the most overarching storyline, is that of love. It is, in a very important sense, a love story.

The contrast between the image of the colourfully dressed prostitute and her lovers, with that of the lamb and his pure bride, dressed in pure white, is vivid, intentional and at the heart of today's passage. We are back in the land of parody again: the images of the prior chapters are a sad and hideous parody of the real thing. They are the 'anti-picture' of Jesus (the lamb) and his faithful Church (the bride) united in marriage. But this is the truer and better story, and John wants the first century believers to see it – to be strengthened by it.

For us, the image can be trickier to understand. Sadly, in our day, marriage does not carry quite the same note of unwavering promise and commitment as it once did, nor indeed the moment when 'oneness' is established in a unique and exclusive way. Mindful of that, what we are meant to see, in this imagery, is the establishment of the highest, most committed, most intimate, most

beautiful and enduring form of relationship possible. And it was a well-trodden road this wedding imagery, both in the Old Testament and in the Gospels/New Testament letters. Again and again, marriage is the image-bed used to talk about God's relationship to his people and, particularly, of the future promise of restoration. It is, after all, as John reminds us in his Gospel, because 'God so loved the world, that he gave his only son...'

I remember a question I once heard: 'if you could have heaven filled with all that you like and enjoy, those you love and care for, and empty of all that troubles or ails you, would it matter to you if Jesus wasn't there?' Now, I'm aware that there are many problems with that question(!) but it does remind us squarely that the prize isn't just 'heaven', that the goal isn't just an 'end to bad things'; but instead, God himself. In Genesis 3, we are estranged from Him and the pages between there and the book we are in, at the other end of the Bible, tell the story of the God who continued to pursue us and who will one day fully restore that broken relationship. Knowing and being known by God, loving and being loved by God, is at the very heart of the story – it's a love story! We mustn't lose sight of that – we mustn't lose sight of the giver for the gifts, nor, as John is reminded at the end of today's passage, the one behind the message for the messenger.

Perhaps take a moment to consider good things in your life and trace them – like you might a sunbeam to the sun (C.S. Lewis) – to their source, to the giver, and allow Him to become the centre of your gratitude. I'm reminded of the invitation to the church in Ephesus, 'remember your first love', amidst the many things that can draw our attention – good things. Let's keep our eyes on Jesus, who is the pearl of great price, the prize, the bridegroom.

25 August Tuesday

Read Revelation 19:11-21

Passages like this likely strike us in different ways. Some may read this and respond with gladness at the victory of God and the sense of justice, for others the same passage may evoke dismay at the seeming violence and absence of mercy. It's likely wise to park any immediate reactions to pay attention to what the text is doing.

With that in mind, it's worth remembering again that symbols are symbols. The imagery of armies and battles are symbolic. We are not meant to look for armies and battles with our natural eyes but, instead, see that the evil which has been allowed to run its course in the world will one day, finally, be brought to an end. One key thing to notice is that the imagery is borrowed and often borrowed with a twist. Many Old Testament passages are being referenced: Isaiah 11 speaks of the Messiah judging with a sword; Psalm 2 speaks of Messiah ruling with a 'rod of iron'; Isaiah 63 speaks of him treading the winepress of God's wrath; Ezekiel 39 speaks of calling birds of prey to a battlefield. Revelation is borrowing – intentionally importing – imagery to draw to mind all that those passages were talking about. And the point being made is that this is the fulfilment of messianic expectation - a point made loudly and vividly, with all the language and imagery attached to that expectation – a point that the first readers would not have failed to see (a reminder again that whilst this letter is for us it was not written to us). So, the imagery is borrowed, and yet... at the same time, there is a twist; the sword is not in his hand but mouth; the blood that stains Jesus' robe is most likely his own blood – as it is all through Revelation; and there is no actual battle in this passage, if you notice, the victory just happens. In fact, as one commentator puts it, 'there seems to

be only one actual battle described in Revelation' – the one we read of in chapters 5 and 12 in which the slain lamb wins through his death, through shedding his own blood, through the cross.

And so, John is doing what Jesus himself did – establishing him as the one in whom all the hopes and promises of the Messiah are in fact fulfilled, through whom the victory of God will be established and justice brought to the earth, but in a way that was different to the expectations of many. Jesus didn't only or firstly have Rome in view, as many of those around him did, but instead a far darker, more sinister, deceptive and deep running evil: the old beast, who appears in our passage again, and the wily dragon who is never far away. A battle? Yes. But not a conventional one, nor the expected one. It's with an evil only conquerable with weapons of a completely different nature, and it's a victory that Jesus would win on the battlefield of the cross, with the sword of truth cutting down every lie.

So, however it may strike us on first read, the point is one that is certainly cause for great hope and encouragement as one commentator helpfully writes: its '...unnecessary to push the literalness of the description. The battlefield language is designed to indicate that a great victory is about to occur.' He means that, with all the power and colour of the apocalyptic genre, John is saying, 'the lamb wins'. And one day that victory over every dark thing – and the structures through which they do their worst – will finally be realised in all the world.

That is deeply encouraging. Perhaps you could pray the prayer we find later in Revelation, 'Amen [meaning "yes" or "I agree"], come Lord Jesus.'

26 August Wednesday

Read Revelation 20:1-6

This passage reminds me of the comment referenced at the beginning of these notes that Revelation is like an extended commentary on Paul's word to the Ephesians: 'For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.' In the last few chapters we have seen the judgement and defeat of those dark characters symbolising evil in the world: Babylon and the Beasts. Our next two readings continue that weeding process with victory over the Dragon and Death itself.

John writes of a thousand-year period where the Devil is bound and those faithful to Jesus will reign with him. What that is, how long it is and when it happens is hugely debated. Some see symbolism here, some see an actual thousand-year period, some think this is happening now, others see it as entirely future. It is certainly not worth being dogmatic given the breadth of thought, but it seems, given John's use of symbolic numbers throughout the book, not unreasonable to expect something similar here rather than just a literal reading. Additionally, given the complexity of timeframe within the whole book, to jump too quickly towards a strict chronological reading equally seems unnecessary. Zooming out to the wider New Testament for a moment, what we see is that: (1) Jesus is currently reigning and that the church in some way share in that with him, and (2) Satan has already been defeated – in Jesus' words, 'the strongman is bound' – and whilst we live this side of the final victory, it has already decisively been won. 'Perhaps', N.T. Wright says, 'what we are seeing in Revelation 20 is the cosmic version of that story.'

It's complex, but as Wright goes on to say, 'we must hold on to the central things that John has made crystal clear: the victory of the lamb and the call to share his victory through faith and patience. God will then do what God will then do...' For the early Church, the charge remained, 'stay faithful to Jesus, don't march to the beat of Rome, in the end, faithfulness to Jesus wins out.' And the same is true for us, 'stay faithful to Jesus, come what may, don't compromise with any form of "Rome"; faithfulness to Jesus wins out.'

27 August Thursday

Read Revelation 20:7-15

This is the end game for the demonic resistance to God's good purposes in the world. John pictures the Dragon being released to do his worst. As in the previous chapter armies are gathered against God's people and presence. The terms Gog and Magog [hyperlink](#) back to a prophetic word in Ezekiel that the people of Israel are to be confronted with an invading army coming from the north under the leadership of 'Gog' from 'Magog'. The story speaks of a moment where God will defeat their enemy and protect his people, but it does so with an air of finality about it. That story is being activated here; the final desperate attempts of Satan, the drawing out of the world's evil, the exhausting and exposing of the kingdom of darkness, will finally lead to the total victory of God. Again, we don't have a battle fought here, we simply have God rightly judging evil and ridding the earth of it. And so, Satan – that Dragon – and Death itself are thrown into the 'lake of fire' to join the Beasts and Babylon. And it's all shocking and vivid and arresting – which, as we know, is par for the course and, in fact, the whole point when it comes to this type of literature.

At the end of our passage, God is sitting on a white throne (poetically pointing to the purity and rightness of his judgement), and books are brought containing the deeds of all who have ever lived and will now be judged according to their lives and choices – only those whose names are in the book of life, mentioned previously by John – will avoid this moment of judgement. The imagery is drawn from Daniel 7 – a key source, as we know, for John. There we have the beasts, the books, the throne and a river of fire coming from it, and the picture being painted is of a final reckoning, a 'weighing' or 'assessing' of all the evil mentioned in the previous chapters. The beast, in Daniel, is

pictured as thrown into the fire but is spoken of in the words 'his power will be taken away and completely destroyed forever.' It seems that the imagery is meant to communicate finality; a complete and final end to the tyranny of evil because of God's final judgement of it. So, the deep poisonous evil in the world will one day hear a final 'No' from God.

For those in the first century church, who through thick and thin remained faithful to Jesus, who had resisted the lure of evil even unto death, those who sought to live out into the reality of their lives the hope of the good news, who sowed into the world the good way of Jesus, whose sins had been removed as far as the east is from the west, this was good news! Their names were in the book of life, the book of the lamb! And moreover, they were to know too that every harmful thing done against them, every brutality of which they were the victim, every horror and injustice would be exposed and righted on that day. Every dragon-like, beast-energised, Babylon-shaped work would be shown and exposed and removed. They could fully trust the God who is both merciful and just. They need not take any of that into their own hands.

For us too, there is much to think on. Whilst we mustn't push it too far – it is imagery and we shouldn't suggest otherwise – we should pay attention to the sense of accountability to which the imagery points; faithfulness to Jesus matters, as does the goodness of the seeds we sow into the world around us. The God we call 'our Father' is also the 'judge of all the earth' and every page of our lives stand open before him. Its sobering, but it's also encouraging. Particularly for those who were, and are now, living under oppressive unjust systems, who cry out for some arbitration, some righting of those wrongs and have no capacity or power or hope of seeing it. For those who are exhausted trying to swim against a tide of destructive and dehumanizing actions.

For those who have had to accept the momentary victory of evil, the miscarriage of justice or the false vindication of those who are truly responsible. For such as those – this is deeply encouraging. There is a God who sees it and will right it.

These things can make us thankful for Jesus, prayerful for the world, mindful of our lives and choices, and full of hope-filled-confidence that all we be made right. Perhaps spend some time there today.

28 August Friday

Read Isaiah 25

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.