

Week 7

A series in REVELATION

27 July Monday

Read Revelation 10:1-7

In today's reading, we have a pause from the distressing pictures of the last few chapters. Instead, we see an angel holding a scroll and we can recognise the repetition in the imagery; similar to the throne in chapter 4, there is a rainbow; similar the vision of Jesus in chapter 1, this angel's "face was like the sun"; and echoing the Lion imagery in chapter 5 he has a roar like a lion. He also straddles the earth and sea – the two spheres of creation. This angel, then, speaks with and represents all the authority of heaven, the creator God.

The angel then shouts, like crashes of thunder, and whilst John hears what is said in the 'seven thunders' (another seven!) he is not given permission to record it. There is much, clearly, that remains hidden or undisclosed. Our sight then, is partial: a state which calls for humility rather than hubris, lightly held convictions rather than over-bearing certainty. There is much about this vision of John's, and of God's work in the world, that remains a mystery. Should we ever think that we have squared that angle, we are reminded again that we haven't; we can try as many times as we want to grab water only to find, time and again, that no sooner do we close our hand on it, it has trickled out! Some may claim certainty here – 'I've got it' – but it's like grabbing at water.

The angel then raises his hand to heaven and makes an oath that things are coming to a climax with the seventh trumpet. Given that we are only half-way through the book, this strongly suggests that we are not meant to read revelation strictly chronologically but instead cyclically, with each different set of seven giving us a different angle to view from, a different lens to see through. In

this sense, perhaps, we see multiple angles on the same things; layers of meaning rather than a timeline. I could tell you, 'slow and steady wins the race' or I could tell you a story about a Hare and a Tortoise, or I could give you an example from my own life, when rushing on my bike led to an accident and a far later than expected arrival. Three angles on the same idea.

This seventh trumpet is said to be the completion of God's mystery; the mystery that every page of the Bible has been talking about, the coming together of long running threads of hope and expectation. You see, this book is not a standalone book – with new and 'odd' ideas – far from it! Yes, it's a genre that we are unfamiliar with and, yes, it can leave us puzzled at times. But Revelation is God doing what he has always been doing – carrying on to completion the work that he has always been doing and always said he would; working to restore Eden from the brokenness and evil that disfigured it.

Could you join that work of restoration today in some small yet meaningful way? Ask God to show you and then keep an eye out.

28 July Tuesday

Read Revelation 10:8-11

So, John is invited to take the scroll from the angel and eat it. He does and it is sweet to the taste but upsets his tummy. Once again, we are sitting deep in Old Testament imagery here, the prophets Ezekial and Jeremiah were asked to do the same thing; eat a scroll, the words of God. Prophets were those who received a message from God to share, but it was more than just parroting heavenly phrases. Instead, they were to 'take it in', in such a way that it became part of them - that they spoke it and 'lived it' out into the world. The scroll, or words of God, tasting like honey was both Ezekiel's and Jeremiah's experience. The psalmist also writes in Psalm 19, 'how sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!' The reception of God's word is a joy to John, but it turns sour because it contains hard things, as we have seen many times in the preceding chapters. The news, whilst good in the end, first highlights the devastation that sin and evil leave in their wake. It shows deep splinters and the invasive treatment necessitated by them. Deep evil and the – at times – sharp justice required to deal with it.

We are not meant to read Revelation and rejoice over every chapter. The full palate of emotions – sweet to sour – should be our experience, too, as it was John's. Not forgetting that it was Jesus', who, knowing something of Jerusalem's readiness to kill him, to collude with evil, did not laugh or mock its downward path but wept over it. He wept over the decisions that those in power were making, decisions that he knew would hurt their own people. Remember, too, that this is the Jesus who is pictured as the slain lamb, the one who suffered with and for the world. He is not casually removed from, but

instead profoundly moved by, suffering. And he calls us to the same, to 'weep with those who weep'. We should be deeply saddened by the wrong we see and the domino effect of brokenness. Sometimes you hear 'Christians' speaking of judgement, speaking against what they have decided is 'sin' with almost glee – a 'they had it coming' kind of attitude. It's just not very Jesus-ey.

What are stories in the wider world today or perhaps closer to home that weigh on your heart? Perhaps bring those things to the Lord.

29 July Wednesday

Revelation 11:1-14

If you read this and felt puzzled then you are in good company; many describe this chapter as one of the most puzzling in an already puzzling book! This is a longer post – I'm sorry!

The measuring of the temple draws from similar moments in Ezekial and Zechariah in the Old Testament. Interestingly, in the New Testament the language of temple very regularly refers, instead, to people not buildings – to the company of those who received Jesus as the promised 'messiah'. The measuring, like the language of 'sealing' or 'marking' in previous chapters, suggests a setting apart for safe keeping. Encouraging, certainly, for those first century churches, who, for one reason or another, had much of their world amassed against them. God knew them, would remain with them, would keep them – though, they may have to go through much hardship!

With that, we come to two rather interesting characters: the two witnesses. Regarding them, one commentator wisely counsels, 'since the opinion varies so greatly... it may be wise not to be too dogmatic about any one view.' Much Old Testament imagery is activated, not least Moses, who also turned water to blood in Egypt, and Elijah, who also stopped it raining and called down fire. The two 'witnesses', like them, speak to the world on God's behalf. And, like we saw yesterday, it's not an easy message (fire from their mouths) and it won't always be welcomed – as has always been true when prophetic types draw attention to profitable but evil systems. Jesus himself wasn't very popular in the end, particularly with the powerful who killed him! While opinions vary,

describing them as 'lampstands' sends our minds to chapter 2, where the seven churches are represented with this imagery. (Zechariah is also in view: lampstands and two olive trees symbolising both being a messenger and the source/power it needs.) It's quite conceivable, then, that the two witnesses represent God's faithful people in their role as 'ambassadors of Christ' in Paul's words.

'Go and make disciples', Jesus said; 'shine like stars', Paul said, 'don't hide your lamp under a bushel', Jesus said; 'You are the aroma of Christ', Paul said (though not all will like the smell, he warns); 'proclaim the Kingdom of God', 'be salt and light', Jesus said. The people of God have an important task; an important role in and for the world.

There are number of other images. The beast is an image quite clearly drawn from Daniel. There, the beast/s refer to empires and kings; here, as we shall see, it seems to point to something of the animating evil that stands behind and works through such things. The phrase, 'time, times and half a time' is taken directly from Daniel, too, meaning 3.5 years but activating the symbolic significance being half of seven (completeness). Finally, the 'great city' is very likely a layered reference to a number of places all at once – places complicit in oppressing God's people: Babylon, Sodom, Egypt, Jerusalem and Rome are, perhaps, all in view.

Puzzling? Yes. Tricky? Yes. An encouragement to the church to persevere in her role of faithfully telling the world about him, prophetically exposing evil and working for good, even when it's runs against the grain? Yes, quite possibly. Certainly, there will be times where the darkness is overwhelming and even eclipsing. Attempts were made to silence early Christians – they were killed at

the hands of Rome and the beastly evil that stood behind it. Similar things have happened since and do, even, today. Attempts to silence faithful witness no doubt happen, too, through means other than military violence – distraction may be a contender among the most silencing weapons we face.

But the gospel has not been, and will not be, extinguished, nor has the church's role in proclaiming it. Across the world, will the church experience hardship animated by spiritual darkness? Yes. Will it need to overcome various silencing pressures? Yes. Will God keep and continue to work through the church, even when it looks finished and done? Yes – because, as Jesus said, 'the gates of hell will not prevail against it'.

Where do you face pressure to hide your light? To lose your saltiness? Perhaps bring those things to the Lord. What an extraordinary role followers of Jesus have, to partner with God's purposes towards making all things new!

30 July Thursday

Read Revelation 11:15-19

The seventh trumpet is sounded with a sense of completion – God's Kingdom has come. Many over the years have interpreted language about the 'kingdom' as being in heaven where God is, with the suggestion that the final goal is to escape the earth and go there. But here we see clearly that the prayer for God's Kingdom to come is instead to do with the very earth we stand on; it is, as we say sometimes, 'God's good and perfect rule and reign' happening here; in a very important way, the future that revelation pictures is an 'earthy' one, a 'this world-ey' one. We hear in this passage very intentional echoes of Psalm 2 which speaks of God's Messiah as ruling over the nations, firm and strong. Kings will give way to him. The political, economic and military powers (and the suffering and injustice in their wake) will give way to him – remembering all time, as we must, that the 'him' is Jesus – the lamb who was slain.

The church, as we have seen, has a very important role in this 'coming of God's kingdom', as we saw yesterday, but it's not a Kingdom with an army sweeping away all who resist, like Rome was, for instance. Instead, it advances with the weapons of their King, with sacrificial love and the laying down of their lives, or as one early writer observed about those who paid the ultimate price for affiliation to Jesus: 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church'. Historically, the more pressed the church and the gospel – the more it explodes into life. One final thing – we tend to hear language of 'judgement' through a negative filter, but in many respects, it is pictured as a good thing – the weeding out of evil, the destruction of destruction, the death of death; it is

God's 'No', to all that breaks and damages and pillages and hurts and steals – to sin's dark thread. Perhaps you could spend time today praying as Jesus taught us to, 'your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' It may be that as you do, you notice small ways in which you can participate with that prayer, remembering as Jesus reminded us, that trees come from seeds – from small things.

31 July Friday

Ezekiel 2:8-3:11

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 up 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.