

THE BOOK REVELATION - SCARY OR WHAT?

Sunday evening 16 November 2008

As we run up to Advent we get into some very serious theology and tonight we are given a passage from Revelation. The Book Revelation is a very scary work, and most preachers - or should I say, most *sensible* preachers - shun it. However, as last week I was talking about the Second Coming of Christ, and our Gospel this morning was all about the Judgement that Jesus will bring when he comes again, then it seems right to spend some time in this great piece of apocalyptic writing.

So let's have a word about the book Revelation as a whole. The New Testament opens with the four Gospels relating to the first coming of Christ, so the Book of Revelation closes the New Testament with the general theme of the second coming of Christ. The Book Revelation is the climax of many lines of individual apocalyptic prophecy running through both Testaments, and it brings to conclusion the revelation of many prophecies yet to be fulfilled.

The vision of the second coming of Christ and the years immediately preceding it are described in Revelation more graphically than in any other book of the Bible. You could say, in crude shorthand, that Daniel describes in detail the period from his own time to Christ's first coming and speaks briefly of the Tribulation and Christ's rule on earth. But the Book Revelation amplifies the great end-time prophecies with many additional details, culminating in the new heaven and the new earth, which tells that there will be no more pain, nor death.

As the opening verses in Revelation plainly state, the book was written by someone called John. From the first century to the present, many orthodox Christians have agreed that he is the Apostle John. Practically all scholars today accept John the Apostle as its author, but there are some who dissent from this view. In the past, such great names as Erasmus, Luther, and Zwingli questioned the Johannine authorship because it teaches a literal 1,000 year reign of Christ after he returns.

Most scholars think that Revelation was written in a.d. 95 or 96. When the question whether to include Revelation in the New Testament canon, early fathers who recognized the book as Scripture include Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Eusebius, Apollonius, and Theophilus, the bishop of Antioch. By the beginning of the third century the book was widely quoted as Scripture. And so we have it today.

OK, but what is it all about? You won't be surprised to learn that there are differing views. The first few chapters are very straight forward. The old Apostle (or the old Bishop) writes sternly to his little Christian communities. Thereafter it gets difficult.

Augustine interpreted Revelation as a chronicle of the spiritual conflict between God and Satan being fulfilled in the **present** Church Age. A liberal variation of this in modern times considers Revelation simply as a symbolic description of God's ultimate victory. In other words, it is possible to read the book as a vast allegory.

A more respected approach regards Revelation as a symbolic picture of **early church** conflicts which have been fulfilled - as distinct from those in the future. This view denies strongly that the book *predicts* the future. Another variation of this view sees Revelation as promulgating principles of divine dealings with mankind, without presenting specific events.

A further view which arose in the Middle Ages is the approach which sees Revelation as a symbolic of the total church history of the **present Age** between Christ's first and second comings. This view was advanced by Luther, Isaac Newton, and others, and has attained respectability in recent centuries. There is of course a problem. Individual interpreters tend to disagree over *which* event a given passage is referring to. Each interpreter tends to find his or her fulfilment of prophecies in his own generation - which is a bit of a problem, for as time moves on you have to keep unstitching the garment and sewing it up again with different thread, if you see what I mean. Many

commentators have combined the historical interpretation with aspects of other forms of interpretation in order to bring out a devotional or spiritual teaching from the book.

Of course there is the totally literal futuristic approach which has been adopted by conservative scholars, who state that chapters 4-22 deal literally with events that are yet to come. They say that Revelation 4-18 describes the last seven years preceding the second coming of Christ and particularly emphasizes the Great Tribulation, occurring in the last three and one-half years before His coming. As I have said before, I am sure it wrong to try to use the Bible as some form of celestial calendar and predictor. Look how inaccurate some of the 'end of the world' predictions have been in the past!

Well, that's the general introduction. You see why this is not a book for the timid.

Now let's turn up the magnification and have a look at our passage for this evening. The book Revelation contains special messages directed to churches in seven specific cities throughout the Roman province of Asia. These cities were important trade and communication centres, which were connected by major roads in New Testament times - they were all in what is now Turkey, and the order in which they are listed shows that the messenger who took the book round would have travelled almost in a circle.

John's use of language in the general address to all of these little Christian communities is very interesting, because it shows that he has done a great deal of thinking about the faith in Jesus the Christ in the near 60 years since the resurrection. Unlike other letter openings in the New Testament, the blessing for his readers here is Trinitarian. Revelation has one of the most fully Trinitarian understandings of God in the New Testament. The one 'who is and who was and who is to come', one of Revelation's unique designations for God, is an interpretation of the divine name YHWH (cf. Ex 3:14), which Jews sometimes understood as referring to the three tenses of the divine

eternity. I was who I was, I am who I am, I am who I will Be - it is the name God gave to himself from the burning bush.

In the opening verses John speaks of God the Father, beginning and end of all things; the seven spirits is one way of referring to the Holy Spirit; and he calls Jesus the ruler of the Kings of the earth. Trinitarian or what? He also calls Jesus "Firstborn from the dead". He was not just the first, He is the one who has supreme authority over the vast family of faith destined to follow Him. John's praise of his Lord is fulsome: Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

This is some of the most powerful praise found in the Bible, celebrating Christ's love, the forgiveness won for us by His blood, and the exalted position to which He has raised us.

And the other imagery. We have seven stars, seven spirits and seven lamps. Seven is a powerful number for John. For one thing, it was the number of years to pass before cancellation of debts - as given in Deuteronomy. There were seven deacons in the early church, and I could go on. Each of the seven elements describing the glorified Christ has symbolic significance. The white head and hair reflect [Dan. 7:9](#) and symbolize wisdom and judgment. The eyes of blazing fire reflect [Dan. 10:6](#) and may indicate a penetrating gaze or perhaps the fierceness of the judgment to come. The feet of glowing metal reflect a common Old Testament symbol of God's glory, found in [Ezek. 1:13, 27; 8:2; Dan. 10:6](#), etc. The voice like rushing waters is a familiar simile in Jewish writings for the power of God's voice, heard often in the Psalms and repeated in [Rev. 14:2](#) and [19:6](#). Anyone who has heard a thundering waterfall can sense why. The doubled – edged sword coming from the mouth of the Christ may reflect [Isa. 11:4](#), which is again a portrait of final judgment. Overall, John's language serves to express the awesomeness of the glorified Christ's appearance and he provides a link, probably deliberately, to the Old Testament prophetic books that

describe history's end.

In John's vision, God voice is recorded directly only twice, here and in chapter 21. The rest of the work is written in narrative form. Here God firmly declares his identity as the absolute sovereign whose purpose is described and the rest of the book sees accomplished.

John writes this at the end of our reading: "When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades."

The Almighty placed his right hand on him - the right hand - the hand of power. God directly commissions John in the prophecy that he is to write. Remember Isaiah was commissioned by the touch of a burning coal from the altar of incense burning before God. Prophetic authority must be established first, if we are to take them seriously.

John says he is commissioned by God himself to write the vision down. John says at the end of the book: "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this book; if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away that person's share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." If God commissions a work, we do well to take it seriously and try to understand it.

Christ calls himself the Alpha and Omega, showing himself Lord of Creation and Master of history. It is Isaiah who calls God the First and the Last - in fact much of John's imagery is borrowed from Daniel and Ezekiel. The real genius lies in the way John has assembled their words into his prophecy.

"The keys of death and hell are to our Jesus given." Many words and themes of our Hymns come from Revelation especially some of the

more modern ones. Keys were a symbol of authority. Jesus has full control over every realm.

The last verse of the paragraph, verse 19, is this: “Now write what you have seen, what is, and what is to take place after this”

Many Bible Scholars say that the key to interpreting Revelation lies in verse 19. “What is now” is reflected in the letters Christ dictates, to be sent to the seven Asia Minor churches, found in chaps. 2–3. And “what will take place later” is a vision of history’s end, correlated with the Old Testament’s prophets’ visions of that time.

Sadly we do not get into the individual message that God has for each of the churches this evening - I remember Laodicea from childhood: “I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth

Do have a potter through the first four chapters of the book. Each of the churches typifies on or other of the types of churches that we know. And we need to consider which one we are. Are we simply pallid and lukewarm for instance, or are we spiritually dead? Have we abandoned the love we first had, have we followed false teaching, do we tolerate false teachers, or are we just weak. All these are charges that are made in the letters to the churches. The words John is commanded to write were addressed to his Christian community - but do they apply equally to us as a church or as individuals? The first four chapters of revelation are easy to understand and are there to help us diagnose our individual and collective spiritual health.

So I commend these chapters to you.

I confess I don’t have much of a clue about the rest.