

## **Who is in charge? (Revelation 1:9-20)**

*With leaders struggling to deal with Covid-19 and a long wait for the result of the US Presidential election result the question: 'Who is in charge?' looms large. Although, Revelation is hard to understand it presents Jesus as the one who is Lord of History and yet also intimately involved in the life of his church.*

### **Who's in Charge?**

We live in a world which seems increasingly to be out of control. Covid-19 is wreaking havoc on our health systems, our economy and our lives. Our countries' leaders are struggling to find the right restrictions and regulations to protect people from the virus and the economy from disaster, but are forced into u-turn after u-turn. It feels like no-one is in control, no-one is in charge.

And in the United States the most powerful nation on earth, the question, 'Who is in charge?' looms large as the results from Tuesday's election have taken so long to be clear and even then are being questioned by Donald Trump.

Again and again leaders seem powerless. So, who is in charge?

To help us with that we are going to be looking at the book of Revelation.

### **Who is Revelation written for?**

Over the next few weeks we are going to be looking at the opening chapters of Revelation, the last book in the Bible. It is a difficult book to read with all its strange images and confusing picture language.

But, it was written for a purpose and so it is important to ask what that purpose was and in particular who it was written for.

The answer is given to us in verse 9. John, the writer, has been exiled to an island for preaching about Jesus. He writes this letter to his 'brothers' and 'companions', those who were like him.

How were they like him? They were those who as followers of Christ shared in the suffering, kingdom and patient endurance.

These are a strange three words that hold together the common Christian experience. To be a Christian is to be part of God's Kingdom. It is to have a faith and confidence in God's ultimate victory over sin and death through Jesus Christ. But it is also to live a life that is still full of suffering and requires endurance or perseverance.

John was writing to Christians that were struggling and under pressure. They were suffering, their faith and churches were under pressure from persecutors all around them.

John writes to help them endure, to hold on to their eternal hope, despite the difficult present realities they were facing.

As Christians in the midst of the pandemic. We may feel that we are suffering. We may be struggling in our faith because we cannot meet up with other Christians. There may be pressures from people around us to compromise or give up on our faith.

This book is for us, just as much as it was for those Christians in the first Century.

### **How should we read Revelation?**

Yet, it is a book that many Christians today find difficult. Rather than seeing it as a source of encouragement and strength in difficult times, they get confused and caught up with the weird and wonderful images described.

How should we read the book of Revelation?

#### **Pictures with meaning**

The first thing to realise is that the images in the book are full of meaning that comes from the way they are used elsewhere in the Bible.

We do this with images today without really thinking about it, because those images are familiar to us.

When we see a 'Poppy', it immediately reminds us of Remembrance Sunday and of all those soldiers who gave their life in the wars. Yet, it is just a flower. The only connection it has with what it represents is the red colour like blood and the fact that poppies often grow in the fields men fought on in World War 1, Western Front.

So, it is in Revelation. Many of the pictures used have meaning because of their association with how they are used elsewhere in the Bible. For the Christians that John initially wrote to, who would have heard the Old Testament Scriptures read many times, these images and their meanings would have been as familiar to them as a poppy and its meaning is to us.

And quite often in Revelation, where it is really important that we understand what an image refers to the writer tells us!

#### **Lampstands = Church**

This is the case in our passage with the Golden Lampstands. Actually anyone who has read the Old Testament, would have known that in the temple there was a lampstand that had to be kept alight by the priests. Over time the lampstand took on a symbolic significance to stand for the temple as a whole, or even as a symbol for those in Israel who remained faithful to God.

It is an image seen in a vision of the prophet Zechariah in Zechariah chapter 4. A vision used to encourage a discouraged and oppressed group of Jews who had returned from exile to Jerusalem and were in the process of rebuilding the temple.

Now, however, in this vision, we are told quite clearly in verse 20 that the seven lampstands are the seven churches. Each lampstand stands for one of the churches that John is writing to.

Together, however, the number 7 also points to completeness. Whereas in the Old Testament there was one lampstand, because God worked mainly through one nation, now after Jesus there are 7 lampstands showing that God is working throughout the world.

John is writing to 7 churches in particular, but the message is also relevant to the universal church around the world and through the ages.

### **Look for the overall impression**

So each image in Revelation has a meaning, but it is important not to get too tied up with the individual pictures and worrying about decoding or working out the meaning of every one.

Revelation is written to encourage and strengthen suffering Christians. It is not written as a puzzle book to solve! As we read it, what is far more important than the meaning of every individual image is the overall impression that the book is trying to put across.

The other day we watched a new Romantic Comedy movie on Netflix called, *Holidate*. The film was made to entertain us and make us laugh. Yet, there were points in the film that were clearly also designed with a deeper meaning. At one point the couple attempted a dance lift that was clearly designed to take the mickey out of another romantic film, *Dirty Dancing*. And at the end of the film there is a scene, where the American woman shouts across a large crowd in a public place to her Australian boyfriend, declaring her true love for him. This was clearly meant to remind us of an older romantic comedy, *Crocodile Dundee*, but with the male and female roles reversed.

Now, Fiona and I could see these deeper meanings because we had seen *Dirty Dancing and Crocodile Dundee* classic films from the 1980s. But, our teenage daughters, who had never seen those films, would not have seen those connections. However, although, they missed out on those deeper connections and meanings, they could still enjoy the film we were watching. It could still make them laugh and entertained them.

The same is true of Revelation. The more you study the Bible, the more connections and deeper meanings you will see in the text. But, what is most important is to take away the overall impression. To be encouraged and strengthened to endure in your faith through suffering.

This is perhaps true when it comes to the picture presented of Jesus in Revelation. There is a whole load of detail about his appearance in the vision, hair as white as snow, eyes of blazing fire, feet like bronze glowing in a furnace and so on...

We can look for the meanings and connections for each individual image, but more importantly we need to take away the overall impression that the vision is given to portray to us.

### **What Impression of Jesus is conveyed?**

So, three quick take aways of this overall impression.

#### **1. In the Midst of the Church**

First of all, we are meant to see that Jesus is in the midst of the Church. The heavenly, Jesus as one 'like a Son of Man' is among the lampstands.

The imagery here and the way Jesus is dressed suggests that he is like a priest in the temple sanctuary tending the lampstand, trimming the wick, topping it up with oil, relighting it and doing everything necessary to make sure the lamp keeps burning brightly.

The point is clear. As the lampstands stand for the churches it reminds suffering Christians, that Jesus has not left them alone to struggle with the distant hope that he will return one day. No he is there in the midst of them, encouraging, enabling and empowering them to be lights in the darkness.

As we go into lockdown at this dark time of year, no longer able to gather together as a church, we can be confident that in the midst of our suffering and difficulties, Jesus is there with us. He has not abandoned us.

## **2. In Charge of History**

Secondly, we are meant to see that Jesus is in charge of history. The hair as white as snow clearly suggests great age and actually comes of the image of God on his throne judging the nations in Daniel 7. Much of the other imagery also comes from Daniel 10, where a heavenly figure explains to Daniel how history will unfold in the coming centuries.

This points to the heavenly figure of Christ as being above and in charge of history. Indeed, when Jesus says, I am the first and the last, he again stresses that in some way he spans the whole of history and verses 4 and 5 of Revelation also emphasise Jesus's control over history and the nations:

"Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood," (Revelation 1:4-5)

Arguably this is the point of the whole of Revelation that seems to present a sweep of God working throughout history. That seems to be the point of what John is told to write about in verse 19:

"Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later." (Revelation 1:19)

For us as Christians still in the world and caught up in the flow of great historical events, of which the Covid-19 pandemic is certainly one! Revelation is written to encourage us that although the world seems out of control, Jesus is still very much in charge.

Our politicians may be unable to control events, but Jesus does. The world will never move beyond his control. The more we grasp this truth, the more we can face the uncertainties and struggles of the present with confidence. The more we can know that Jesus is in charge, the more we need not fear.

## **3. In Control of our Destiny**

The third impression that we can take away is that Jesus is in control of our destiny. The great truth that we all face is that one day we will all die. That in a sense is our destiny.

Yet, this passage reminds us in verse 18,

"I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades." (Revelation 1:18)

Jesus is the only one to have died and be raised to a new eternal bodily life. He as verse 5 says is the firstborn from among the dead.

But not only has Jesus broken free from the prison of death, this passage says he has carried away the keys! He now has the ability to unlock us from the prison of death, which is often called, Hades in the Bible.

So Jesus is in control of our destiny. When we belong to Jesus, death is not our final destiny, rather our ultimate victory is the new heaven and the new earth that the very last chapters of Revelation will go on to describe.

Surely, this is an encouragement to persevere in our faith, no matter what suffering and pressures we might face.

### **How should we respond?**

So, how should we respond to all this?

- **Be encouraged**

In the midst of a chaotic world, where the threat of death and economic catastrophe looms large, we as Christians can be confident that Jesus is in charge of history and in control of our destiny. We need not fear.

- **Be Warned**

At the same time the picture of Jesus is not a cosy comfortable one. He has a sharp double-edged sword coming out of his mouth. And there are messages from Jesus for the churches that as well as encouragement contain warnings and calls to repent.

The heavenly picture of Christ is an encouragement in the midst of suffering, but also a warning against compromising our faith in the face of the pressures of the world.

We need to take his word seriously. So join us in the next few weeks as we look at what Jesus says to the churches.