

Sermon Easter 7 Year C 2022

For these past seven weeks of easter tide, the epistle reading each week has been taken from the Revelation of Saint John the Divine, sometimes known as the Book of the Apocalypse. During this most sacred time as we celebrate the resurrection of Our Lord, the book of Revelation is read for us because it gives such powerful and striking expression to the full implications of the resurrection. The resurrection of our Lord is not some strange moment limited by time and place. It has cosmic consequences. Our Lord's triumph over death and the grave does not impact just a few close friends. It reverberates through the entire universe! The resurrection is not simply about inspiring us to a better, even a more holy life. It crushes the devil and defeats the powers of evil!

It is this 'big-picture' scenario that the Book of Revelation seeks to bear witness to. Through the strange imagery and word forms, we are ultimately to read all this as offering us hope. When people tell me they are reading the book of Revelation, or are struggling with it, I normally (in a somewhat offhanded way) say, well, there is one thing to keep in mind through it all, one thing that really matters: Jesus wins! That really is that take-home message. *Christ is victorious* in his resurrection. And that victory reverberates through the entire cosmos.

Many of you would be aware that the Revelation of Saint John had a tricky time finding its way into the canon of scripture. We can imagine that in part this was simply because it is so different from either the gospels or the letters that make up the bulk of the New Testament. But nothing is contained in the Revelation that is contractionary to what the other New Testament writers set out. It was last to be accepted into the canon. In early lists of books and letters that were in and out of what we would call the New Testament, the book of Revelation sort of comes and goes. It appears in some lists and not others. It was certainly not unique in that regard. But simply because something was added last does not mean it is to be taken less seriously. At any rate, the wisdom and the mind of the church settled that *it did* belong, that it had apostolic credentials, that it had been in continuous use in the church, and that it commended itself to the ongoing life of the church.

One of the striking ideas that comes through this important book is what we hear today: the promise of the Lord's return. Indeed, this is the very last idea that is expressed in the book, and so the very final note that sounds in the entire bible! *Surely, I am coming soon.* I'm not sure about you, but I can't think of the last time in Anglican circles where this article of faith – the Lord's return - was explicitly addressed. In part, this may be due to the default Anglican position of genteel, not-too-much-enthusiasm-please kind of religion. And this is distinct from more 'hot and strong' brands of religion where this article of faith is central to their identity and understanding of the faith. In other words, all too often faith in the Lord's return is seen as a marker of certain 'types' of Christianity, often a fundamentalist form of Christianity, and we think that we want none of that. But we have just solemnly recited the creed together. And in this we have given our public assent to the faith which says that Christ *ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again with glory, to judge both the quick and the dead.* This is our faith. Belief in the Lord's return has not been done away with! The wisdom of creedal faith, as I have said before, is that it says enough without saying too much.

Now, certain theologians have held that belief in an end of the world signaled by the return of the Lord in judgment is one of those ideas - like the Lord's descent into hell and ascension into heaven – which modern man is disposed of. They argue that every reasonable person is convinced that the world will go on as it has done ever since the New Testament gave expression to these ideas. And in the light of some contemporary scientific discoveries around the ever-expanding nature of the universe, the indicators are that all things will come to an end with a whimper, trillions of years in the future.

But of course, science cannot inform the content of *revealed faith*. And theologians which depart from the revelation are constructing a new religion altogether. For faithful believers, we can only accept the content of the faith on its own terms. And this means we accept Christ at his word, that he is faithful and true. Otherwise, we end up with the very tricky position in which we must say our Lord did not mean what he said, in which case he was either deceptive or delusional. Or that the New Testament writers were so ignorant and stupid that they simply missed the point of it all. But this is simply not borne out by the faithful witness of the church and personal lives of believers through the ages, who know Christ's words to be trustworthy. He promised he would return, and in faith, we believe he keeps his promises.

One of the reasons the early Christians lived in such great hope and expectation was their faith in the promise of the Lord's return. This is something we would do well to note. Where we see only darkness when we peer into the future, they saw light. Where we see great clouds of uncertainty, a fog of doubt and insecurity they saw the hope of glory. The reason why so many Christians hold to this so lightly, or are so dismissive of it, is that after 2000 years the promise hasn't been fulfilled, Christ has not returned as promised, so best drop the whole delusion. But the quantity of years between the first and second coming of Christ is *irrelevant*. It is the quality of this time that is the point. We *are* now living in *the last hour* as the writer of the first letter of John says. Following the Ascension of Our Lord, we are in a new era, the era of the church, an era which coincides with the final age of the world, whether it lasts ten years or ten million. The most important event in history has already happened in the first coming of our Lord. Everything else is in reference to this. It is his first coming that divides all time: before Christ and after him. Only one more great event will happen: his second coming. Despite the claims of some religious sects, there will be no more revelations, no more bibles, no more churches, no more saviours until the end of time.

Importantly, the bible does not promise that this last age will be one of sheer progress and goodness. Instead, we are told (indeed, warned), it will also be one of great evil and tribulation, of spiritual warfare between the spirit of Christ and the spirit of the antichrist. All Christians now live in two worlds, two kingdoms: the world and the church; the flesh and the spirit; the worldly man and the new man; and what Augustine called the earthly city and the city of God. And, it must be said, that this tension - the pulling of these opposing forces - is a particular mark of the church of our age, in our context. If we do not sense this in ourselves, then something is amiss.

But the promise of the New Testament, the promise of the Revelation, is that Christ is victorious. The powers of the world, the flesh and the devil do not, in the end, triumph. The great lesson being, then, that it is foolish to put our lot, our effort, our spiritual investment in those things which do not endure forever. In the Gospel of John - in the chapter previous to what we have been hearing the last few weeks - our Lord declares that *there will be tribulations in the world. But be of good cheer. I have overcome the world*. As we come to the end of this glorious season of Eastertide, we finish with one note resounding loud and clear, the ultimate consequence of our Lord's victory: *surely I am coming soon*. A note to which we pray in response: Amen! Come, Lord Jesus!