

7th Sunday of Easter, May 31th, 2025

10.30 Holy Communion

Acts 16.16-34, Revelation 22.12-e, John 17.20-26

Over recent weeks you may have noticed that one of the readings at Holy Communion has been from the Book of Revelation. The preachers have left them well alone – a sane and rational decision you might say, as Revelation has, over the centuries, been the happy hunting ground of what one might politely describe as nutters of various types. But today, I would like to have a look at the portion of Revelation that is set before us – from which you might conclude I am not that I am neither rational nor sane, and perhaps even worthy of being called a nutter. The readings includes the very last words in the bible as we have it. First though a little bit about the book itself. It reports the visions of a Christian named John in exile on the isle of Patmos. Visions were, and indeed are, a well respected way of allowing God to speak – indeed the bible would be a lot thinner if all the visionary experiences were removed from it. John was praying and fasting and reflecting on both scripture and the current state of the world – almost certainly at the time of the persecutions of Nero – and the visions he experienced reflected both his experience, his knowledge of scripture, particularly of the books of Daniel and Ezekiel, and the events he was concerned about. And God spoke to him, probably whilst he was in some sort of trance like state, in a real way that would have made sense to him. Coming forward 2000 years, J K Rowling writes of a visionary experience of her hero Harry Potter in perhaps my favourite quote from all the books of the series that addresses the issue of visions.

Tell me one last thing,” said Harry. “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?” Dumbledore beamed at him, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Harry’s ears even though the bright mist was descending again, obscuring his figure. “Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?”

For John, his vision on Patmos, was a blinding reality. Whilst I have no doubt of the reality of his experiences, the book of Revelation is more than a mere report. It is a carefully crafted literary creation, with a complex structure, many scriptural allusions, the significant use of numerology (for example think 666, the mark of the beast) and much else with which his readers would have been familiar and with which we aren’t. But the overall message of the visions is that the resurrected and ascended Jesus is now Lord of all in heaven and will protect his people and bring them safely into his presence. And that is what the readings have been about over the past couple of weeks. We had a vision of the exalted Jesus in Chapter 5.

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing, ‘To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might for ever and ever!’

In Chapter 7, Jesus with the saints in heaven.

The Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes

Then the vision of the heavenly city from Chapter 20.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

Whilst the records of John's vision must have been hugely encouraging and important to the first hearers, the church realised too that the visions had a lasting significance and through continued use made it a part of scripture.. Putting aside the more lurid (and frankly silly) interpretation of some of the visions down the ages, the Book, in its visions of the risen, exalted Lord of the church and of the saints in heaven, has continued to be of great encouragement and comfort to generation after generation of Christians. And it continues to speak and to give comfort and hope to those struggling to cope with whatever life is throwing at them, that the Good shepherd is on the throne in heaven, their will be no more tears and pain, and all will be made anew.

But back to today's reading. About time too you might say. The visions have ceased. We now simply have voices – the voice of John of Patmos, and the voice of Jesus himself. We hear Jesus say

Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they will have the right to tree of life and may enter the city by the gates.

Here he seems to take up and affirm for a last time the truth of the visions that have gone before – that all those who follow him, will have eternal life and enter the heavenly city. He then goes on

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end..... I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star.'

All of this is worth unpacking. They are the words of Jesus about himself, who he is. As elsewhere we have the introduction "I am". An echo of the Divine name Yahweh – I am what I am or I will be what I will be, a claim to deity so often hinted at by Jesus in the gospels - *I am the Good Shepherd. I am the way, the truth and the life* and so on. Occasionally he is explicit - *Before Abraham was I am* he declared in confrontation with the religious authorities of his day. But here it isn't a phrase used in an argument with opponents. It is simply a stated fact, the assumption by Jesus of the divine. *I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last.* Here at the very end of the bible, it is impossible not to think of the very beginning.

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light

And at the very start of the gospel of John.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one

thing came into being.....The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Jesus, there at the beginning of the biblical story, at the creation of all things. Jesus there at the end. Jesus, the bringer of light, the dispeller of darkness.

Then Jesus talks of himself as the root and branch of David. He is both the root, the source of the kingdom of Israel as the first part of the plan for the salvation of the world. He is also the shoot, the branch of David, the Messiah who was to die for the salvation of all. The one who was before all things, who became incarnate out of his love for his creation. Still in heaven he bears the marks of his humanity.

And finally, Jesus says of himself I am the bright morning star. This is an ambiguous metaphor, used to describe the downfall of an over mighty king in the Old Testament, but also to describe the coming Messiah. Perhaps for John's hearers, and for us, it is a sign of hope, the light that shines brightly just before the dawn, marking the end of the darkness.

Now over the centuries, many would recognise Jesus as a good man, an inspired teacher, as a miracle worker even, and would go no further. The concept that he was before all things, that he was the creator, the saviour, the light of the world is too much for them. In thinking about this C S Lewis famously wrote.

"I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

And the challenge still remains for each one of us – how do we see Jesus, as a good man, an inspired teacher, or as the God who is the source of the created order; God made man for our sake; now risen, ascended, glorified in heaven; God who is Lord of all; the one who calls us to acknowledge that Lordship in all aspects of our own lives. If Jesus really is who John tells us he is, coming to church, being a Christian is no simple pastime or leisure interest, but should be the centre and purpose of our existence.

But if such thoughts overwhelm us, there is another voice in our reading – John of Patmos.

The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let everyone who hears say, 'Come.' And let everyone who is thirsty come. Let anyone who wishes take the water of life as a gift.

In these words, we hear the call of the prophet speaking whilst "in the spirit" for all to come to Jesus; the call of the bride of Christ, his church for all to come to him; the call to come, to come to this risen exalted Lord, to quench our spiritual thirst with the water of life. A call to which Jesus responds.

'Surely I am coming soon.'

He calls us to come to him, but he meets us on the way, The loving father who runs to meet his prodigal, wayward son and throw his arms around him. He comes to meet us as the alpha and the omega, the first and the last but also as the bright morning star, the light that is a precursor to the dawn, a sign of hope and expectation.

And then John again, finishes scripture with the words

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!

The call of Advent for Jesus to come at the end of the age, but also the call for him, by the spirit, to come to us here and now.

And he does come to meet us. Should we but perceive him, every time we open ourselves up in prayer for ourselves and the world he loves, every time we read scripture, he comes with his light of hope, the morning star, that there will be a new dawn. Every time the church sings his praise, he comes to fill us with his Spirit to bring us the water of life to refresh and renew. Every time bread is broken and wine is poured out, heaven is opened to all who believe, and as the light of heaven breaks through, the powers of death and hell are broken, in the world, in the church, in ourselves. The light shines on in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Even so, come Lord Jesus.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen