

**Sermon**

Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> November, 2006

Lessons      2 Samuel 23: 1 – 7      Revelation 1: 4b – 8      St John 18: 33 – 37

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

Come upon us now, O Holy Spirit, and give us holy thoughts which are translated into prayer, holy prayers which are translated into love, and holy love which is translated into life; for the sake of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

**From Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.**

*Revelation 1: 5-6*

Emily Dickinson said that the Book of Revelation was her favourite book in the Bible.

The poet and writer, Kathleen Norris, says she loves this unlovable book. Norris

says:

Revelation is a casebook of visionary excess: a man appears holding 'in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword: and his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength' (1:16); a beast rises out of the sea 'having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy. Voices sound like thunder or trumpets, a throne sits in a sea of glass, surrounded by cherubim and lightning, four angels stand at the four corners of the earth, four horses – white, red, black and pale – herald an apocalypse.

By contrast to the enthusiasm of Dickinson and Norris for the Revelation of John the Divine, the Eastern Orthodox Churches acknowledge the Book as part of Scripture but never read from it in their services. Luther wanted to exclude it from the New Testament and it is the only book of the Bible upon which Calvin never wrote a commentary. Writers from George Bernard Shaw to D H Lawrence have denounced the Book as the ramblings of a drug addict, or a dangerous psychotic nightmare.

The Book of Revelation was written towards the end of the first century. Domitian, Titus Flavius Domitianus, was Roman emperor. His provincial administration was efficient, but after 89AD he ruled cruelly and despotically and tyrannised the Senate. He persecuted the early Christians for their refusal to burn incense as a sign of their supreme loyalty to him. He was concerned about their growing numbers and they were an easy target. His gaols became crammed with his victims and many Christians were executed. The Book of Revelation is a 'dense and bitter code in which the Roman Empire and the Roman Emperor, the supreme representatives of earthly rule, are portrayed, not as the legitimate enforcers of law and order, ordained by God and duly to be obeyed...but as the enemies of God: Babylon the Great, the Beast, the Antichrist.'<sup>1</sup> In the Book of Revelation, Christ is called the ruler of the kings of the world, the prince of the kings of the earth, the King of kings. He is called that because that is what Domitian claimed to be. The emperor demanded that all people of his empire worship him as their lord and god. He used the title *Kurios*, Lord, and he created a day of veneration called the Lord's day. On his coinage, Domitian is portrayed with seven stars in his hand. In the first chapter of the Book of Revelation, Jesus is described as the prince of kings, to be worshipped as Lord and God, and in his hand there are seven stars. The Book of Revelation is not a dangerous psychotic nightmare nor is it the product of a drug addict. It should be read in church services, it should not be omitted from Scripture and it deserves our best efforts to understand it.

St John the Divine called Christ King: the Lordship of Christ was for the author a rejection of the idolatrous claims and immoral behaviour of the powers of his age.

Domitian not only claimed to be god, he was a despot. For St John, *Pax Romanum*

---

<sup>1</sup> Duffy, E. *Walking to Emmaus* p100

was ‘a hollow mockery, a demonic parody of what real human peace, real human community ought to be.’<sup>2</sup> Later in the Book (Ch. 18), we read: ‘Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird.’ This is poetic, metaphorical language at its best! The poverty, the injustices, the suffering children, the tears and the pain, we are told, are too much for God to bear. In the Old Testament, God said to King David, ‘He that ruleth over men must be just, ruling in the fear of God.’ St John wrote of Rome, of Babylon, that it is a doomed city. God will overturn their applecarts:

The merchants of the earth shall weep and mourn... for no man buyeth their merchandise any more: The merchandise of gold, and silver, and precious stones, and of pearls, and fine linen, and purple, and silk, and scarlet... and cinnamon, and odours, and ointments... and wine, and oil, and fine flour, and wheat, and beasts, and sheep, and horses, and chariots, and slaves, and souls of men.

And the fruits that thy soul lusted after are departed from thee... and thou shalt find them no more at all.

The author of Revelation calls Jesus King. The Crucified One is King, is the Lord of the Universe and His Kingdom with its different values is the eternal Kingdom. Of Christ’s Kingdom, we read:

God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things have passed away.

John believed that God was on the side of the marginalised and the powerless. The Book of Revelation is an all-encompassing attack upon the most powerful people on the earth and of their idolatrous self-interest and their contempt for human life.

The slaughtered Lamb, the Victim, is King.

---

<sup>2</sup> Duffy, E. *Walking to Emmaus* p101

It is true, is it not, that emperors, kings, queens and democratically elected governments and all leaderships, however well-intentioned, are liable to be contaminated by the desire to dominate and by personal ambition. It is part of what it is to be human and, though most of us never become despots, we are all of us similarly disfigured by sin. The Chancellor of York Minster, Edward Norman, has said:

The religion which Christ came to deliver is about the inability of men and women to put what is wrong with themselves right. It is about human sin, and the flawed nature of each person which renders everyone incapable of self-redemption. [That] is the spiritual beauty of Christianity – and why it will endure to the end of time.

Pilate asked Jesus, ‘Art thou a king?’ Jesus replied, ‘To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world.’ St John the Divine principally had Domitian in mind, but we are all of us in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. St John wrote: ‘Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood be glory and dominion.’

Recently, I was struck by the words of Sir Simon Rattle on the subject of music. He said:

The most dangerous thing to do to something that relies on peripheral vision is to stare it straight in the face. There are some things one has to glory in their tenuousness, and music is one of them. That’s why so many of us are not enormously verbal. If you try to pin it to the wall, you’ve had it.

If that is true of music, then how much more true it is of God. All this talk of Christ the King and kingship is metaphor. We say that Christ is King and in the Apostles’ Creed we declare that He is seated at the right hand of God the Father. It is all metaphor. God is in our peripheral vision and the moment we try to doctrinally pin

Him down, we've had it. Peripheral or not, the message is profound. Christianity is a religion which deals with human corruptibility and it declares that God saves us and forgives us.

We are called to accept Christ's Kingship, to align ourselves with the powerless and to seek to make the structures of our society and our community instruments of care. There is one question that each of us must face: 'Is He Master and Lord of my life?' No 'ifs', no 'buts', no conditions and no reservations, but 'His up to the very hilt.' Can we with heart and voice sing, 'Crown him, crown Him, crown Him, crown Him Lord of all?' Let me close with the words of John Donne as he indulges himself with biblical metaphor, with the imagery and theology of the Book of Revelation – and shame on those who want to ban it or never read from it. These words of Donne are for all of us:

I shall rise from the dead, from the darke station...and never misse the sunne, which shall then be put out, for I shall see the Sonne of God, the Sunne of glory, and shine my self, as that sunne shines. I shall rise from the grave, and never miss this City, which shall be no where, for I shall see the City of God, the new Jerusalem. I shall looke up, and never wonder when it will be day, for the Angell will tell me that *time shall be no more*, and I shall see, and see cheerefully that last day, the day of judgement, which shall have no night, never end, and be united to the *Antient of dayes*, to God himselfe, who had no morning, never began. There I shall beare witnesse for Christ, in ascribing the salvation of the whole world, to *him that sits upon the Throne, and to the Lamb*, and Christ shall bear witnesse for me, in ascribing his righteousnesse unto me, and in delivering me into his Father's hands, with the same tendernesse, as he delivered up his owne soule, and in making me, who am a greater sinner, then they who crucified him on earth for me, as innocent, and as righteous as his glorious selfe, in the Kingdome of heaven.

Amen.