

Cry Out! Our Response to a Shaking World

Reading Revelation 7:1-14, 9-17; 8:1

Tom Peryer

Before reading this talk, you might like to watch this video <https://youtu.be/YtC-Fnsy4es?si=lgkKVvjBje7mFdQU> which is a song based on the events of Chapters 5 – 7 in Revelation. It is called 'Is he worthy?'



Over the next three Sundays we will be delving into the most challenging parts of Revelation. So far, it has been a relatively easy journey. In chapter 1 a vision of Christ the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the one who is and who was and who is to come.

Then in chapters 2-3 we had the messages to the seven churches.

That was followed by a vision of heavenly worship, with echoes of Isaiah's vision in the Temple. At the centre sharing the throne with God the Father is Jesus Christ, the Lion and the Lamb as Rose reminded us powerfully last week. Incidentally I do recommend that you go to the church website to read the transcripts or watch the videos of the last few sermons. They are well worth following up. But today we enter darker territory and parts of this talk will be darker than usual.

Most of the next 14 or 15 chapters present us with nightmarish visions and dreams of one kind or another, until we arrive at the last two chapters which begin...

Revelation 21:1

(NIVUK) 1 **'Then I saw 'a new heaven and a new earth',**

Perhaps it is helpful to think of Revelation as one of those control rooms where multiple screens are running at the same time, each showing a different location – conflicting images being shown simultaneously.



Only this control room shows not just different places, but different times.

Or we might think of it like looking up the stars...



We see those stars at the same moment in our lives but actually what we are seeing is stars at different points in their history because the time taken for their light to reach planet earth varies. as a non-stop series of films running alongside and over one another. Patrick Whitworth in his book on the Bible says:

'Revelation has both a linear and a cyclical time frame. It is linear in that it looks forward to the end of time; but it is also cyclical, repeating its twin themes of judgment and hope for every age of empire, conflict and crisis.'

RECAPPING CHAPTERS 6-7

Let me first briefly summarise chapters 6 & 7.

In chapter 6, six of the seven seals that kept the scroll rolled up tight are opened.



This scroll was held in the right hand of him who sat on the throne and it had writing on both sides. This scroll is often thought of as the pages of history or the pages of history yet to be witnessed and lived through.

When the first four seals are opened four horses ride out – they have become known as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.



First a rider on a white horse who symbolises conquest; then a rider on a fiery red horse symbolising war; then a rider on a black horse symbolising famine and economic hard times; lastly a rider on a pale horse and this rider was named Death.

Between them, John writes:

Revelation 6:8

(NIVUK) ⁸ **'They were given power over a quarter of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth'.**

The fifth seal is entirely different to the first 4, and reveals a picture of all those who had been killed for their faith, and who are crying out:

Revelation 6:8

(NIVUK) ¹⁰ **'How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?'**



The sixth seal reveals a great earthquake, the sun turns black, the moon turns blood red and the stars fall from the sky. Then the whole of humanity from the greatest to the least run to caves and rocks in the mountain to escape from the 'wrath of the Lamb'.

Then there is a gap or interlude before the last seal is opened. In this interlude there is a description of 144,000 servants of God all from the tribes of Israel.

That is followed by a vision of a multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the land, singing, praising and worshipping God.



These are those who have come out of the great tribulation, but now:

Revelation 7:16-17

(NIVUK) 16 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'

This vision looks ahead to the final one at the end of Revelation.

So far then, we have moved from angels worshipping around the throne, to the unleashing of the four horsemen with all the death and suffering they bring, through to a picture of martyred saints and onto another picture of multitudes of human beings joining the angels and the elders around the throne. Quite a journey. Perhaps no wonder then that the opening of the seventh seal brings silence.

John writes:

Revelation 8:1

(NIVUK) 1 'When he opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour'.

Phew!

Well what does it all mean? The truthful answer as far as I am concerned is "I don't really know" or more accurately "There are bits which make sense but there are bits that are a mystery." And in fact it is going to get worse in terms of the vision and the imagery.

Martin Luther, the man who launched the Reformation in Europe in 1517, struggled with Revelation too. He apparently once said or wrote:

'Everyone thinks of the book whatever his spirit suggests – my spirit cannot acquiesce in this book'.

That is above my paygrade to say anything like that and certainly not from the pulpit. I don't think I could dare to go as far as that. Actually, there is plenty in the book which is more or less straightforward, but let's not pretend that this is true for the whole of the book.

Having said that I also want to say “It’s OK not to understand everything.” Leaving aside faith and the Bible and Christian belief, there are thousands of things I don’t understand or if I vaguely understand them, I can’t get my head around them. Things like calculus in maths, how nuclear fission or the internet works, why 77 million people voted for Donald Trump in 2024, or the fact that we are told there are around 2 trillion galaxies in the universe and that the galaxy we inhabit, the Milky Way, contains 100 – 400 billions stars and at least the same number of planets. At one level I can understand it but at another level it is a mystery to me.

But I don’t need to understand those things and a multitude of others to go about my life safely, making use of hundreds of things that I couldn’t make for myself or understand how they work. I don’t know how the national grid works but I know how to switch on a kettle to make a cup of tea.

That’s true of our faith and the Bible as well. There are parts that are very hard to understand; there are statements and truths that seem hard to reconcile as both being true. But I am not alone in this. In the Apostle Peter’s second letter, when he is writing about end times, throws in this line:

2 Peter 3:16

(NIVUK) 16 ‘He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction’.

Then again take Daniel, a John-like figure in the Old Testament. He had a series of puzzling visions and at the end of one of them he writes:

Daniel 8:27

(NIVUK) 27 ‘I, Daniel, was worn out. I lay exhausted for several days...I was appalled by the vision; it was beyond understanding’.

The American writer and humourist Mark Twain is supposed to have said:

'It ain't those parts of the Bible that I can't understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand.'

It's a witty remark but it has a lot of common sense and truth in that. I have read quite a bit recently where writers and preachers seek to explain and interpret Revelation but for the most part they have lost me or taken me down a rabbit hole. They remind me of one of my favourite Peanuts cartoons.

Over-confident Lucy says to low esteem Charlie Brown:

L: 'I'm trying to draw a political cartoon that will solve all of the world's problems. See here's uncle Sam and here's a dove of peace and here's an elephant and here's a donkey and here's a figure I call the Grim Reaper.'

Over here is a tiny figure I've labelled "taxpayer" and down here is a snake saying "don't tread on me!" Don't you think this will solve all of the world's problems, Charlie Brown?'

(To which Charlie replies in a great and unaccustomed put-down):

C: 'No, I think it will add a few more to it.'

To my simple mind, much of the commentary on Revelation is just adding to the problems and confusion – especially where people are 100% certain they know exactly what this and that image means. Beware of people who are 100% certain of those parts of the Bible which are far from straightforward things.

Instead, it is more profitable to focus on those things in the Bible which are straightforward and easy to understand. But as Mark Twain said focusing on those apparently simple truths can be very disconcerting in a different way. Living a life which is consistent with the words of Jesus to us and the apostles is Intellectually fairly easy, but challenging, bothering, unsettling to live out to the full.

But having said all that let's glean what we can from these two chapters. And I have two very basic very simple points.

1) The world is not as it should be or as we would want it to be. It is a broken world.

These seals remind us that terrible things have happened, are happening and will continue to happen until the end of this present age. They also point to forces and powers that we cannot see with our own eyes. I am sure that all over the world, there are government led activities going on which we know nothing about and which would scare the pants off us if we did. Every now and then something leaks out but for the most part the forces of espionage, counter-intelligence, scenario and war-planning remain shrouded in secrecy. Not to mention the evil activities of criminals and criminal gangs or global companies seeking a world dominance for their products. Whilst it may not be clear to us whether or not the visions in these chapters directly refer to past, present or future, or all three, the plain fact is there has never been a century in the history of humanity which has not seen strife, conquest, war, killings, hatred, famine.

There have been and are many who believe that the world is getting better and that humanity is becoming more humane. True there is some evidence for this. Our punishment systems, our care of the sick and those unable to support themselves, our many scientific and technological advances ... but running alongside these is the relentless panorama of human wickedness which daily parades in front of our eyes. The four horsemen are alive and well and continuing to bring destruction, misery and death. The world has changed a great deal, but the human heart hasn't.

I do not know if we are living in the end times. Every time we have a communion service we say those words "Christ has died, Christ is risen; Christ will come again'. To say that believing it, means we believe there will be a time in history when history and time as we know it comes to an end. Perhaps just as we ought to be aware that every day could be the last day of our lives so we need to be aware that our generation could see the return of Christ. The fact that there have been many foolish predictions about this does not invalidate the thought that one day there will be a last day. And it could be our generation.

Think about this: ours is the only generation, (and by generation I mean everyone from 1945 onwards) - ours is the only generation that could actually destroy a large part or the whole of our planet and living things by our own efforts. In the millions of years of earth's history, that has only been possible in the past 80 years. We could do it in several ways - through several horsemen if you like. We could do it via a horrendous nuclear war, or biological war or a cyber war using weapons and systems we collectively have invented.

We might end up doing it through our collective efforts pumping Co2 into the atmosphere, causing the earth's temperature to heat up causing devastating climate and environmental change. Some of you were present on Friday and saw the film Climate Emergency when numerous experts talked about the very real prospect of wide-spread famine, civil unrest, geo-political conflict because of a climate change especially if we go above 2 degrees of warming.

And only in the past year or so, we have the spectre of Artificial Intelligence with all the warnings coming out that we are in danger of creating a Frankenstein that will break free of our intentions and controls and could end up destroying humanity.

Are these today's four horsemen? These are sobering, worrying, fear-inducing thoughts. At the screening of the Climate Emergency film those present were asked to name their feelings after watching it. These mostly consisted of 'fear', 'anger', frustration' and 'despair'. These are understandable and rational reactions.

In the same way when we read much of Revelation, we might experience the same kinds of feelings but then breaking through into these prophetic scenes of disaster, misery and death, we as Christians are made aware that these scenes are not the final scenes of the drama we call 'The history of the world'. They might be part of the last act, but they are not the finale.

2) Jesus One day the broken world will be mended. Or, rather, a new world which cannot be broken will be created.

Here in the second half of Revelation 7 and supremely at the end of the book is the vision of all God's people gathered around the throne of God full of praise. And some of those praise words make it into our liturgy and songs. They cry '*Blessing and honour and glory and power be yours for ever and ever*'. We say those same words in the Communion Service.

Imagine saying to Pontius Pilate or Caiphas or anyone living in Jerusalem or Rome round about AD 35. "You see this motley bunch of ill-educated, rough and ready followers of Jesus. They are few in number and not much to look at but let me tell you they are going to start something which will be completely unstoppable no matter what you or generations to come throw at it.

This faith, this belief in Jesus is Lord - not Caesar nor any of the Great Kings, Emperors and Presidents of the world. This belief, this faith, this movement will grow and grow, spread and spread until there is not a continent or country that does not have followers. There will not be scores, thousands, tens of thousands but hundreds of millions who will call themselves Jesus followers.

And that is the vision given to John in this chapter and elsewhere. As he writes:

Revelation 7:9

(NIVUK) 9 '...there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language...'

What we are shown and will be shown again is the ultimate triumph of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the punishment and banishment of evil and a completely new kind of life for those who have put their faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. Whatever sacrifices they have experienced in the world, whatever miseries they have known, whatever hardships they went through, especially for the sake of knowing Christ - all that will have gone and we read these wonderful, hope-inspiring words:

Revelation 7:15-17

(NIVUK) 15 '...he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. 16 'Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them,' nor any scorching heat. 17 For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'.

You could put it as simply as this little story.

Some American theological students were playing a game of basketball when they noticed the caretaker reading the Bible and they asked him what he was reading and he said Revelation to which they said, somewhat patronizingly, "you don't understand that do you?"

He replied “sure I do!” so they came back with “well, what's it all about then?’ With that his eyes lit and with a broad smile came the reply ‘Jesus wins!’



And because Jesus wins, we his followers, whom he calls his saints and his servants, ultimately we win too and the four horsemen of the apocalypse and everything else that we see in Revelation will be gone and forgotten. May we live today and tomorrow as if these were our last days and as if we were the last generation with a sense of making every day count.

COLLECT

Almighty and everlasting God, increase in us your gift of faith that, forsaking what lies behind and reaching out to that which is before we may run the way of your commandments and win the crown of everlasting joy; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.



@allsaintswestonchurch



All Saints Weston Church



01225 447663

All Saints Church, Church Street, Weston, Bath, BA1 4BT
office@allsaintsweston.org.uk allsaintsweston.org.uk