

## CHRIST: LORD OF ALL

*Text:* Revelation 1-3

*Occasion:* Sunday Service, OBC

*Date:* 16<sup>th</sup> December, 2018

I remember sitting in class one day, and we were working through a most difficult and bizarre text—Revelation 12: “A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her ... She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns ... The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born.”

This of course, is Saint John of Patmos’ rendition of the Christmas story. It is perhaps, ever-so slightly different from the sanitised stable scene we are most used to, right?! Well, we were discussing it in class, and, drawing off something I’d read a commentator say, I rather wittily said that this year at Christmas instead of being lambs and shepherds, we could get the children to dress up as each head and horn of the dragon, ready to devour the baby Jesus! Wouldn’t that be fun? Well, at least I thought it would be.

Sitting there smugly as the rest of the class and lecturer laughed, very quickly a friend of mine who happens to be a mother piped up and responded, “Well, no, not fun. We never said anything about fun. This passage is not a fun passage at all, in fact, it’s quite scary.” As some who’d first-hand experienced the difficulty of childbirth, the anxiety and stress of the miracle was enough on its own, let alone dealing with a hungry dragon ready to devour your child as soon as it was born!

I quietly added this experience to the long list of times where I have really put my foot into my mouth and learnt a valuable lesson about the importance of reading Scripture together in community.

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But I think that something along the lines of Monique’s experience is what most of us feel when it comes to the Book of Revelation, would I be right? It’s sometimes said that Revelation is either the only book Christians ever read, or the book Christians never read. Personally, prior to this year, I never touched this book, confused by its strange and complex imagery. In the other camp, the camp who *only* read Revelation, it often becomes a source of terror. The power of this book has leaked into the pop-psyche of America and the world, leading to all sorts of strange, terrifying prophecies and predictions of the future.

However, I believe that Revelation (no ‘s’ on the end) is neither of these things, neither a book we read divorced from the rest of the Bible, reading it in isolation, but neither is it a book we ignore and cannot learn from when we do the work. Instead, Revelation is a book of hope, while concerned about the end, mostly concerned with the present. I believe John of Patmos has a wealth for us trying to learn the way of Jesus in 21<sup>st</sup> century Aotearoa which we desperately need.

So, this summer we are going to be doing a short series on Revelation, seeking to hear God speak to us through the terribly neglected part of his Word. Let’s pray.

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When it comes to such a little opened and misinterpreted book such as the Revelation, we might have to do things a bit differently. Over the four weeks will shall have together focusing on this book, my hope is that we can begin to see that this book is a book of hope, of discipleship, and of justice. In fact, my hope is that you can begin to see this book for what it is: a book about Jesus and the gospel, in all its fullness.

The man who lectured on this book at Carey for decades Laurie Guy called the Book of Revelation the ‘fifth Gospel,’ a direct continuation from the previous four. He claimed that no new information is given to us in the Book of Revelation that we did not already have in the Gospels.

Instead of being a book all about the rapture and end times (the ‘rapture’ never actually appearing in the Book of Revelation), we shall see that it is actually a book about here and now, that it was written to its original recipients to inspire them to hold fast to Jesus and to persevere in times of both hardship and complacency. Parts of the book no doubt talk about what is to come, but mostly it was written for this one purpose: to encourage the God’s people that despite what it looks like on earth—where rulers reign oppressive political systems, where society is hostile to the way of Jesus—Christ is in fact the Cosmic King, the True Ruler over all creation. He is the true King of all creation who has overcome evil in the most surprising way and who will hold this evil to account. Revelation shall inspire us to cling to King Jesus, the Lamb of God, even unto death. Does that sound like good enough reason to read the book?

## REVELATION 1 – WHAT IS THE BOOK OF REVELATION?

So, what actually is Revelation? Where did it come from and why is it in our Bibles? This morning we’re going to look at the first three chapters of Revelation, Revelation 1-3 and see what it has to say for itself.

Let’s begin at the beginning, Rev 1:1: “A revelation from Jesus Christ.” We must constantly remember that this book is a book about Jesus, inspired by him, written for him, and addressed to his people. Eugene Peterson writes, “*The introductory sentence of Revelation is ‘The revelation of Jesus Christ,’ not the end of the world, not the identity of the Antichrist, but the centring and recentring act of each and every day ‘Worship God.’*”<sup>1</sup> This sets the scene for the book, a book for and in devotion to worshipping Christ.

Now we read on, from verse 4:

“John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

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 ... the ruler of the kings of the earth.”

After a brief poem about Christ’s return, we read on about who this John is and to whom he is writing to in verse 9:

“I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos ... I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, which said: ‘Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.’”

So what have we figured out so far about the nature of Revelation? Firstly, the book came to a man named John by revelation of Christ Jesus. Second, John is on an island called Patmos and wrote a letter to seven churches in a province called Asia.

A peculiar thing begins to happen when people take up reading John’s Revelation. For some reason, clever, well-taught Christians who understand the basics of biblical interpretation throw it all out the window and completely ignore the context and setting of the book! You don’t need me to tell you that each book in the ancient Scriptures was written by specific people, for a specific purpose, and in the original style and language of the day. These facts change the way we interpret texts, just like anything.

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire: A Conversation in the Ways of God Formed by the Words of God* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017), 368.

You don't watch a documentary the same you watch a romantic comedy, nor does one read the news the same way they read a murder mystery.

Our first rule of reading Revelation: Revelation was a letter written to real people, in real place, amidst real communities and churches and lives and struggles. Whatever we interpret, we must first make sure that it would've made sense to them, to the people whom the letter was written for.

So where is Patmos? Well, here's a photo:



Patmos is a real island in modern day Greece. It looks quite beautiful really, you could go and visit for a holiday and see for yourself. In Roman times, Patmos was a small island characterised by family life and normal Greco-Roman society.<sup>2</sup> Yet John was most likely being kept here as a political prisoner, clearly for causing trouble and civil disruption.

And where is Asia? Well firstly, 'Asia' in Roman times referred not to the Asia we know today (China, India, Japan, etc.) but to province called Asia Minor. Where and what is Asia Minor? Here's a map of the seven churches, all located in modern day Turkey:



<sup>2</sup> For an academic and comprehensive survey of Patmos in Greco-Roman times (even with pictures!) see Craig Koester's brilliant commentary: Koester, *Revelation: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* Anchor Yale Bible 38A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 239-242.

This was the Roman Providence of Asia Minor, located in modern day Turkey. All the seven cities line up along the mighty Roman roads which connected the known world providing great lines of commerce and prosperity. These cities were all significant areas of commerce and culture, the New York, Hong Kong, and London's of the day.

All of this info isn't to test you on ancient history later on, but I'm hoping we can get a sense that these were real, physical places and people, the book wasn't written as a secret code to unlock the future but rather first as a letter to real worshipping Christian communities.

To expand on that a little bit, this all means that John of Patmos could not have possibly been writing about Donald Trump, Russia, nuclear warfare, or North Korea, because these people, places, and nations did not exist!

Dangerous interpretation springs up when we forget this fact, as G.K. Chesterton so brilliantly once said, "*Though St. John the Evangelist saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.*"



*Ruined columns from the city of Sardis*

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Revelation was first a letter to a group of churches in Asia Minor. But another significant difficulty in reading Revelation for us modern people is because as well as being a letter, it is also styled in a genre while very common to the time, all but foreign to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It was a genre known as *Apocalypse*, common among Jewish and Christian communities at the time. Some of the Old Testament fit into the category of apocalypse, portions of Daniel and the Prophets of whom John draws off extensively.

Apocalypses were incredibly exaggerated and elaborate poems about otherworldly realities. They peeled back the layer on the natural world to reveal what is really going on underneath. Theologian T.F. Torrance put it most brilliantly when he preached, "*Apocalypse or Revelation is the unveiling of history already invaded and conquered by the Lamb of God. Apocalypse means the tearing aside of the veil of sense and time to reveal the decisive conquest of organic evil by the incarnate Son of God. Apocalypse means the unveiling of the new creation as yet hidden from our eyes ... a new creation which is the out-working of the Cross.*"<sup>3</sup> It was theological language, language about God. I want to preach like that when I grow up.

Apocalypse, by its genre, was theological, words about cosmic and godly realities, about God. Take N.T. Wright's pithy words, "*When we read a text from Isaiah saying, 'The sun will be turned into darkness, and the moon will be turned into blood, and the stars will fall from heaven,' we ought to know as a matter of literary genre that the next line is not going to be that the rest of the country will have scattered showers and sunny intervals. This is not a primitive weather forecast. This is simply the sort of language that people use to refer to concrete events, but to invest those events with their theological significance.*"

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Apocalypses were full of theological language, but also political. Revelation is a very *political* book, in fact a scathing critique on Rome and her evil ways of being, built on war and conquest, so much so that esteemed biblical scholar Richard Bauckham called it "one of the most effective pieces of political

<sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Torrance, *The Apocalypse Today: Sermons on Revelation* (London: James Clarke & Co, 1960), 12.

resistance literature from the period of the early empire.”<sup>4</sup> So what is it like to read these deeply political texts?

It could be compared to trying to read the political cartoons of 2000 years ago. Take this modern day one for example; anyone with some knowledge of politics and modern states could figure out the lion represents England, the bear Russia, the dragon China, etc. If I say ‘bald eagle,’ what do you think of? America, right? These are intuitive modern day symbols for politics.

What about this cartoon, from the war? A three-headed beast! Sound familiar?



Context is everything in understanding these cartoons. How about this one, drawn after the All Blacks first defeated England in rugby. Show this cartoon to any kiwi and straight away they can tell you what it's about right? But show this same image to a person in Africa who's never heard of rugby, of a flightless bird defeating a lion and without the intuitive context it will make no sense to them! Are we beginning to see the difficulty in reading and understanding a political apocalypse from over 2000 years ago? We don't have any of the intuitive context or understanding.



Hopefully we have been very quickly introduced into the world of the Apocalypse, into the Book of Revelation. It's been a lot of content thrown at you but only so that we can set the scene as we explore this book together, and I just want to add here that if anyone is interested in knowing further or wants to read some research about these features get in touch and I'd love to talk about the book more.

So Revelation 1 reveals to us that Revelation is a letter, written to real worshipping communities in the Roman province of Asia Minor. Instead of being a mysterious prophecy about the future, it is rather a theological and political apocalypse which peels back the layer of space and time to reveal that Jesus is King and Lord over all. Let's read on.

## REVELATION 2-3 – THE RISEN CHRIST ADMITS THE CHURCHES

Of all the unfamiliar passages in Revelation, chapters 2-3 are probably the most well-known. These chapters are where we find the both stunningly encouraging and confronting messages given to the seven churches. It contains some of the most famous phrases and passages we know, such as the image of Christ spitting out the lukewarm Laodicea, or knocking at the door wanting to come in.

In all of these different messages John recounts from his vision of the risen Christ, one thing becomes clear. This glorious, cosmic Christ, the same Jesus walked the shores of Galilee and stilled the storm is

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (London, T&T Clark, 1993), 338.

now exalted as ruler of God's creation, yet still near and close to the church, "never very far from the seven congregations, witnessing their tribulations and their complacency."<sup>5</sup>

It is commonly assumed that during the time John was writing the church was facing widespread persecution and so Revelation was a call to comfort and encourage the church amidst martyrdom and loss of life.

Yet at the time of Emperor Domitian when the book was written, there was not yet systemic persecution of Christians, the government and authorities didn't mind this new sect of Judaism that had sprung up as long as it didn't disturb public life.

This is where the big problem comes in however: John of Patmos was convinced that to live a faithful Christian life, the seven churches were called by Christ *to* disrupt public life, to hold faithful to Jesus despite what the world says. A huge issue for John was the eating of food sacrificed to pagan gods in the local temples.

See in the ancient world, there was no such thing as private religion. Nowadays, society is very careful to keep religion and religious belief to a minimum in the public sphere. Politics, business, and religion are not things we mix.

Yet in the ancient times this was precisely the opposite: religion and religious belief permeated and affected every aspect of public life. The markets you met to buy and trade food were held in temples devoted to patron pagan gods, and there were many, many different gods you could subscribe to. As for politics, the Emperor and Rome themselves were turned into gods and worshipped as idols in a temple. Everyone was expected to pay their tribute and worship towards Caesar in the public square.

This was becoming increasingly complex for the early Christians who had devoted their allegiance to the one Lord Jesus in the late first century AD in Asia Minor. Clearly there was division about what was the best action to take. Some said it was fine to take part in these rituals because of course you didn't *really* mean it, but others had a very different stance. Hear what the risen Christ says to the church in Thyatira, "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols" (Rev 2:20). This leader in the church of Thyatira Jezebel clearly thought it was fine for the Christians there to take part in normal Roman life and morality. John of Patmos did not...

We see that for these churches, while there was no doubt resistance and hostility towards Christians (John does even mention a martyr Antipas in 2:13) the key issues was not that these early Christians would lose their lives for their faith, but instead would become complacent or compromise their faith.

We're going to finish this morning by examining what Jesus says to the final church of Laodicea:

"I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked ...

... Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me" (Rev 3:15-17; 19-20).

Did you catch that message? Not so subtle right? I will spoil this for you now, this isn't a very subtle book! It's not meant to be.

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<sup>5</sup> Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of Saint John*, BNTC (London: A&C Black, 2006), 44.

The original word for ‘spit out’ literally means ‘to vomit;’ so Jesus is saying that because of their complacency and because of their wealth he is about to vomit them from his mouth. Yet he also offers them time for repentance and to turn around. To eat with someone in their home was sign of deep respect and friendship.

There is a lot to be said about us in the West reading this passage. I think it should terrify us.

How often do we claim to be self-sufficient? to not *really* rely on God for all matters? In this country compared to the rest of the world, we are the rich, we are the wealthy who most of the time go about life not thinking too much about the systems of injustice, about the humanitarian and ecological disasters that our comfortable lives are built off. The sweatshops and child works of the third world only appear on our television screens in charity adverts, not in the malls we shop at.

Hot and cold are both useful properties for water, but tepidness is not. Participation in systems that keep people poor and make us rich off the backs of others comes about not by specifically evil intent but by a ‘whatever’ attitude towards ethical consumption. It’s not as if we intentionally participate in systems like slavery, but we just don’t give them too much thought. It echoes other words of Jesus’ found elsewhere in the Gospels: “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” ... Jesus looked around and said ... “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mark 10:21b-23).

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Yet there is also a profound message of encouragement in these chapters, and I believe the entire book of Revelation.

See, these churches were tiny blips in the vast Roman Empire. This civilisation was quite literally the mightiest empire the world had ever known. Their legionaries were fearsome, their political power incredible—we still talk about the Romans with awe and reverence today. Their monuments and buildings are still standing, ancient power which still takes the breath of modern people away.

These seven churches were tiny congregations, all located in some of the most powerful and significant cities of Asia Minor. Remember, we are talking about the New York’s and Hong Kong’s of the day, huge cities full of diversity, power, and status. What did a congregation of a few house churches, following this obscure Jewish rabbi from the small province of Judea have against such formidable forces as these? The confessions of the church declared that ‘Jesus was Lord,’ yet on the ground it very much seemed like Caesar was the king, that the Emperor was the ruler of the world.

John peels back the layer to reveal the true nature of things: Christ really is Lord. Listen to the many ways he describes Jesus in chapter 1:

“[H]e placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!” (Rev 1:17-18).

He is the one whose

“feet [are] like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice ... the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he [holds the] seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance” (Rev 1:15-16).

This is the Lord we serve, Christ *Pantokratōr*. *Pantokratōr* is Greek word for Almighty, the ruler over everything, powerful and immovable. John paints the true image of Jesus, risen and exalted, Lord over all. While on the ground it may seem like Caesar is king, Jesus truly is Lord.

What seems to be ruling in your life? Is it some sort of sin or temptation you feel as though you will never defeat? Is it the disappointment of unanswered prayers to heal a sickness in a loved one? Is it the

condescending way in which your faith is treated at work causing you to cringe in front of your colleagues when they ask what you did on Sunday?

These are discouraging times for the church. It seems every other day there is another snide comment about the church in the press, and it's increasingly a hostile and secular world out there. People ridicule religious belief, and find the way of Jesus totally irrelevant to everyday life. In fact, so do most Christians. What do we conclude amidst these forces of culture and belief, watching as our Sundays shrivel up and decline?

One option would be to pray fervently for the '70s to come back, right? I've noticed that there is a lot of talk about the '70s and '80s here, about the time where the Spirit moved so powerfully in this place. A wonderful time no doubt.

Yet, I had the most disturbing conversation that I just can't get out my head. We were talking about this time of revival and renewal many decades ago, 40 or 50 years or so. And a comment was made, "Yes, the Holy Spirit was really moving back then. But now it's up to us."

My dear friends, it most certainly is not up to us. It was never up to us.

We do not serve a distant or removed God, we do not lose sight of God's power even when in the world out there it seems so many things have the place of Lord and Ruler. We serve the risen Christ, Christ *Pantokratōr*, Lord over all. He is never very far from the congregations of this city, of the faithful saints in Tauranga and Otumoetai, no more than he was to those early churches in Asia Minor so many years ago. Behold, this God is at the door knocking.

Ask honestly deep in your heart this morning, what would Christ write to this church? What would he write to you? Would he be glad and praise your steadfast faithfulness, or would his warning be far more grave?

I think we are going to have to relearn what it is like to be a small, tiny counter-cultural community who offer an alternative society to the worlds. It's hard for the church to lose its power and influence over society, but it's already happened. We are going to need to learn what it is to be 'God's little people' again. What does it mean to live and follow Jesus, ruler of all, in a world that so desperately screams the opposite?

Dear believers; behold the Lamb has conquered and rules over all. Amen.

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Revelation is a book of worship, full of many beautiful songs, sounds, and praises of worship to the Lamb. So, I want to send us out with this benediction from Revelation 7. Each week we shall pray and use these passages in our worship as we explore Revelation together. You read the text in bold/underlined.

"Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb."

**"Amen!**  
**Praise and glory**  
**and wisdom and thanks and honour**  
**and power and strength**  
**be to our God for ever and ever.**  
**Amen!"**