

FOLLOWING THE LAMB

Text: Revelation 4-5; 19:1-3 *Occasion:* Sunday Service, OBC *Date:* 30th December, 2018

This morning we enter further into John's Revelation, this marvellous and elaborate book which I hope is beginning to capture our imaginations. Today we will be taking a look the "central and centring vision" of Revelation: chapters 4-5; the vision of God on the throne and the Lamb.

Here we are beginning to enter the truly apocalyptic section of the book. If you cast your minds back to our first opening of Revelation you will well remember that Revelation is part of a common genre at the time of writing known as *apocalypse*, wild and vivid poetic books which tell stories about theological—God-infested—realities, language and imagination which invests itself in a God-centred world, peeling back the layer of our normal vision to reveal true cosmic reality. Apocalypse is also political language, much like trying to read the political cartoons of ancient Roman society.

Revelation 4-5 contains one of the most profound and incredible reflections on Christ which shall frame we see Jesus when we read the rest of the book, and also give us insight in the way we are to follow him in 21st century Aotearoa. Let's pray.

Lamb of God, speak to us this morning. Eternal Spirit of Jesus, open our ears, hearts, minds, and lives to hear the Word speak to us once again today. Amen.

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Perhaps the first thing that should strike us about Revelation 4-5 is the vast array of worship we experience as we are lifted up into the throne room with John. Turning his attention from the risen Christ speaking to the churches in chapters 1-3, John sees a door standing before him in heaven, and by the Spirit is taken up into a heavenly court room.

In this throne room John sees an array of worship. Striking are the mysterious 24 elders who are seated on 24 thrones surrounding God, dressed in white. The identity of these elders has been long debated, but what is clear is that they represent God's people, the number 24 being a multiple of 12. The Book of Revelation is riddled with all sorts of numbers, often repeating in many different ways. Far from being mysterious codes which we use to interpret the future, they act as symbols, each number symbolising something. The number 12 always represents God's people, echoing the 12 tribes of Israel or the 12 apostles.¹ Another example of the use of 12 is in the famous 144,000 who stand before God in Revelation 7, 12x12x1000, in other words a lot of God's people! As another example, the number seven, used in our passage to describe the seven spirits of God, represents fullness and completion, 7 being the cycle of the week and creation.

These 24 elders are in company with another group of strange imagery, the four living creatures. Now, John's original audience simply knew their Bible's far more than the modern Christian, John being Jewish himself most likely having committed large parts of the Hebrew Scriptures to memory. For any reader familiar with the prophets, the four living creatures would immediately send off alarm bells signalling the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel 1 describes a vision the Old Testament prophet recalls,

"I looked, and I saw ... what looked like four living creatures ... Each of the four had the face of a human being, and on the right side each had the face of a lion, and on the left the face of an ox; each also had the face of an eagle. Such were their faces." (Ezek 1:4-11 NIV).

Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Daniel appear to be favourite books of John's. Here's an astonishing statistic: Revelation has within it 404 verses, and within those 404 verses 518 allusions to the Old Testament.

¹ For a table detailing the symbolic significance of all the numbers in Revelation see: Michael J. Gorman, *Reading Revelation Responsibly* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 18-19. I would highly recommend this book as a very accessible and valuable introduction.

John's imagination is completely saturated in the Scriptures, everything he lives and writes oozes from his biblical imagination. It also poses as a warning: anyone who hopes to interpret the book needs to know the previous 65. John's imagination is soaked in Scripture.

All these great and wonderful creatures look upon the one seated on the throne and worship, singing, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come" (Rev 4:8b).

This is, in essence, the message of Revelation: worship God and come out of the culture. Revelation is constantly asking us, drawing a binary—to whom does your allegiance belong? To your country or your state, to pleasure or to complacency, to your partner or your career, or to God?

Revelation does not let us divorce ourselves from our lives, to remove the cosmic realities of our everyday actions. Revelation forces us to take hard long looks at ourselves, and sections of our journey together through it might get uncomfortable. John's apocalyptic lens shines and exposes the areas of our lives we neglect, the dusty corners and shady, forgotten rooms behind doors we'd rather keep shut.

When you talk to me about Revelation, I want to hear about how it is speaking to *your* life. In the time you spend, things you read, thoughts you give voice to—to whom does your allegiance lie? Is it to God, or is it other things? We see that in the throne room of God that *all things* sing praise and honour to God and to the Lamb, bowing down before him, and what John is trying to say is that we cannot loose ourselves from the earthy and uncomfortable reality of these spiritual, heavenly visions.

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Worship is infused in chapters 4-5, calling us to reflect on how our everyday actions have cosmic consequences. So the two questions for us this morning are: who is it they worship? and how are we to live in light of this?

I. First we get an image of throne with someone sitting on it. This figure is not named *per se*, but it clear this figure is God. 4:3 describes this figure and their surroundings, "And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like emerald encircled the throne." This is poetic, apocalyptic language; the one on the throne is dazzling like precious gems, evoking the splendour of God's presence and echoing God's well-known promise to Noah via rainbow.

Then, at the start of chapter 5 we get an astounding passage.

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. Then one of the elders said to me, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." (Rev 5:1-5 NIV)

Here a scroll containing the mysteries of God is introduced to us, and its contents so wonderful that John weeps at the thought that they might not be known. No one in all creation is able to open the scroll, no mighty warrior, no brave angelic being is worthy to do until ... until one of the elders comforts John "Do not weep! The Lion of Judah has triumphed—he shall come to open the scroll." We turn ready to see the king of the jungle, expectant to see a mighty lion. We all know how the story ends when the hero comes back to beat the enemy.

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. (Rev 5:6-7 NIV)

John hears about the Lion that has conquered, yet turns to see a Lamb. He hears of one thing, but sees another.

Lamb-power is not the power we expect, to perhaps even want, in the world. Lamb-power is not even the power we expect from the Book of Revelation. We hear tales of judgement and destruction and we picture a vengeful God, hurling thunderbolts at people who've upset him, fickle and angry.

This is not the God that John sees in the throne room, this is not the God that we know and follow as Christians. The Lamb has seven horns—representing fullness of power—and seven eyes—fullness of insight—yet it is totally subversive about what we think about real power. God has purchased and redeemed all people in the world, every nation not by lion-power, but the blood of the Lamb. The true victory is won not on the glory of the battlefield but in the backwards, shameful practice of the cross.

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Lamb-power flips everything on its head. In chapter 19, manifestations of evil and imperialism come together one last time in order to try defeat the God of justice and peace. It is a futile battle as Jesus rides into conquer; 19:11 reads,

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and wages war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God ... Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron sceptre." ... On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written:

KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS. (Rev 19:11-16 NIV)

To some, this militaristic image of Christ feels wrong, "too alien to be applied to Jesus of Nazareth, Prince of Peace."² The white horse was indeed a strong military symbol—Roman generals would ride a white horse at the front of a victory procession returning from victorious battles. Yet, this is not really the case, because John has already revealed to us the true nature of Christ's conquest in chapter 5. "The death by which he conquers is his own, the once-for-all offering of his life on the cross. John uses all of the traditional messianic imagery, but he consistently asks the hearer-reader to interpret the Lion as the Lamb, as he himself does, even in this bloody scene."³

Revelation flips on its head what we think we know about judgment and power, victory and justice. On the surface, Christ here as the rider of the white horse appears foreign to what we think we know of Jesus, but when we read closer we see it is a self-giving Lamb who has won.

For one, Jesus the Conqueror fights not with a literal sword, but the sword of his mouth, the Word of God which he himself is. He is winning by self-sacrifice, by the giving of himself. Second, the word for 'rule' which quotes Psalm 2 also means 'to shepherd' and lead, evoking the beloved 23rd Psalm—the Lord is my shepherd I shall not want, his rod and staff they comfort me. As Revelation 7:17 reads, "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'."

Third, and most stunningly, there is something else really important we miss if we read this text at a surface level. Notice this, Christ rides into the 'battle' with his white robe dipped in blood. He has blood on his cloak before the fighting even begins.

The battle has already been won on the cross, the enemies of God overcome not by their own death by the death of the Son, the sacrifice made for all. For while we were still God's enemies Christ died for

² M. Eugene Boring, *Revelation*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1989), 196.

³ Ibid.

us (Rom 5:10). He rides into this final battle having already conquered at the cross, defeated even death through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. As one commentator writes again, “*This is simply what has happened in the Christian confession as such, that the Christ [the Messiah], the triumphant military king, is Jesus, the crucified man of Nazareth, who was crucified not as preliminary to his victory but as his victory.*”⁴

This is how God reveals himself to us as Saviour, not through brute force but through the victory of Lamb-power. This redefines how we see victory and triumph, for remember it is the Lamb who has conquered. The true victory is won not on the glory of the battlefield but in the backwards, shameful, horrid practice of the cross. This is who all the heavens and earth worship (Rev 5:13).

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So how do we live in light of this? What does it mean then, to follow not a lion, but the Lamb?

II. Let us return to a theme we’ve touched on before. If you use certain metrics, it appears the church in the West is in a time of crisis. As good evangelicals, birthed from revivals and tracing our roots back to times of church vibrancy and growth, we often see success as numbers: numbers of converts or baptisms. Historically we’ve seen great times of evangelism and expansion. We love overseas mission and see the great commission as our primary goal. Churches like ours were often birthed out of zealous, charismatic revivals, and we long to see large numbers of people come to Christ. So when we feel the force of dominant cultural trends, when we see our young people leave the church in droves and witness the rapid decrease in numbers, we therefore feel like failures. We feel as though we haven’t reached the world for Christ.

Now, let me make a few things clear. For one, a drop in church numbers is objectively bad, I understand that; objectively, we want as many people to know Christ as possible. But there something deeply disturbing that begins to happen as people grow more and more insecure about the decline of church stats.

Cultural and society in the Western world have been undergoing major, major shift in the last 150 years. In fact, it’s hard to overestimate how much the world has changed. In the last 500 years, Western society has gone from thinking religious belief was the only way to view world—where a worldview without a higher power was inconceivable—to the very opposite, where any belief in a higher power is inconceivable. These cultural winds have been in motion in various spheres for many generations now, we are simply seeing their fruit. In short, everything has changed, and have been changing for a long time.

Christendom, the period where the church and Christianity had control over society, is now over. In fact, in places like New Zealand, you could argue it was never there. Can anyone guess the decade in which church attendance was the highest in NZ? ‘40s, ‘50s, ‘80s? It was actually in the 1890s, peaking at 30%. We have never been in control over the salvation of religion of this nation and that is even more so the case today. There was no golden era of the church.

What do we have control over? We have control over how we respond to the rise of irreligion and the death of Christendom. Christendom is a very different thing from Christianity.. In these times, what does it mean to follow the Lion of Judah who comes as a Lamb?

I have a grave fear, friends, I have a fear (and I’m not alone) that when we feel the force of secularism and the winds of change, we enter defence mode; we curl up and cringe, being desperate and nobly insecure to see our neighbours come to know Jesus. In this mind set, we call upon God to send down his best lion-power.

⁴ Boring, *Revelation*, 196.

We think up dramatic acts to get God's attention, plans for fasting and prayer, large scale rallies and focus on public evangelism. We complain to Carey (anyone read the listening Hui report?) that they need to train more leaders in 'evangelism' because we are looking for strong, charismatic people to guide us. We commodify worship; possibly one of the biggest tragedies of 20th century Christianity, we turn our Sundays into a product to sold, fit with the best children's programs and worship music. We are all in the constant search of the most attractive, young, new, hip, vibrant church. The quest to commodify our worship continues, sanctuaries become 'auditoriums,' congregations 'audiences,' and 'worship' music. We think to ourselves, 'I wish God would use some lion-power right now,' smugly looking onto the world who has obviously abandoned all morality and tradition and make our disapproval publically known.

There is a cancer growing in the body of Christ, a vicious desire to grow the tribe and boost our influence. Militant and competitive attitudes run wild in this insecure climate. The church across the road is no longer family but competition. In this jungle of the world with so many dangerous beasts lurking we feel as though we desperately need to turn to our own lion-power.

It is in these times we need to ask ourselves the question: what does it mean to pursue Lamb-power, following the one who wins the victory not but strength but sacrifice, not by force but by vulnerability.

If we have any faith in all in who Jesus is and who he says he is then we can forget our insecurities and numbers games. He shall call whom he shall call into his community, the church, and he shall save whom he shall save—regardless of what we do. As Chesterton once wrote, "*Christianity has died many times and risen again; for it had a God who knew the way out of the grave.*" Bringing people to Christ was never up to us, it is up to him, to his self-revelation.

Following the Lamb means to be self-giving. It means to sacrifice one's own comforts, reputation, and prestige in order to seek the lost, to be with those who society forgets, to keep an open home. It means to not chase after security and comfort, second houses and comfortable careers—in a nationwide housing crisis how many of us have empty holiday homes that go unused?

Following the Lamb means to go towards the people, to set up camp in the neighbourhood. It means to invite others into our homes, people from school or work who we don't even like, to meet them in the places they are. Instead of trying to make someone come to a church building on a Sunday, why not invite them over to your house, be generous and feed them, go where they are.

Following the Lamb means to embrace weakness and vulnerability. God's people were never the smartest, quickest, most-up-to-date, in fact anything but. But they are never plagued by an insecurity to be cool, to chase anything the world values because they knew they absolute security was in their adoption into the family of God.

Following the Lamb means to pursue justice. The Word of God *will* hold evil to account and God detests inequality and social injustice. In a nation where wealth is increasingly going to the top few percent and the bottom lagging further behind, how can we be agents of God's work to bring about biblical justice in our world? It means to advocate for these people, fighting against legislation or attitudes that mistreat the homeless or vulnerable members of society.

God has revealed himself not as lion but as Lamb, and I think we are in desperate need to relearn that. Lamb-power is a radically subversive form of power, based not humanity's finite grandeur but on God's eternal glory, won by total sacrifice. We are people of the cross, the community of the crucified one, who has victory not by avoiding shame and suffering but embracing it. These are the profound mysteries of the Lamb who arrives to conquer with the blood of his own sacrifice already shed.

To finish with some concrete application, I think there are two things we can start to do, learnt from the Book of Revelation to help us reverse this deadly attitude which ails the contemporary church. The first is the act of *hospitality*, and the second the act of *trust*.

As the Lamb conquers in Revelation 19, a banquet is served, the wedding feast of the Lamb to which all those who didn't worship the beast are invited. Sinners, rejects, outcasts gather at the final table this side of eternity to partake in God's subversive victory. *Hospitality* is a value God's people need to reclaim, to be keeping open home. This week, invite someone round, someone who makes you uncomfortable. The holidays and summer season can be a lonely one for so many: open up not only your home but your life, be available to listen to people and share a cup of tea. Hone your listening skills; listen not to reply but only to receive, to hear deeply the pain or joys of the other person. Get deep, care for people. Be *hospitable*. Stop inviting someone to a building on a Sunday but first to a place they would want to be.

Second, Revelation repeatedly shows us: God is the one with the power, the Lamb is the one who saves, not us. In fact, God's people in the book are relatively useless, they don't do much expect wait for God. They *trust*. Bringing people to Christ was never up to us, it is up to him! to his self-revelation! We cannot continue this attitude of insecurity and despair in the church simply because people aren't coming to faith the way you want them to! *Trust*, trust God to save and instead do what he tells you: love and worship him with your whole life and love others. If we all spent half an hour each not worrying about the latest baptism statistic or census result instead learning how to pray this nation would be transformed.

Remember dear friends, we are people of the cross, the community of the crucified one, who have victory not by avoiding shame and suffering but embracing it. These are the profound mysteries of the Lamb who arrives to conquer with the blood of his own sacrifice already shed. "To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!" (Rev 5:13) **Amen.**