

## REVELATION AND JUSTICE: ‘COME OUT’

*Text:* Revelation 18      *Occasion:* Sunday Service, OBC      *Date:* 6<sup>th</sup>, January, 2019

‘Bagpipes for stragglers’—this was another one of Laurie Guy’s phrases to describe the Book of Revelation. Revelation, in fact, like most of the New Testament, was written from the perspective of the underside of history, from the lowly and oppressed. It is like the sound of bagpipes for these people, visions of God’s reign and justice full of mystery and beauty, sending shivers down our spines.

Our text for this morning is most likely the most intense we are going to have time to look at. It pulls no punches, and represents Revelation’s apocalyptic visions of judgement which so many of us find difficult and hard to explain, apocalyptic not referring to something about the end of the world but in fact the vivid and poetic genre Revelation was written in.

This morning we turn our attention from the glorious visions of God that John recalls in chapters 1-5, first of the risen Christ near the seven churches and then of God on the throne and the Lion who comes as Lamb. These central depictions and descriptions of God and the Lamb do not change for the remainder of the book; Jesus is still the Lamb who wins by Lamb power. *Let’s pray.*

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Today we are going to read through Revelation 18. We shall work through it section at a time and draw out what John of Patmos might be trying to say to us today.

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendour. With a mighty voice he shouted:

“Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great!  
She has become a dwelling for demons  
and a haunt for every impure spirit,  
a haunt for every unclean bird,  
a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal.  
For all the nations have drunk  
the maddening wine of her adulteries.  
The kings of the earth committed adultery with her,  
and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries” (Rev 18:1-3).

Well, we are really in the thick of it now! In such an already much neglected book passages, like these stand as totally ignored by most Christians and preachers and, as I hope we shall see, this cannot do.

So what is John on about here? Well, firstly he is drawing from all sorts of Old Testament language to describe a vivid portrait of an evil empire, Babylon a common biblical symbol for imperialism and empire. What virtually all scholars agree on is that Babylon the Great depicted here, is Rome. This alluring, magnificent, yet horrid depiction of the prostitute/harlot is a vivid parody of the Roman Empire, very much like a strong political cartoon. One scholar calls it Rome’s *exposé*. So what does John think of Rome and her politics, of her glorious splendour?

Clearly, it’s not good. First we read of the angel’s curious description that the city of Babylon has become a place where foul creatures and demonic forces gather. This is very clear Old Testament language, echoing sections of Isaiah and Jerimiah.

Then we get new characters introduced, the ‘kings of the earth’ and ‘merchants’ who clearly benefit off Babylon’s might. Roman rule had indeed been good for the wealthy and elite of Asia Minor, the province the book was written to. ‘Peace’ or *pax Romana* (which was peace enforced by the threat of Roman destruction) meant that commerce was able to boom and trading increase. The famous Roman

roads brought new lines of connection and business for the elite of the seven cities, making the provinces rich.

Yet John is not fooled by the lux exterior of these elite. Despite their opulence, John reveals that they are utterly debased. Verse 3 reads, “For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her.” The world is in bed with the power and luxury of Rome and drink from her cup. Earlier in chapter 17, John describes the exact contents of this wine cup: “the woman [Babylon/Rome] was drunk of the blood of God’s holy people, the blood of those who bore the testimony of Jesus” (17:6).

John is scathing in his critique of Rome: that her supposed prosperity and comfort is actually built off the blood of God’s people and partakes in all sorts of foul and evil practices.

Then I heard another voice from heaven say:

“Come out of her, my people,  
so that you will not share in her sins,  
so that you will not receive any of her plagues;  
for her sins are piled up to heaven,  
and God has remembered her crimes.  
Give back to her as she has given;  
pay her back double for what she has done.  
Pour her a double portion from her own cup.  
Give her as much torment and grief  
as the glory and luxury she gave herself ...  
... Therefore in one day her plagues will overtake her:  
death, mourning and famine.  
She will be consumed by fire,  
for mighty is the Lord God who judges her (Rev 18:4-8 NIV).

Verse 4 reads, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues.”

This is key to the life, witness, and mission Revelation calls us to and is one of the main reasons we need this book so badly: unbelonging from empire. ‘Come out,’ unbelong; this is the posture to which God’s people are called, to unbelong from empire. Now, what do I mean by that?

At the time of Revelation in the Roman Empire, particular religious practices were in place that deeply impacted civil and public life. It was a particular form of worship and patronage known Roman imperial cult. Under Augustus, the practice of emperor worship sprung up. Rome and the Emperor were turned into gods, fit with their own temples, sacrifices, and assemblies. For the cities of Asia Minor John’s original audience were in, the imperial cult was a way to pay tribute and show their gratitude to Rome for her ‘peace and prosperity,’ becoming a source of civic pride and honour.

Religion was not a private affair in ancient times as it is today. Everything was permeated by religion and religious belief, from the food you ate, the temples you met at, and markets you traded in. You couldn’t simply opt in and out of the pagan religious practices if you wanted to be part of everyday society.

Some thought it was fine to participate in everyday religious society, to pay tribute to Caesar and worship at the temples because it didn’t *really* mean anything. John’s Revelation has none of this; to participate in those systems is to take part in the beast itself. To perform simple everyday acts such as eating food sacrificed to pagan gods or paying tribute to the imperial cult were not simple innocent acts but rather, John apocalyptically peels back the layer to reveal the true spiritual and evil forces at work.

Everyday simple acts are not as innocent as they seem but actually contribute to your allegiance in the spiritual and cosmic world.

Let us read the final section together.

“When the kings of the earth who committed adultery with her and shared her luxury see the smoke of her burning, they will weep and mourn over her. Terrified at her torment, they will stand far off and cry:

“‘Woe! Woe to you, great city,  
you mighty city of Babylon!  
In one hour your doom has come!’

“The merchants of the earth will weep and mourn over her because no one buys their cargoes anymore—cargoes of gold, silver, precious stones and pearls; fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet cloth; every sort of citron wood, and articles of every kind made of ivory, costly wood, bronze, iron and marble; cargoes of cinnamon and spice, of incense, myrrh and frankincense, of wine and olive oil, of fine flour and wheat; cattle and sheep; horses and carriages; and human beings sold as slaves (Rev 18:9-13).

The rest of the chapter then goes on to explain the downfall of Babylon and God’s victory over her.

In case we were still in any doubt about what John is trying to say, in verse 12-13 we get given a grand list of luxury goods: ‘gold, silver, precious stones ... wood, bronze, iron and marble’ etc., and then, at the end of the large list the phrase: ‘and human beings sold as slaves.’

Here, right back in the late first century AD we have the first explicit Christian critique of slavery, John peeling back the layer on Rome’s practice to reveal that her wealth and luxury is based on the labour and exploitation of slaves, human beings made in the image of God. The whole system is corrupt, John sees Rome and Roman society for what it truly is: debased and evil, based off the backs of slavery, violence, and slaughter.

In his political and economic critique of Rome’s violence and prosperity, John pulls no punches about what he thinks of Rome and those who benefit off her. In order to remain faithful to the Lamb, the inspired prophet implores this forceful command of God: ‘*Come out of her* my people, so you do not share in her evil ways.’ The whole system is corrupt, built off the backs of slavery and violence.

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Here is a photo of a sweatshop in Bangladesh which collapsed in 2013. 1,134 workers were killed and many more injured. Conditions in sweatshops across the world include hazardous work places, incredibly low pay, long hours, and very little prospect of career progression.<sup>1</sup> The millions who work in places like these provide the textiles and materials which feed our fast fashion and rapid consumption in the West.



An estimated 20-70 million people each day work or live as ‘modern slaves,’ depending on how you define that term. Child labour, forced work, inhumane conditions across industries like palm oil, coffee, and clothing exist in many different forms. You already know the stories. It is these practices and industries

<sup>1</sup> A recent International Labour Organisation (ILO) report about wages and working hours in textile, clothing, leather, and footwear industries can be read here: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_dialogue/@sector/documents/publication/wcms300463.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_dialogue/@sector/documents/publication/wcms300463.pdf).

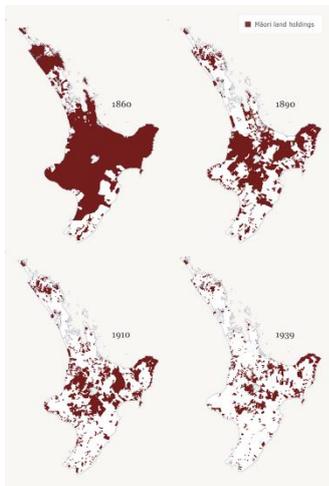
which have granted us the form of life and luxury we enjoy today, \$4 flat whites and late-night Kmart trips.<sup>2</sup>

What does God say to the church amidst this? Verse 4, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins.” *Come out*; this is the call of Revelation, in fact of the entire Christian life; come out so that you do not take part in Rome’s sins.

In Rev 11, the 24 elders we met last week praise God that he holds to account ‘those who destroy the earth’ (Rev 11:18). This is a picture of Henderson Island, located in the South Pacific, our own neighbourhood. Considered one of just two of the untouched raised-atoll ecologies left in the world, it is UNSECO World Heritage site. In 2017 the Guardian reported that now an estimated 38 million pieces of plastic waste were found on the island from all over the world.<sup>3</sup> Microplastic has now been found in every remote corner of the earth’s very vast ocean. China’s recent block on recycling imports mean that even our recycling is emptied into the ocean or burned off illegally in South-East Asia to the sickness and death of locals inhaling fumes in the area. Meanwhile we all continue to complain tirelessly about having to remember to bring a reusable bag to Countdown. We have abandoned our first commandment to look after creation and be God’s stewards given in Genesis (Gen 1:26).



What does God say to the church amidst this? Verse 4, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins.” *Come out*; this is the call of Revelation, in fact of the entire Christian life; come out so that you do not take part in Rome’s sins.



Here are some maps of the North Island. The top left was in 1860, two decades after the Treaty of Waitangi was signed, each image showing the land lost by Māori in following decades. Land previously owned and inhabited by Māori is in red, taken and lost at a rapid rate (the last map from 1939) after the second article of the treaty promised “*full exclusive and undisturbed possession of their Lands and Estates Forests Fisheries and other properties which they may collectively or individually possess.*” Both the church and state had large parts to do with this, in many cases taking land by force or manipulation, as an example go look up the very recent apology from the Anglican Church to local hapu in Tauranga Moana.

Colonialism is not an issue of the past however. Each year to a new class at Carey Andrew Picard reads out a poem he learnt as a youngster. I am sorry I have to read this. “I wish I was a Māori / Oh what a lovely life. / Ten kids on social welfare / And a big fat lazy wife. / I’d live in state-owned houses / No mortgages to pay. / A goat to keep the grass down / And in the pub all day...” Each year Andrew asks if any student has heard this before and inevitably they have. One year a Samoan student reported that they heard a church elder read it out at an eldership meeting in which they were the only non-white attendee. These are the myths and attitudes that sustain the oppression of our Māori brothers and sisters, made in the image of God, treated as inferior, lazy, or stupid.

<sup>2</sup> I might add that in terms of ethical sourcing of materials, Kmart actually does pretty well. Tearfund’s Ethical Fashion Guide which is available from their website is an incredibly helpful resource to making ethical shopping choices.

<sup>3</sup> Elle Hunt, “38 million pieces of plastic waste found on uninhabited South Pacific island,” *The Guardian* (15 May 2017).

What does God say to the church amidst this? Verse 4, “Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins.”

Hopefully you can see what I’m getting at. Buying unethically sourced clothing, making no effort to pronounce tea properly, telling racist jokes, or using single-use plastic may seem like small things, but John would argue they are part of something so much bigger. Many roll their eyes when they hear about environmentalism. Many get rapidly defensive at the mention of biculturalism. But ask yourself honestly, no agenda—are you taking part in evil and beastly systems no matter small the action might seem? Come out of her my people!

A desperately pressing issue is to ask ourselves the confronting question: in both our nation’s past and present, and in the church, where have we contributed and continued to contribute to the injustices of colonisation and the myth of Māori inferiority? These things have no place in the people of God, and we need to open up our past and spend time remembering, repenting, and trying to reconcile for the systems of empire we’ve been a part of.

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And now let us consider the fate of Babylon and her evil ways of empire. We see of course that despite Babylon’s power and might, she is doomed to fail. John is clear in his depiction of Rome—she will fall, and do so dramatically. Justice is finally enacted on the destroyers of the earth and the violence of imperialism. Earlier in the book we see a group of martyrs, people killed for their faith. They cry out to God, “How long, O Lord, until you avenge our blood?” (Rev 6:10). This period of waiting for justice will not last forever, God, as he is good and just, will hold evil to account.

But also notice how this occurs, not by a vengeful, rash God who enacts spiteful revenge on Babylon, but instead Babylon is paid back her as she has given; “Give her as much torment and grief as the glory and luxury she gave herself ... in one day her plagues will overtake her” (18:7-8).

We are not comfortable with God’s justice in the West, not in this sense. The idea of punishment and hell sits awkwardly with us, and keeps many out of the faith. The devil has done an incredible ironic work that in order to keep people from God he convinces them with fear of the very dwelling place he (and all others who hate God) shall end up. Large parts of the Western church do not understand Revelation and take little comfort from its message of justice for this reason: white Christians for the most part are not victims of imperialism or injustice, but are often the perpetrators of it.

Let’s get more personal. My own heritage is South African, my parents born there and many generations (as far as I’m aware) harken from that land. My own parents grew up in a society, in schools, churches, and institutions which segregated, a society which, whether explicitly or implicitly, supported the government of apartheid that said blacks and coloureds were an inferior race and do not deserve the same as whites. Lines were drawn, great evil was done, and my own people not on the side of the oppressed but the oppressors. Black theologian and anti-apartheid activist Allan Boesak in his commentary on Revelation wrote, *“During recent years there has hardly been a place where the police and the army have not wantonly murdered our children, piling atrocity upon atrocity for the sake of the preservation of apartheid and white privilege. And as they go from funeral to funeral, burying yet another victim of law and order or yet another killed by government-protected death squads, the cry continues to rise to heaven: ‘How long, Lord?’”*<sup>4</sup>

A message of justice and God’s reign amidst situations like these sounds very much good news to me. So why is it that we not find this part of the gospel good news? We are all about the love and acceptance and come-as-you-are-part of the gospel, but the justice bits, the parts where the kings and merchants of the earth, the rich and oppressive and wealthy are thrown into the pit, we don’t find good news! Perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> Allan Boesak, *Comfort and Protest: The Apocalypse of John from a South African Perspective* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1987), 69-70.

it is because we are in an entirely different position in life and society from the very people Revelation was written to.

The God of justice is very good news to the suffering African American church and their history of police brutality and incarceration. The God of justice is very good news to the suffering church of China, who are being run underground and arrested for any public sign of their faith. The God of justice is very good news to the Māori church who has lost land, language, dignity, and culture amidst colonisation. That God will hold these oppressors and evils to account is very good news.

Naturally however, as someone who has not only never experienced this but is on the other side of the spectrum, I shrivel at the prospect of this justice. What do I do? Do I seek justice myself? Do I give up in guilt or shame or self-defence? No. I refuse to be part of these systems any longer, I seek to see the empire around me for what it truly is and actively anti-participate. I give God the reigns of justice and instead I come out, I repent and reconcile, making every effort I can to try and reconcile with the other, to uphold and protect the oppressed—not because I am under any illusion I can save them or make up for what has been done in this broken world but because I follow One who can.

We are sometimes guilty of seeing God's justice as opposite to his mercy and love. This is not the case at all. For those who've experienced injustice and hardship, that God will hold this evil to account, that he is sovereign over all it the most comforting fact there is. Revelation really is 'bagpipes for stragglers.'

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This morning has been a tough journey. I fear that when it comes to the contemporary issues we've touched on—ethical consumption, environmentalism, and biculturalism—it is tempting to try write them off as separate issues from the Christian faith. I do not believe that is the case when we read texts like Revelation 18. These things are *part* of God's mission, part of being God's people together. The witness and purpose of God's people in the book of Revelation is to unbelong from empire and empire in our world is as alive as she ever was; Babylon is still kicking and screaming, sucking people into her debased ways like a great vacuum cleaner. 'Come out of her' and do not be part of these systems.

I want to end with these thoughts. At the time of writing, the Roman Empire was showing zero sign of any weakness or collapse. In fact, the Roman Empire would go on to enjoy many more centuries of prosperity and vast political power, enduring in smaller ways even beyond that. Here is this little prophet, an exile on a small island in the middle of the Mediterranean, talking about the demise of the world's largest superpower.

When faced with contemporary challenges such as racism, environmentalism, and so on, very quickly we can begin to feel helpless, and with good reason! The forces of evil and empire seem so immense, so uncontrollably vast that there is little hope in overcoming them and little point therefore in trying.

One commentator writes about the ancient church in Ephesus, "*[The early church] would have seen the display of the imperial cult, and reflect on the vastness of the Empire's power, and scratch their heads ... Ironically today, only a single column from [the temples in Ephesus] stands as a solitary witness amidst a swamp-like setting, crowned with a stork's nest ... great temples to the empires survive only as scattered pieces of marble and a few arches hinting at their former glory.*"<sup>5</sup>

The God we follow is the eternal, uncreated One, the Alpha and Omega, beginning and end. *He* shall hold evil to account, *he* shall defeat Babylon, *he* shall overcome empire, and *he* shall endure forever in order to inaugurate his new creation and kingdom where all things are made new. He is the One we trust and follow, not our own small abilities but his. He has done this not in the way we expect, but through the power of the Lamb, the self-sacrifice of the Son. Jesus has come to resurrect this broken world and make it new. Yet to follow him faithfully, we must come out, not daunted by the vastness of

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<sup>5</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Ephesians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

the situation but instead steadfastly and stubbornly refusing to participate. This is how we are to live as people of the Lamb. **Amen.**

*A Prayer:*

God,  
 you are our beginning and you will be our end;  
 we are made in your image and likeness.  
 We praise and thank you for this day.  
 This is the day on which you created light  
 and saw that it was good.  
 This is the day in whose early morning light  
 we discovered the tomb was empty,  
 and encountered Christ, the world's true light.  
 This is the day you have made;  
 we shall rejoice and be glad in it.

Lord, make us instruments of your peace;  
 where there is hatred, let us sow love;  
 where there is injury, pardon;  
 where there is discord, union;  
 where there is doubt, faith;  
 where there is despair, hope;  
 where there is darkness, light;  
 where there is sadness, joy.

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Eternal God,  
 grant to us this day and every day  
 such readiness and delight in following Christ,  
 that whether our lives are short or long  
 we shall have lived abundantly.

**Amen.**