

Revelation 1 The first and the last and the living one
Tim Anderson 12/7/20

We begin a new sermon series on Revelation today.

Revelation is a book of the Bible that puzzles many people.

Others are extremely confident they know what it's saying, but their guesses are wide of the mark.

Why tackle a puzzling book?

Partly because Christian people are interested in knowing what it means.

Partly because sometimes people have been fed mistaken readings of it, and it's good to put those to bed.

Partly because the world that Jesus revealed himself to John in was not unlike our own.

It was a crazy world.

Christian people were regarded as not good citizens

because they didn't toe the line

when it came to what their society told them to believe.

Sound familiar?

But in John's day,

it was certainly up a notch from how things are in Australia.

In John's day, if you shared the good news of Jesus with others, they may well have you put on an island by yourself to live.

And before your mind fills with visions of tropical paradises, you would get very lonely,

and if you had a calling to spread the good news, you would be very frustrated.

But in God's providence,

John wrote down what he saw in his vision and people like us are still reading it today.

So he did get his message out after all.

In verse 9, John says,

“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,
because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”

Why was John on Patmos Island again?

Well he says he was there

because of the ‘word of God and the testimony of Jesus’.

What does that mean exactly?

It means that John had been teaching people the word of God
and telling people about Jesus,

and for his troubles,

he’d been sent as a prisoner to a little island in the Mediterranean Sea,
so no one else could be infected by his teachings.

They wanted to stop the Jesus virus spreading.

And John wasn’t an isolated case.

He was having his island holiday

at the pleasure of the Roman Emperor Domitian,

probably sometime between 90-95 AD,

and Domitian was busy persecuting all the Christians in his empire.

It wasn’t that Domitian had it in for Christians in particular.

It was just that they refused to worship him.

Domitian had decreed that everyone in his empire must worship him.

He wasn’t against their religions.

They were free to keep their religions and worship their own gods too.

But they had to worship the emperor.

Christians refused.

And so they faced violent persecution.

It was a desperate struggle to survive.

Many Christians would have felt like their whole world was falling to
bits.

That’s how the world was when Jesus appeared in a vision to John.

What sort of message do you want to give

someone whose world is falling apart?

You want to encourage them.

But how can you encourage someone when it seems like their world is falling apart?

You need to help them keep their present troubles in perspective.

It's no encouragement to be told,

“Look, your present troubles don't matter,
get over it!”

But it may well be quite an encouragement if you can say,

“Look, I'm enduring the same trouble.

And while it is hard right now,

I'm convinced that in the end things will work out.

So keep your chin up

and let's get through this together.”

And that's the message of John for his readers.

“I am your brother and companion.”

That is, we're in this together you and I.

Don't lose heart.

I'm here with you.

“I, John, your brother and companion
in the suffering and patient endurance.”

That is, we're in this together you and I,

and I'm undergoing the same trials you are.

“I, John, your brother and companion
in the kingdom.”

That is, we're in this together you and I,

and we share the same reward –

Jesus has conquered and we will reign with him!”

Now that's a message of encouragement,

from a prisoner on an isolated island.

What did John see in his vision

that gave him such confidence and hope?

In verse 12 we read,

“And when I turned,

I saw seven golden lampstands,

and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man,

dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet
and with a golden sash around his chest.
His head and hair were like wool,
as white as snow,
and his eyes were like a blazing fire.
His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace,
and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.
In his right hand he held seven stars,
and out of his mouth came a sharp double edged sword.
His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.”

John saw Jesus.
But it's not Jesus as you usually imagine him.
People often imagine Jesus as a bit of a wimp.
Nice guy but not the chap you'd have
protecting your back in a street fight.
John's vision of Jesus
is not the Jesus you'll see in a stained glass window.
The Jesus of the stained glass window looks very holy –
but he doesn't look frightening and powerful.
But in John's vision,
Jesus is frightening and powerful.
His eyes were like a blazing fire.
That means he sees everything going on around him,
and he is ready to judge.
Jesus' voice is like the sound of rushing waters.
From Ezekiel 43,
we know that means that Jesus' voice is the voice of God.
And for rushing waters think Tsunami not babbling brook.
Jesus is wielding a sharp double edged sword.
It's an implement of judgement.
Only a man's man wields a double edged sword.
Think back to all the black and white movies you've ever watched.
Did a namby pamby whoos ever wield a double edged sword?
This picture of Jesus should strike terror into our hearts.

It certainly did strike terror into John's heart.

In verse 17,
When John saw Jesus,
he fell at his feet as though dead.

But although the picture of Jesus is of a man's man,
there's nothing macho about it.

There is strength without posturing.

There is power without ego.

Jesus stands in a robe reaching down to his feet –
that marks him out as high priest.

He has a golden sash around his chest –
that marks him as king.

His head and hair were white like wool –

The white hair is a sign of wisdom.

And it's worthy of note that one of the famous Old Testament passages,
that this symbol of white hair comes from,

Daniel 7,

where one like a son of man comes

and stands before the Ancient of Days –

in the Daniel passage,

it's the Ancient of Days,

not the one like the son of man,

who has hair white like wool.

In this picture,

Jesus is being given attributes that are usually reserved for God.

Jesus with the wisdom of God the Father.

His feet glowing like bronze in a furnace,

a sign of holiness –

being purified by fire.

So when he judges,

he judges in holiness and wisdom.

And he judges with his word.

That's why the double edged sword is coming out of his mouth.

So we have Jesus,
 a priest and king
 who is ready to judge with God's wisdom and holiness.
 He judges with his word,
 speaking with God's voice.
 Who is Jesus ready to judge?
 John is looking for a message of encouragement.
 He is in prison on Patmos island and his flock are under great pressure
 from the persecutions of Emperor Domitian.
 Who do you think Jesus is ready to judge?
 My natural first thought is that Jesus is coming to the aid of his people –
 he's coming to save them from the evil Emperor Domitian.
 The book of Revelation will get to that point down the track.
 But that's not what we see in this first vision.
 Jesus is walking among the seven lampstands,
 holding the seven stars in his right hand.

The seven lampstands are seven churches.
 You can see the names of them in verse 11.
 They're real places.
 Most of them are in what we would call Turkey.
 But we wouldn't want to think
 that Jesus is walking around exclusively in those seven churches.
 For starters most of those churches don't exist anymore.
 But more importantly,
 seven is a symbolic number in the book of Revelation.
 If there's seven of something,
 then it symbolises being perfect or complete.
 The seven churches symbolise the whole church.
 So Jesus is walking around among the churches
 keeping an eye on them.
 and while he's doing that he's holding seven stars in his hand.

The stars symbolise messengers or angels

who will take the words that Jesus speaks
and give them to the churches.

The words that come out of Jesus' mouth –
the mouth containing the double edged sword of judgement –
will be given to the churches by the messengers.

Well, next week we will read what those words were –
what those words are in fact –
because they are still words for Jesus' church.

Those words are in chapters 2+3,
and they come in the form of a letter to each church –
a letter from Jesus.

But for now I want to pose a question.

How is it an encouragement for these persecuted churches,
with the Emperor Domitian breathing down their neck,
to know that Jesus is walking around
with his eye on them ready to judge?

It reminds me of a rhyme I knew as a child.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

If Lillee don't get 'em, then Thommo must.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,

if the emperor doesn't wipe the churches out,
then Jesus will finish of the job for him.

It's not quite like that.

But when you read through what Jesus has to say to the churches,
some of it is pretty fierce.

So how is this message an encouragement?

We need to look at the big picture.

The big question that confronts every person who walks this earth is,
"Whose kingdom are you part of?"

Are you part of the kingdom of God?

or are you part of the kingdom of the evil one?

Who is your king?

And there's only one way to move from the kingdom of the evil one

to the kingdom of God.

You can find that one way in verse 5.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.”

It’s only through the death of Jesus on the cross freeing us from our sins that we can be part of the kingdom of God.

How do we find out about this good news?

Who will teach us how to be part of the kingdom of God?

Jesus has entrusted that job to his church.

The church has the job of passing on the good news from generation to generation.

What do you call a church

that fails to pass on the good news to the next generation?

It’s dead, isn’t it?

If it’s not now, it soon will be.

So it is a message of great encouragement

that Jesus is walking around among the golden lampstands keeping an eye on them.

Because if Jesus wasn’t keeping an eye on the churches, then the churches would go off track.

And if churches go off track then they will stop telling people about, “Him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.”

And if churches stop telling people about Jesus,

then people won’t be able to be part of the kingdom of God.

Jesus needs to keep an eye on the churches,

to make sure they are doing the job he gave them to do.

It’s a great encouragement that Jesus is holding us accountable,

because if he wasn’t we would drift off and do our own thing,

and that would have eternal consequences for folk.

Maybe it’s a bit like children and discipline.

This is a topic pretty close to my heart.

Children complain when they are disciplined.

It doesn’t matter whether you give them a smack

or send them to their room or dock their pocket money or whatever.

They complain when they are disciplined.

But really it should be a great encouragement to them
that we are prepared to put the time and energy in to do it.
If we didn't,
they would grow up with no self control,
they'd never hold down a job
and they'd end up on the scrap heap of life.

But it's also a great encouragement for us
because it reminds us that Jesus has won the victory.
When you are facing harsh persecution
like John's church in the time of Emperor Domitian,
or even when life has just plain dealt you some heavy blows,
you need to be reminded that you are on the winning side.
It might not feel like it.
But Jesus has won the victory and he's taking you with him.
When John saw Jesus,
he fell down terrified,
it was such an awesome sight.
But Jesus put his hand on John and said,
"Do not be afraid.
I am the first and the last.
I am the living one;
I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever!
And I hold the keys of death and Hades."

Jesus is alive.
He was raised from the dead,
and now he lives for ever.
The number one reason we can be encouraged that Jesus is ruling and
judging,
is that he rules over death.
He has defeated death.

We all face the certainty of our own mortality.
It's always there in the back of our minds.

And sometimes it stares us in the face.
Each day, each one of us is one day closer to meeting our maker.
And none of us know what day that will be.
The ultimate encouragement
is that Jesus holds the keys of death and Hades.
His resurrection was not just for him.
His resurrection was for you and me too.
That's the ultimate encouragement.

In the words of verses 5-6.

“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood,
and has made us to be a kingdom and priests
to serve his God and Father –
to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.”