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Heaven in Ordinary (Revelation 5.1-14)

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In the more than 10 years of Benedictus' life, this is the first time we've had a reading from the Revelation to John (or so I thought, till I talked to Richard last night and was reminded that he had preached on a passage from Revelation a few years ago!). Anyway, notwithstanding, it's the first time in my entire ministry I've attempted to preach on this biblical text! So it's with some trepidation that I invite you to strap yourselves in!! For this book, the last in the whole bible, is infamously difficult and seems frequently grotesque. To some readers it's seemed to justify, if not mandate, violence and vindictive vengeance toward the 'ungodly'. As New Testament scholar, Peter Llewellyn has said, 'Crank... purveyors of hatred, bigotry and a hoped-for holocaust of the last days – all find the fulfilment of their fantasies in John's visions'.¹ Indeed, writes another scholar, the book of Revelation, also known as the Apocalypse of John, 'is arguably the most dangerous book in the history of Christendom in terms of the history of its effects'.² All of which naturally raises the question, what the ... are we reading it for?

Well, partly, because it's there and traditionally read during the season of Easter, and I have a sense that it's time for me, for us, to have a go at it. Partly, because the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church has recently characterised Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a 'holy war' which is just the kind of theological imaginary that has often been shaped (or misshaped) by a certain reading of this text. A dangerous book indeed ... which suggests it's more than ever important to

¹ Peter Llewellyn, "The Unveiling": Reflections on the Book of Revelation as a Spiritual Adventure', February 2017 (Printed by the York Community Resource Centre).

² Loren Johns cited in David Neville, *A Peaceable Hope: Contesting Violent Eschatology in New Testament Narratives* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), pp.224-225.

learn how to open it responsibly. So for these last four weeks in the season of Easter, that's the learning I'm hoping we might begin.

I'll start with a brief orientation. Revelation is an account of a series of visions given to John – purportedly the same John who wrote John's Gospel. In fact, the two books were probably not written by the same person, but they have enough in common 'to envisage that both emerged from the same stream of the early Christian tradition'.³ The author (I'll call him John) is living on the island of Patmos off the coast of present day Turkey – he's in exile on account of his faith – and the book was written in the late 1st century, probably around the year 80^{CE}. As to genre, well - Revelation purports to 'unveil' or see into the deep meaning and purpose (the 'end') of the world. It's a vision of consummation communicated by means of incredibly dense symbolism. Said English theologian, Austin Farrer, it's 'the one great poem which the first Christian age produced'; and according to Eugene Peterson, it's the inability (or refusal) to deal with it *as* a poem, that's 'responsible for most of the misreading, misinterpretation, and misuse of the book'.⁴ So with this in mind, let's venture a little way in!

The first three chapters are introductory. John describes an initial hearing and seeing of 'one like the Son of Man', who gives him messages to convey to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor. The faithfulness of each congregation is assessed – 'I know your works' says 'the living one' – and each is called to renewed commitment, with the refrain: 'Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches'. Then, at the beginning of Chapter 4, comes a decisive transition.⁵ 'After this', writes John, 'I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this"' (Rev. 4.1).

³ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.217.

⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *Reversed Thunder: The Revelation of John & The Praying Imagination* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988), p.5.

⁵ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.230.

Immediately, 'in the spirit', John is translated into heaven – and what a wild and colourful scene he encounters!! He sees a throne with one seated upon it. This 'one' is not described but 'looks like jasper and carnelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald' (Rev. 4.3). This description of jewel encrusted divinity sounds a bit like the bling associated with the prosperity gospel, but actually – this is about light. In the beginning, you'll remember, the first thing God does in the biblical text, is to evoke light: 'Let there be light'. And in the ancient world, says Peterson, precious stones were valued because they collect and intensify light. Light is full of colour, he writes, but our eyes cannot perceive it, so a precious stone, 'selecting certain colours out of the air and intensifying them, shows us the deep glory of the colour that is in the light all the time'.⁶ Jasper, carnelian, emerald. Here is the revelatory effect of God who 'is light and in whom is no darkness at all'.

Around this central, light emitting, light intensifying throne, John sees 24 more thrones on which are seated 24 elders, representing the 12 tribes of Israel together with the 12 apostles; representing, in other words, the whole history of the people of God. Also around the throne are four living creatures – one like a lion, one like an ox, one with a face like a human face, and the fourth like an eagle – singing without ceasing 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come'. Each of these creatures represents an aspect of the created order – bird, domestic and wild animals, and humanity, and the key point is that this worship of heaven gathers into its magnetic, centering, orienting orbit every aspect of creation.⁷

This is the scene in which our passage is set. Then, says John, 'I saw in the right hand of the one seated on the throne a scroll'. Peterson remarks that a 'scroll', to a first-century Christian, would mean 'scripture', the means by which God's words and will for humankind are communicated. It's to be expected in the act of worship that a scroll will appear. But this scroll is sealed with seven seals – and there is no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth able to open the scroll or look into it

⁶ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p.63.

⁷ Peterson, *Reversed Thunder*, p.62.

(Rev. 5.3). It looks as though creation is excluded from the knowledge of God; the real meaning of life is inaccessible. John begins to weep bitterly.

Then, one of the elders on one of the thrones speaks: ‘Do not weep. See the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals’ (Rev. 5.5). Well, thank God for that. John is being told that the Messiah – imaged by tradition as the Lion of Judah, a conquering warrior king – has triumphed. He will be able to unseal the scroll, to unlock the key to meaning and communicate it to John. But hang on. John looks and sees in the midst of the elders and the living creatures and the one on the throne, not a Lion, but a lamb, a ‘Lamb standing as if it had been slaughtered’. Scholar David Neville writes: ‘the shift of imagery from that of anticipated “Lion of the tribe of Judah” ... to that of “Lamb-as-slaughtered” unsettles preexisting notions’ (which seems to put it rather mildly)!⁸ And when this Lamb takes the scroll from the right hand of the one seated on the throne, all the company of heaven begins to sing a *new* song: ‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals; for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation’. And note the maximal inclusivity of this.

Theologically speaking, so much is communicated here. As Neville points out, the first part of John’s vision – that glorious worship of heaven, differs little from traditional Jewish ‘throne-chariot’ mysticism (so-called). But with the vision of the Lamb in the midst of it all, John introduces something distinctively new. The lamb slain, representing the crucified Christ, is worshipped as the one God of Israel is worshipped. Not only that, this Lamb is recognised as holding the key to all meaning, the only one worthy to unseal the scroll. And the text insists that his worthiness, his capacity, is a function, not of his might, but his suffering; not of his dealing out violence and death, but his undergoing of it. As Neville points out, after this passage, the lion is never mentioned again, which suggests that ‘the images of the lion and the lamb were created specifically to address competing visions of how the messiah

⁸ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.233.

wields power'.⁹ And this total subversion of expectation is absolutely key to interpreting the rest of this text, as we will see.

Even so, the whole set up is fantastical. And in a week when news of appalling atrocities in Ukraine continues to emerge, when many in our own community struggle with illness, anxiety and fear for the world, it can feel almost insulting to spend any time contemplating it. John's vision purports to reveal the depth dimension of reality – how things really are – if only we have eyes to see, if only we break through the veil. But how are we to believe that? And what difference would it make if we did?

The poet George Herbert speaks of 'Heaven in ordinary'; 'the six days world transposing in an hour'. But what if this is just escapist fantasy? Well, maybe it is. Yet here's another testimony. Laurence Freeman has written of an experience that befell him as a young man. 'Shortly after I became a monk', Laurence writes, 'I was agonizing over what I was doing with my life, who on earth or in heaven Jesus was or is, whether the church and all its baggage was only a massive collective self-deception, whether Christian faith gave sufficient backing to my odd and perplexing decision to be a monk. My questioning was not curious but desperate. I was not depressed but I was in great pain. Whether I was wasting or investing my life was what was at stake.

'One evening as I was reading the gospel and had put the book down to think and pray I was suddenly filled with the only experience I could to that point really call *praise*. Suddenly and for no obvious reason I felt myself caught up in an orgy of praise and *saw* that it was both directed to but also *through* the person of Jesus. I knew that this was happening at the heart of the world – or at least of everything I was capable of understanding as the world. It was an ecstatic praise not a formal one, more like a rock concert than a church service. Yet its ecstasy was of the most deeply satisfying order and harmony imaginable. The words of the New Testament to him be all glory, honour and praise which had seemed exceedingly grey to me before

⁹ Neville, *A Peaceable Hope*, p.235.

now expressed a participation in the risen Christ “in glory” in which every sentient being shares’. Laurence went on: ‘This individual, to me “memorable”, experience has passed away in time. I don’t think of it much now. But I sense – maybe this is an aspect of faith – that what it exposed is always present, undiminished, and even always deepening’.¹⁰

How are we to believe this? And what difference would it make if we did? These are questions I invite you to hold with me in coming weeks.

¹⁰ Laurence Freeman, *Jesus the Teacher Within* (New York: Continuum, 2003), pp.16-17.