

Revelation Revealed

Mike Starkey, Holy Trinity Twickenham, February 2006.

Part 1: Background (Revelation 13:11-18)

I wouldn't exactly say I had a misspent youth. But my teenage years were dominated by two things that some people frowned on: rock music and science fiction.

I played guitar in a noisy rock band, I listened to lots of heavy metal songs about wizards on mountains and motorbikes and demons. And I read books about alien worlds and hostile life forms. I loved all those films about dismembered brains in tanks, poised to take over the world. By comparison, the Christian message I heard at the rather polite church I went to on Sundays seemed rather tame and a bit dull.

But then I discovered the book of Revelation (and incidentally, it is *Revelation* in the singular, not *Revelations* with an 's'!). And I discovered that the Bible actually contains writing which was more extreme than all my rock records and sci fi books, and which was more wild and visionary than anything written in my own generation. In fact, one vicar I know describes the book of Revelation as John the Divine's Magic Mushroom Book. And if you read it, you'll see why!

So I don't come to the Book of Revelation as a detached observer. I come to it as somebody who's been excited by it, stimulated by it, and had my mind boggled by its strangeness. It's 25 years since I first read it, and I still find it strange, compelling, and difficult. So what do we find when we get into Revelation? Not the history writing of the Gospels, or the letters to people and churches that St Paul wrote. But a wild mixture of angels, evil beasts, demons, prostitutes, cities, earthquakes, horsemen and plagues, and, finally, the recreation of the whole universe.

So what does it all mean? Well, there are a few things you're got to bear in mind when you approach Revelation. First, you've got to realize that most of Revelation is not easy. Not even to theological experts who've spent a lifetime studying it. So if you find a book that says: here's a simple key which unlocks all the mysteries of Revelation at one go, don't believe it.

Also, you've got to understand what type of writing it is. The majority of Revelation is what's known as an *Apocalypse*. And *apocalyptic* writing is writing that's wild and full of imagination. It usually gives vivid pictures, in the form of visions and dreams. And in these visions and dreams you get hidden meanings and symbols which are often veiled ways of talking about things that are happening at the present time.

Other books in the Bible have apocalyptic styles of writing in them, especially the OT prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel. So it reads like a kind of fantasy literature, but all the fantasy's actually a way of referring to real events. It's fantasy as a window into truth, and real events.

So what sort of real events? Well, sometimes it's about the end of time, but mostly it's messages for the people at the time the apocalypse was written. So you can expect two different levels of application. The main one is for its first readers in the early church. But it's also for the end time generation, with warnings about backsliding away from God's truth before the end comes.

Another thing you've got to bear in mind is that some of the images can be identified or decoded. So the dragon in Revelation clearly represents the devil, and the forces of spiritual evil in our world. But some of the other images are more general: the four horsemen who ride out causing havoc probably just refer to things like war and famine in general, rather than any one particular war.

And that means that we can't necessarily press any one image too far. So when some writers claim that a particular beast represents Russia or Iraq, or this insect represents Arab military helicopters over Israel, we can be fairly sceptical. Lots of the details are more for general dramatic effect, and the point being made is a general one about God defeating evil, rather than a specific prophecy about a thing in the future. In other words, it's better to go for the big picture rather than getting stuck on a detail.

So who was it written by, and why? Well, the writer was a Jewish Christian by the name of John, who was in exile on the Island of Patmos. At the time the Greek island of Patmos was a Roman penal colony, a kind of prison island. And he's almost certainly been sent into exile for his Christian beliefs at a time when the Roman empire's become very hostile to the church. The evidence points to it being written under one of two Roman Emperors who persecuted the church: Nero or Domitian. And that puts it somewhere between 68 AD and 95 AD.

So it was written by somebody suffering for his faith, for a church that was being persecuted for its faith. And that gives us the biggest clue as to what it's all about. If you want to find two words which sum up the message of Revelation, they're *judgement* and *hope*.

So why judgement? Well, you've got to imagine what it must have been like to be a church undergoing persecution at the hands of the Empire. Probably for us, the best comparison would be the worst persecution in China, or Russia before the Berlin Wall came down. Or Cambodia under Pol Pot. Or, even better, North Korea today – where human rights groups say around 100,000 Christians are in prison, just because they're Christians.

People in those kind of circumstances might have a general promise that God's in control, but it sure doesn't feel like it. All they can see around them is the prospect of persecution and death. So God gives them a vision of judgement. The day's coming when he'll judge the world in a dramatic and final way. The evil empire's already under the judgement of God. Human evil and immorality, spiritual forces of evil, they'll all be done away with. And that's what we see so vividly in Revelation. The church which has suffered is finally vindicated by God. It really has been worth being a Christian.

And that's why the other word that describes Revelation is *hope*. Hope for the church that despite appearances, God hasn't abandoned his people. That he knows what's going on, and he's just temporarily staying his hand of judgement. So it's to give confidence and hope to a church which is downtrodden and battered, and losing hope.

So at the heart of the Book of Revelation you get images of Satan and evil, presented as a dragon – and a human leader who sides with Satan, who's known as the antichrist – knowing they're defeated, but having one last go at revenge on God and his people. But the evil Empire is shown to be hollow and deceitful. For John's readers that would have meant Rome. And you see how despite all its military might and grandeur, it's headed for destruction.

Preachers today tend to be rather coy about preaching on judgement. Nobody wants to hear messages of judgement. But the Book of Revelation isn't so coy. It faces squarely the fact that you can't have *hope* without *judgement*. There's only hope if evil is held to account and ultimately done away with.

And in Revelation, all the images of judgement are followed by an incredible image at the end of the Book: that of a new city of God where God's people live for all eternity in peace, with evil wiped out of the story for ever. And a stunning river of life that runs through the middle of the city, and on each side of the river there's a tree of life, whose fruit brings healing to the nations.

Incidentally, have you ever noticed that at the very start of there Bible there's a garden with a river in it, and a tree of life, that becomes the entry point for brokenness. And at the very end of the Bible there's a city with a river in it and a tree of life that becomes the focus of healing and new life? It's also there in the visions of the prophet Ezekiel – Chapter 47 – but that's another story, for another day!

But how do we know which bits of Revelation were just for the original first-century readers, with all their coded references to Rome, and which bits are long-range forecasts of the end of history? Well, in most cases, we don't know. It's all lumped together in Revelation as if it's all happening at the same time. It's a bit like when you're standing in the Lake District or Wales and you look out at the horizon. You see two mountains which look as if they're close together. But when you try to walk to them, you soon realize that they're not next to each other at all. In fact, there's about 20 miles between them.

That's pretty much how Revelation works. It presents two mountains as if they're together, the immediate present and the distant future. But it mixes them up so you don't know which is which. That's why it's dangerous to say a particular bit of Revelation definitely refers to China or Hitler. Or even to look for a particular person who's the Antichrist. It's far more likely that it's referring to things in Rome in John's own time. But there are some bits which are clearly about the future, like the vision of the New Jerusalem at the end of the Book. That's clearly a far mountain peak we haven't reached yet. Other bits, we just don't know.

So the message to us today is this. Don't get too bogged down in the finer details of Revelation. Some bits we can understand, some bits we can't. Take the big picture, the whole sweep of the images with all their violence and drama. And try to put yourself in the shoes of a first-century Christian going through persecution. Or of a Christian in a prison camp in North Korea today, who's being persecuted simply for being a Christian. The message of Revelation is that evil won't have the last word. God's in control and he's going to judge evil and wipe it from the face of the universe.

And Revelation still has that double message of judgement and hope for us today. The evil we see around us in the world, even in our own hearts, won't have the last word. God will bring judgement by fire, that'll burn up everything that's less than his perfect will. And it reassures us that there's a hope. Hope for us, because God's on our side, and hope for the world, because God hasn't abandoned it.

So this week, try reading the Book of Revelation for yourself, in a modern version of the Bible. Allow it to grip your imagination. Allow yourself to get excited by it, like I did as a teenager. And allow God to speak to you, through the most powerful images of judgement and hope ever written. They're a promise from God, for you and me.

Part 2: Letters to Churches (Revelation 3:14-end)

Last Sunday we started to explore the strangest book in the Bible: the Book of Revelation. It's the last book in the Bible. And it's the account of a vision which God gave to a man called John, who was in exile on the island of Patmos, which was a Roman penal colony. In other words, people were sent there for punishment, and John was sent there in a time of severe persecution by the Roman authorities.

Most of his extraordinary vision that we call Revelation, or the Apocalypse, is to do with pictures of heaven and beasts and battles, and a whole lot of vivid stuff told in symbolic language.

But the very first part of Revelation is a bit different. It consists of a number of letters to real churches, seven to be precise, which really existed at the time John was writing. In John's revelation from God, the risen Jesus effectively dictates letters to these seven churches. And in them, he directly addresses their situation. He gives them warnings where they're going wrong, and encourages them in things they're doing right. In fact, people still do so-called Seven Churches tours in Turkey, where they visit all seven of the places Jesus addresses his letters to. Back in the ancient world, all of these were fairly substantial towns. These days, some of them are big cities. Like the ancient town of Smyrna, which is now the Turkish city of Izmir. Others are little more than a heap of ruins or an unexcavated mound in the landscape, like the original city of Philadelphia. And a town called Laodicea. And it's the letter from the risen Jesus to Laodicea that we're looking at this morning.

So just to rewind for a moment: today's reading from Revelation is a letter, which is dictated by the risen Jesus, to a man in exile on an island called Patmos, and it's addressed through him to a real church, in a city in Turkey. You've got to understand all that before you can understand what's going on.

So this is a letter written to people who've already become Christians, to encourage them to get their lives right with God. And what's the risen Jesus saying to this first century Turkish church? He wants them to stop being half-hearted in their commitment to him, and to get serious about their faith and lifestyle.

Jesus says this: 'I know your deeds: that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I will spit you out of my mouth' (3:15-16).

So the letter's addressed to lukewarm believers. People who have a faith, but it's a bit insipid, like tepid tea. And what do you do if somebody brings you a cup of tea that's been left standing for 20 minutes? Well, if you're polite, you ask nicely for a fresh cup. And if you're not polite, you'll run to the potted plant, spit out the tea, and shout 'Yuck!'

And our passage tells us that's precisely Jesus's reaction to their half-hearted faith. Because Jesus wasn't a polite Englishman, he was a passionate Middle-Eastern man. Jesus says to them: 'Your half-heartedness makes me sick!'

Let me tell you a bit more about Laodicea. The city didn't have its own natural water supply, especially in the summer, because the river dried up in hot weather. And so the Laodiceans were very jealous of some of the neighbouring cities. The city of Hierapolis, which was 6 miles out along the northbound road, had hot springs, which were great if you wanted to take a long hot bath. And 10 miles to the east was the city of Colossae (as in Paul's letter to the Colossians). And Colossae had a cold, clear stream of water, which was perfect for drinking. It was cool and refreshing.

But Laodicea's water had to be carried to the city along pipes and aqueducts. So any hot water which was piped from the hot springs would have cooled down so it was lukewarm by the time it reached Laodicea. And any water piped from the cold stream at Colossae would have warmed up so that was lukewarm by the time it reached Laodicea. So the poor old Laodiceans had lukewarm hot water and lukewarm cold water. And the people of Laodicea would complain about their water like we complain about the weather. Their stand-up comics would have had a long repertoire of lukewarm water jokes.

And incidentally, the other references in the letter are based on daily life in Laodicea too: buying gold and new clothes, and putting on eye ointment to help them see better. Laodicea was a centre for finance and banking, it had a major textile industry and it made a famous eye salve!

So the risen Jesus takes something from their daily experience, their water system, and uses it to challenge them about their faith. He's saying: Be hot like bathing water, or cool like drinking water. Anything other than this dreadful lukewarm half-heartedness, which is no good to anybody. Jesus actually says: 'You makes me sick'. In other words, he's challenging them not to be boringly Christian, but passionately Christian, having genuine fullness of life and faith, not some pale half measure.

Now, at that point, you can almost hear the Laodicean Christians being startled into thinking about what he's saying. And they begin to wonder if they have been a bit lackadaisical in their faith. They haven't had a faith that's passionate and wholehearted. They haven't tried to apply their faith the every dimension of their lives. But what can they do about it?

And this is where Jesus uses one of the most memorable images in the whole Bible. It's an image that's been used in art. There's a famous picture based on this verse by Holman Hunt in St Paul's Cathedral: '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 him and he with me.' (3:20).

Now, in Holman Hunt's painting, the whole scene has a kind of holy glow around it. But the picture that's being used is actually of somebody going to a dinner party. We've all been there: you're invited to somebody's house. And you get dressed up. And you buy a bottle. And you arrive on the doorstep and you knock on the door, holding onto your bottle, waiting to be invited in to join the party and join in with the meal. In our culture, to invite somebody to dinner is a sign of friendship. It's a way of getting to know people better.

And it had exactly the same meaning in the ancient world. What Jesus is saying to the Laodicean church is this: I'm standing here on your doorstep with the bottle of wine I've just got from the off-licence. And I'm knocking at the door, trying to attract your attention. Are you going to invite me in to your home, to have dinner? (Well, I added the off-licence bit, but that's exactly what Jesus is saying).

Now sometimes preachers use this image of Jesus knocking at the door as an image of Jesus trying to get access to the heart of an unbeliever: 'I stand at the door of your heart, let me in by becoming a Christian for the first time'.

But remember the context is this. It's a letter from Jesus to a Church: to people who already say they're Christians. So the knocking isn't so much about Jesus wanting access to the heart of an unbeliever. It's about an invitation to Christians to have a more intimate, more celebratory, more passionate experience of being a Christian.

And the picture being used is of having Jesus at your dinner party. It's a picture of fun and celebration and intimacy. And intimacy means spending time together, and communicating. In the Christian life, that means things like discovering a new excitement in communicating with God, and getting to grips with the books of the Bible, discussing important issues of faith and values and lifestyle with other Christians. It's about meeting around the Lord's table, and wrestling with what God's will might be for our lives.

And it applies not only to each of us as individuals, but to us as a whole Church: Is our worship on a Sunday morning a hollow ritual we go through, or is it from the heart? Are we open to new things that God might want to do with our church? Are we committed to each other, praying for each other and supporting each other? Does our life together reflect the joy and excitement of knowing and following Christ?

So the challenge to the lukewarm church in Laodicea is a challenge which echoes down the centuries, to us today. The actual town of Laodicea may not exist any more. But we still have a record of this extraordinary letter to the church of Laodicea from the risen Jesus. Jesus says he's knocking at the door, asking to be let in. It's a letter that still has a powerful resonance and challenge to those of us who are Christians, but haven't yet discovered that life with Christ is about passion, excitement, closeness, friendship.

In other words, Jesus is saying the Christian life is a party. And we need to make sure we haven't left Jesus standing on the doorstep, with his bottle of wine in hand, desperately trying to attract our attention. We need to invite him in, and discover the reality that the Christian life is about a relationship, and it's about a great celebration.

There's far more to the Christian faith than we've yet discovered: more joy, more excitement, more intimacy. And it starts as we open the door to a very special dinner guest.

Part 3: Four Living Creatures (Revelation 4)

Take look at five small pictures on the ceiling here in Holy Trinity, just above our main Communion Table. Don't worry if you can't see them very clearly now – you can come and have a look later! Right in the middle, you've got a picture of a lamb, which represents Jesus. (Some other time, we can have a think about what it means to call Jesus the 'lamb of God'.)

But if you look to the left and right of the lamb, you'll see images of four creatures: an eagle, a lion, an ox and a man. And Holy Trinity isn't the only church where you'll see these four characters. Together, they form one of the most common images in the history of Christian art.

Today we're finishing our three-part introduction to the Book of Revelation, the last and strangest book of the Bible. And these four creatures all appear in today's reading from Revelation Chapter 4, as well as being there up on our church ceiling.

So the big questions we're looking at this morning are these: Who are these four characters? Where do they come from? What are they doing in the book of Revelation? And what on earth are they doing on our ceiling? Well, the first time we come across them all together – the eagle, the lion, the ox and the man – is back in the Old Testament. They're in a strange vision that God gives to a prophet called Ezekiel around the year 600 BC.

Ezekiel is a young Jewish priest-in-training, aged about 30. And he's living in Babylon, where his people have been carted off into exile. And Ezekiel introduces his strange vision by saying this:

'As I looked, I saw a great storm coming toward me from the north, driving before it a huge cloud that flashed with lightning and shone with brilliant light. The fire inside the cloud glowed like gleaming amber. From the centre of the cloud came four living beings that looked human, except that each had four faces and two pairs of wings. Each had a human face in the front, the face of a lion on the right side; the face of an ox on the left side, and the face of an eagle at the back.' (Ezekiel 1:4-6, 10, NLT). So what's going on here?

God is giving Ezekiel a vision of his throne. And, of course, the throne of God represents the kingship and majesty of God. It's dazzling and awesome. These four beings around the throne are later called 'cherubim' (Ezekiel 10) - a bit different from the fat, winged 'cherub' babies of later church art! This whole vision's full of symbolism:

- There are four creatures. And the number four stands for completeness (it's used in this sense over 40 times in the vision of Ezekiel alone). So these creatures represent the whole creation: the man, human beings; the lion, wild beasts; the ox, domesticated animals; and the eagle, the bird kingdom.
- Also, each is the 'ruler' amongst its own kind: man rules over all creatures, the lion's the strongest of the wild beasts, the ox is strongest of the domesticated animals. And the eagle's the mightiest of the birds. And yet, says the writer, they're all below the throne of God. God alone is supreme ruler over all creatures.

And in this vision, the creatures are accompanied by some mysterious, huge wheels with rims covered in eyes. And these eyes represent God's omniscience. In other words, the fact that God sees everything and knows everything.

Incidentally, if you go to the British Museum and have a look at the sculptures from Babylonian temples and Babylonian art, you'll see lots of huge winged figures guarding temples. Especially figures with the bodies of oxen and lions. And in Babylonian art you'll see images of sacred trees guarded by winged creatures with human bodies and eagles' heads. So Ezekiel's vision uses some of the symbolic imagery of his culture, to underline the majesty of God.

So that's Ezekiel's vision. It's a weird vision, but full of meaning and symbolism. Especially to somebody who's used to seeing the art and sculpture of ancient Babylon. But then these same four creatures reappear in another vision around 95 AD, nearly 700 years after the time of Ezekiel. This time the visionary's a man called John, who recorded his vision in what we call the Book of Revelation. And John writes this:

'In the centre and around the throne were four living beings, each covered with eyes, front and back. The first of these living beings had the form of a lion; the second looked like an ox; the third had a human face; and the fourth had the form of an eagle with wings spread out as though in flight.' (Revelation 4:6,7, NLT)

Again, the four beings are pictured surrounding the throne of God. John's vision directly echoes the vision of Ezekiel, and it has similar symbolism.

What's it doing in the Book of Revelation? Well, we said last week that the first three chapters of Revelation are letters from the risen Jesus to specific churches in western Turkey. But then the focus shifts for the rest of the book. In chapters 4 and 5 we're given a glimpse into the throne room of heaven. We see a vision of God's majesty and glory, and then we see battle plans being drawn up there for the final conflict between good and evil. And then, from chapter 6 on, you see the battle plan unfolding: in very vivid, apocalyptic terms.

So these four creatures have important roles in both the Old and New Testaments. In both cases, they're in powerful visions of the throne of God.

Now, it wasn't long before a tradition arose in the early church: that each of the four creatures represents one of the four Gospel writers (or 'evangelists') – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Remember, these four creatures give glory to God, who's enthroned in majesty. And they direct our attention and worship to him. In a similar way, the four Gospel writers give glory to Jesus Christ, God's son. And they encourage us to worship him and put him centre-stage in our lives.

So the analogy stuck. And by about 400 AD, the church had agreed which creature represented which evangelist:

- Matthew = the human
- Mark = lion
- Luke = ox
- John = eagle.

So was the linking of each evangelist with their particular creature simply random? Well, not entirely. Anybody who reads the four Gospels will find that each one gives a slightly different picture of Jesus. Each one brings out different dimensions of who he is. The early church chose which of the living beings captured something of each evangelist's style. In particular, they looked at the very start of each Gospel:

- Matthew's gospel is represented by the human face, because he starts with the genealogy of Jesus - his human ancestry.
- Mark is the lion because he begins with the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness - and lions roar in deserted places!
- Luke is the ox, since the ox was a sacrificial animal for priests, and Luke highlights the role of the priest Zechariah (the father of John the Baptist) early on.
- John is the eagle, because an eagle soars high, just like the majestic opening of John's Gospel, which is vast and epic in scope: 'In the beginning was the Word,' (John 1:1).

So each creature came to represent a gospel writer. But these four creatures have also been used down the years as a kind of teaching aid. Because together they give a summary of the Gospel message: Jesus was born as a man, sacrificed (like an ox), rose victorious (like a royal lion), and ascended (like an eagle).

You see, in earlier ages most people couldn't read. So the symbols of these four living creatures were a kind of picture language. And these pictures reminded the people of all the things we've been talking about this morning.

- That the whole creation bows before the throne of God.
- That God is mightier than even the mightiest among his creation.
- That each of the Gospel writers offers us a distinct portrait of Jesus Christ. And as we read and study the gospels carefully, we can meet Jesus for ourselves.
- And finally, that Jesus Christ was born, died, rose and ascended, to bring us into a relationship with God.

So as you come forward for Communion, or a blessing, later in this service, do look up at the lion, the ox, the man and the eagle. These are figures who have such an important role in the vision of Ezekiel, and in the Book of Revelation. And ask God to use them, every time you see them, to teach you more about himself, to give you a fresh vision of the glory and majesty of God, and to draw you closer into a relationship with him. That's been their job for the past 2,700 years.