

Tidenham and Tutshill 14/1/24

Revelation 5: 1-10 – Worship

Prayer

I wonder how we got on with that first reading from Revelation? It is somewhat ironic that one of the most difficult – for us – books of the Bible is called Revelation – opening up, making clear. Perhaps we should rename it Obscurity or Mystification? We'll be going there in a minute.

But first – some important news that you may or may not have heard. Swansea City has a new manager – Luke Williams. That's football for some of you. Luke Williams has been entrusted with the authority now to shape the Swans for a brighter future. He can pick the team, set the strategy, and if he succeeds the fans will be singing his name and raising their arms in praise of the Swans.

Now Revelation – more a drama than a book, where the language and the symbols are drawn from the Old Testament and the time between the end of the Old Testament and the time of Jesus. All this was very familiar to people in the early church who were the first readers of this book as much as it is unfamiliar to us in the twenty-first century. The writer, John – we won't worry about which John, it was a fairly common name then – he is in the audience for this drama. And he is there both representing us and also there to report back to us about what is going on in this drama. Don't think – nice polite audience, think panto audience because John is invited to play a small part in the drama. *Oh yes, he is...* repeat...

The scene of this drama is God's throne-room; the one seated on the throne is God himself. And in his hand is a scroll. And this scroll is God's plan for the creation. But there is an issue; it is sealed up. No one can know God's plan. Worse than that – no one can put it into action. It is sealed up with seven seals – seven is the Biblical number of perfection. Stop a moment and reflect on what this might mean for us here and now. What's going on in the world now? Do you understand it? Conflict, climate change, messed up relationships...Can you see where it's going? Can you make it all come good?

Who is worthy? Who can do it? No-one. No politician, no academic, no religious leader... So John in the audience representing us is weeping. God might have a plan, but there is no one who can understand it let alone put it into action.

But wait – this is a drama after all. One of the characters onstage, an elder tells John – there is the Lion of Judah (not Tudor as I am told I thought when I first heard this as a child), the Root of David. Think Old Testament – Judah, David – the Messiah, God's powerful agent who will come to make it all right again. Think of the Lion – King of the jungle, although strictly king of the savannah not the jungle at all. Lion – powerful, majestic. How sad this week to hear of the death of JPR Williams, magnificent British and Irish Lion – rugby now – fearless, flowing hair... Lion – in the Old Testament – roaring in Ezekiel, fierce in Job, in Amos threatening judgment. We get the idea. There is one who is strong and powerful enough to open the scroll and unlock God's future plan.

But John has only heard of him. He wants to see him. Let's change briefly from stage to screen as the camera pans round to show by the throne not a Lion but a Lamb. The gentle, defenceless, lovely with mint sauce lamb. Old Testament again – lamb is the animal of sacrifice, and this lamb is standing *as if it had been slaughtered*. And then it gets seriously weird – seven horns and seven eyes. The horn is a symbol of power and authority and seven the number of perfection. Seven eyes – perfect sight and understanding and knowledge through the seven spirits of God. That seven is not numerical but John

is talking about the perfect Holy Spirit who mediates, links between God's throne and the earth. Here is the one who is worthy – the Lion and the Lamb. He has no name here, but we have had enough clues. This is Jesus, all-powerful, all-gentle. He bears the marks of the cross, the scars of sacrifice. He is the one who was killed and raised to conquer death. He holds the key of the present and the future. He is worthy.

And he is gathering a people – *saints* they are called *from every tribe and language and people and nation* – four terms. If seven is the number of perfection four is the number of the earth -the whole world. Jesus is bringing together a people from all the world to be a kingdom and priests to reign with him. We have to unpack this too, because it seems so remote from us here and now. Jesus is Lord and he is gathering us not to come to church and have a nice time, but to join in the new song, the chorus of praise to our Lord and Saviour. Sing! The elders in God's throne room have harps – make music. And pray – there is incense in heaven, thankfully not here – representing prayer and intercession. We bring our requests to the all-powerful one, the Lion, to the all-gentle one, the Lamb, the one who died for us and who lives.

This year in the parish we are looking at the theme of Worship, and the drama we have been looking at in our passage is a drama about worship. Three observations – which I am sure will be recurring as we look at the theme of worship. Christian worship has Jesus at the centre. That means, of course, we are not at the centre. Worship is not about what we like or don't like, making us feel good. Worship focuses on Jesus. It's a pity our reading stopped at verse 10 because we go on to read about myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

*Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honour and glory and blessing.*

Jesus is the focus of our worship.

Having said that, it doesn't always feel like Jesus is Lord who holds the answers and the power. The world is still a mess and it's hard to see a way forward. This book of Revelation was written for Christians who were facing persecution. The Roman Empire was all-powerful politically. They and we are living in the in-between times. Jesus is Lord, but his lordship is yet to be fully revealed. Keep the faith, keep trusting. I want to share with you a poem I wrote for Advent – which may or may not speak into this:

The dawn from on high shall break upon us
with starburst white hot shrapnel.
Maryam sits weeping with Rachel in
tunnels where vengeance is wreaked and conceived.

Gabriel is coming through still rubble streets.
His purpose is clear, while other eyes flit
fearfully searching for bread or a tin
of boiled chicken or surplus sardines.

Lo-Ammi deep rumbles secure in his tank,
phosphorus-tipped shells at command of AI,
the drone-driven destroyer.

Salvation comes to him, not from him.

While Maryam weeps,
one side of her Gospel, the other Jihad
and the child within her
will be born.

Keep the faith, keep trusting, keep worshiping. Worship is about being caught up by the Holy Spirit into something greater. Revelation gives us the drama of what God is doing, and we are there, not simply as spectators, dispassionate observers. Worship is not a spectator sport. We are there, part of that vast number drawn from every tribe and language and people and nation. Think of your team, pushing for that goal, for that try; you're up on your feet cheering them on; you're there adding your weight to that rolling maul, singing hymns and arias. We are caught up in worship, in the drama of heaven...