

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH EPIPHANY 2 WEEK 2 YEAR B 14 JANUARY 2018

Both the New Testament and the Gospel readings set for today are difficult passages to understand. The last two occasions we read them, on this second Sunday after Epiphany in 2015 and 2012, I preached on the gospel – Jesus speaking with Nathanael – so today I intend to focus on the reading from the Revelation to S. John the Divine. This John is our saint of dedication!

Many Christians find the book of Revelation, also called the Apocalypse, puzzling. It's full of visions, symbols and strange beasts. The first thing to bear in mind is that it was written at a time the church was being persecuted. At the opening of the book, the last in the New Testament, the writer identifies himself as John and says that he shares in the tribulation and the patient endurance of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He has been exiled to the island of Patmos, a rocky place west of the Turkish mainland.

Suffering communities produce a particular sort of writing. Conflicts on earth are seen as reflections of conflicts in the heavenly or spiritual realm. If the forces of goodness prevail in heaven, then victory will soon come on earth. So the message is one of reassurance: persevere, keep the faith, your deliverance is on its way. The book of Daniel in the Old Testament is an example of this sort of writing, and it has many links with the book of Revelation. The archangel Michael appears in both, as protector of Israel, and as leader of God's angels in their battle against the devil and his angels. You might have seen the sculpture outside Coventry cathedral.

A common mistake is to think of the book of Revelation as a timetable of events. Then people try to find predictions of World Wars, or identify the 'beast of the Apocalypse' with Napoleon or Hitler. I can think of one or two present world leaders who also fit the bill. But it makes more sense to read the book as a succession of scenes, each involving conflict, but ending with the triumph of good over evil. To be more specific, the triumph is Christ's, who rose from the dead. He is often portrayed as a Lamb – the Lamb of God, a lamb sacrificed for sin. In each scene he is praised for his victory over evil and his subsequent or forthcoming reign over all things.

Today's passage begins with John's vision of God on his throne holding a scroll with seven seals. An angel asks who is worthy to open the scroll; at first no one can be found, a cause of dismay to John. But then one of the twenty four elders, who dwell in God's presence and are often referred to in the book, declares that there is one who is worthy. Why twenty four elders? Well, twenty four is twelve plus twelve. There were twelve tribes of Israel; there were twelve apostles. The elders

represent the old Israel and the new Israel, the historical nation and the church, God's people in every age. It is the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, who is worthy. These are titles of Christ, emphasising his fulfilment of Jewish hopes. "He has conquered," the elder says.

Then the imagery changes, as it often does in dreams and visions, and John sees not a lion but a Lamb standing between the throne and the four living creatures and among the elders. That's a detailed description, perhaps rather confusing. The four living creatures are angelic beings representing all humans and beasts on earth – think of the four points of the compass. The placing of the Lamb among the elders, with God on one side and the living creatures on the other side, signifies that Jesus, the Lamb, is the link or mediator between God and mankind, indeed between God and all created things. It is through Jesus, in Jesus, with Jesus, that we are brought into God's presence. The human communities he is linked with – Israel and the Church – have a special place in heaven, God's presence. The link is emphasised by the description of the creatures and the elders falling to the ground in worship, holding bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints. Worship on earth becomes part of worship in heaven. What an immense privilege! Is this in our minds as we come to church on a Sunday? Are we serious yet joyful in our participation, knowing that what we offer reaches God's ears, or are we more concerned about sitting in our favourite place?

The number seven occurs several times in the reading. Seven denotes completeness – think of God resting on the seventh day of creation, because all had been done. The scroll is thoroughly sealed, but as the Lamb breaks one seal after another in the following sections of the book of Revelation, its contents are revealed. They describe what is to happen on earth, and most of it is not good news: warfare, famine, pestilence and death. But there are assurances of salvation for the servants of God. Today's reading ends with a hymn praising the Lamb for ransoming every tribe and language and people and nation (a fourfold description – think of the four living creatures), saving them by his death.

Most Christians on earth today are not suffering in the way John and the communities to which he wrote were suffering. Some are, however. For them, the message that victory has been won by Christ, and that their sufferings are known to God, is a reassurance. For us, who have a more comfortable life, the picture that S. John paints is more of a challenge: to live in the knowledge that heaven and earth are closely connected, that what we do on earth has an eternal dimension. Though we live in this world of good and evil, we have a presence where God dwells. We have been taken behind the scenes. God has a plan for all people, in which the church has a privileged position. The

responsibility that goes with this position is to proclaim Christ, present in his people, as the mediator between God and mankind, the one whose death and resurrection opens up salvation for all. Come, let us join our cheerful songs, with angels round the throne!