

Autumn 2014 Sermon Series: “You’ve Got Mail”

Introductory Précis of Revelation (All Chapter Numbers in Bold)

Author

The writer identifies himself as ‘John’ (1:1,4,9; 22:8). From as early as the second century, it was held that this ‘John’ was the apostle John. In the third century, an African bishop called Dionysius compared the style and language of Revelation with those of the gospel of John and the letters of 1, 2 and 3 John, and concluded that Revelation’s ‘John’ was a different writer. He suggested a man known as ‘John the Presbyter’. However, Dionysius failed to take into account how a person’s writing style can change as they grow older, and also how anyone writing an apocalyptic piece of literature, with its bizarre visions and dreamlike style, will inevitably write in a manner different from the usual. For that reason, the traditional view of the apostle John being the author, bears considerable weight.

Date of Writing

Revelation was written during a time of extreme persecution of Christians from the Roman Empire, sometime in the first century. Because of this, two possible dates have been suggested: the last part of Nero’s reign (AD 54-68), or the last part of Domitian’s reign (AD 81-96). Most expert theologians take the latter view and date the book around AD 95. It was written on the Greek island of Patmos (1:9), where early Christian teaching held that John was exiled to a Roman penal colony, for his Christian missionary work.

Background

In the latter first century, Rome began to reinforce the cult of emperor worship (having to call the emperor ‘lord’ and ‘saviour’). However, Christians maintained that Christ, not Caesar, was Lord, and they thus faced huge persecution from the Empire. John sees that the situation will only get worse before it gets better, so he writes to the churches of the Roman province of Asia (not the same as our modern continent of Asia), where this persecution is particularly prevalent, both to warn and encourage them.

Purpose

John wishes to remind the seven churches (equivalent perhaps to our modern dioceses, each containing many smaller congregations dotted around) that despite how things may appear, God is in full control of history. Although God’s people are suffering in the present, His salvation belongs to them. His judgement will fall on those responsible for the Church’s suffering, and ultimately, God will restore what was lost at the beginning of creation in Genesis 3.

Literary Genre

Revelation is a rare example in the Bible of apocalyptic literature. ‘Apocalypse’ does **not** mean ‘final destruction’ (as often assumed). In fact, it comes from a Greek word meaning ‘uncovering’. Thus apocalyptic literature is not *per se* a prophecy of the end times, but more an unveiling by God, through visions, of what is happening in the world and what God is going to do about it. The only other overt example of apocalyptic literature in the

Bible is the Old Testament book of Daniel (though traces of apocalyptic writing can also be found in other books, such as Ezekiel **38-39**, Isaiah **24-27**, Zechariah **12-14** and Joel **3**). Apocalyptic literature can be difficult to understand. This is intentional! Our *dreams* can be strange and hard to understand, but we often know that a dream has said something fundamental about our inner selves. So too here. God uses the strange, dreamlike images of vision to by-pass our human logic, and teach us about His sovereignty in all situations.

Moreover, it is almost certain that John's letters from the penal colony on Patmos were being monitored by the Roman authorities. Therefore, it is highly likely that John was also writing this denunciation of the Empire in a kind of code, which would not be understood by his Roman captors but would be by his Christian audience. Clever indeed!

A Breakdown of Revelation

The book, then, is an apocalypse, or unveiling, which Jesus gives to John through one of His angels (**1:1**). It begins in letter form (**1:4**), and it ends with a Paul-like grace (**22:21**). The risen Christ appears to John and orders him to write to the seven churches (**2-3**). The messages warn the complacent and the worldly, and encourage the faithful. Summoned into heaven, John sees God enthroned, holding a sealed scroll which no one can open. He hears that the lion of the tribe of Judah has won the right to open the scroll, and he sees standing by the throne a lamb bearing the marks of sacrificial slaughter (**4-5**). The Lamb's opening of the seals unleashes the first of three series of disasters, which represent God's wrath against an idolatrous and impenitent world: seven seals opened (**6; 8:1**), seven trumpets blown (**8-9**), and seven bowls poured out (**16**). Symbolic visions in between depict the opposing forces in cosmic war, which comes to a climax in **19**. The Lamb is victorious over the seven-headed beast (Satan's emissary, the Antichrist). The beast's city, 'Babylon' (probably meaning the Roman Empire), is destroyed and the beast is defeated. Satan is bound and the saints reign for 1000 years, until Satan is released for his final assault (**19:11-20:10**). Then comes God's judgement of the world, and a new heaven and earth. The holy city, Jerusalem, the bride (almost certainly representing Christ's Church), comes down from God, and all earth's splendour is gathered into it (**21-22**).

It is important to remember that, whilst Revelation may to some extent be a description of the end times and God's final victory over evil, it was also very much a message to John's first century compatriots about God's judgement of Rome, the oppressors of His Church. For example, Satan's 'number' is famously given as 666. The ancients did not use Arabic numbers as we do, but used the letters of the alphabet for numbers (a=1, b=2 etc). So by adding up numerical values, a number could represent a name. Nero Caesar, written in Hebrew letters, adds up to 666. Thus 'the beast' in Revelation represents both Satan (for us) and the horrendously wicked emperor Nero (for John's audience). Either way, the message is that the Lamb will ultimately win out over both (Jesus, in Greek lettering, adds up to 888, 8 being the number of completeness or wholeness). The message is that Jesus will complete all things and restore the cosmos to its pre-Fall wholeness. And because Scripture is true and relevant for all time, Revelation spoke to John's audience under Roman control, but it equally speaks to us today about the forces oppressing us (e.g. secularism in the west and non-freedom to practise in other parts of the world), and it gives a glimpse of how Jesus will return and 'make all things new' (**21:5**). Amen!

Autumn 2014 Housegroup Notes

Notes Pertaining to Sunday 7th September 2014

“You’ve Got Mail”: Week 1 – “Revelation: What’s It All About?”

Main Reading

Revelation 1: 1-20 (i.e. the whole chapter).

Background

Whilst imprisoned on the island of Patmos towards the end of his life, the apostle John hears and sees the Lord Jesus, who instructs him to write down the visions Jesus is about to show him, and then to send what he has written to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (in what is now western Turkey). Jesus commands John to write “what you have seen” (this vision), “what is now” (the current state of the seven churches) and “what will take place later” (what Jesus is going to do about it).

Ice-breaker – Either:

- 1) Have you ever had to tell some amazing news to someone, perhaps about something extraordinary you had witnessed? What was it, and how did you feel describing it? **Or:**
- 2) Have you ever witnessed what you think may have been a vision? Or perhaps a dream in which you really felt God was speaking to you? Can you describe it?

Study

Vs. 1-3:

1. This prologue is packed full of indications by John, that the work he is writing and which is to be read in the seven churches, is not of human origin but is to be viewed as Holy Scripture. Can you identify some of these indications or clues?

Vs. 4-8:

2. In verse 4, John passes on to the seven churches, greetings of grace and peace “from him who is, and who was, and who is to come”. John seems to be stressing the changelessness of God. Why would he do this? What point is he trying to make to his original audience, and indeed, to us?
3. In verse 6, John refers to “a kingdom [of] priests”. Who were God’s original “kingdom of priests”? (**Helpful hint:** see Exodus 19:6). Under the new covenant, who is it now? (**Helpful hint:** see 1 Peter 2: 5 and 9). If priests are God’s representatives to people,

and people's representatives before God, how can all of us (not just 'official' priests like the clergy) represent people before God, and God to people?

4. In verse 8, John refers to the Father as "the Almighty". This title is given to God ten times in the New Testament, nine of them being in Revelation (the only other instance is in James 5:4). What point is John reinforcing here?

Vs. 9-20:

5. One Sunday, John is praying in a deep, Spirit-induced meditation, when he hears a voice. Turning around, he sees Jesus standing among seven golden lampstands, holding seven stars and with a two-edged sword coming from His mouth. What do you think each of these things signifies? (**Helpful hint:** for the lampstands and stars, see verse 20; for the sword, see Hebrews 4:12.)
6. If Jesus is standing "among the lampstands" (v.13), and the lampstands represent "the seven churches" (v.20), what does this imagery imply?
7. The stars represent "the angels of the seven churches" (v. 20). This might mean supervisory angels, or it might mean the leaders/pastors of these churches, or it might mean the prevailing mindset of these churches. Either way, what does the fact that Jesus holds them in His right hand, tell us? In view of Jesus' later criticism of some of these churches, what does this further teach us?
8. Consider the description of Jesus in verses 13-16 with Daniel's description of God in Daniel 7:9. Then consider Jesus' self-description as "the First and the Last" (v. 17) to God's self-description as "the Alpha and the Omega" (v. 8). Finally, consider Jesus' self-reference as "the Living One" (v. 18) to OT references to "the living God" (e.g. Joshua 3:10; Psalm 84:2). What point are both Jesus and John making here?

Application

1. How does it help us to know that God does not change His attitude to us, even when we are fickle and change our attitude to Him and His service?
2. How does it help us to know that God is all-powerful, whatever situation we are in?
3. Has there ever been a time when you have wanted or tried to distance yourself from Jesus? Even in that period, could you still feel Him within your life, holding you and supporting you? If so, in what way? If not, what do you think drew you back to Him?
4. Have you ever felt chastised or rebuked by God, whilst still being loved and protected by Him? Would you be willing to share with the group the situation behind that?
5. Do you ever have doubts about the divinity of Jesus? If so, please do not be embarrassed to share this with the group. (Even some of the apostles had occasional, nagging uncertainties – see Matthew 28:17.) If you sometimes do have doubts, why do you think they appear? Is there anything we can do to confront them?

Autumn 2014 Housegroup Notes

Notes Pertaining to Sunday 14th September 2014

“You’ve Got Mail”: Week 2 – “The Church in Ephesus”

Main Reading

Revelation 2: 1-7.

Background

In chapter 1, Jesus appears to John and instructs him to write to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (what we call Asia Minor, in modern western Turkey). These churches, if visited in the order that they are listed, would form a rough circle. The first is the church in Ephesus, and Jesus instructs John what to write to this church, in verses 1-7 of chapter 2. Ephesus was the most important city of that area. It had a busy harbour, and lay at a crossroads of major trade routes; it was therefore a bustling commercial centre. Paul established a church here, probably in the early 50’s AD, and stayed for just over two years, during which time the church grew and flourished. Note, however, that sometime later – it may be as few as just 15 years later, but probably more like some 30-40 years later (see ‘Introductory Précis of Revelation’) – the church in Ephesus, though still doing some good work in the city, has lost its initial love for Jesus and/or the lost. This is what Jesus wants to tell the church, by dictating a letter that John will write down and send.

Ice-breaker

If you can remember, who was the first person you fell in love with? Why did you fall for this person? Did your affections subside at some point, and how did you feel about this?

Study

Vs. 1-3:

9. Theologians hold different views on who “the angel of the church” (v. 1) refers to. Some think it is literally a kind of guardian angel of the church. As the word ‘angel’ and its Greek derivative really mean ‘messenger’, some theologians think it means the pastor or leader of that church. Still others think each ‘angel’ is John’s personification (or summary) of each church’s general attitude and mindset. Which of these theories seems most plausible to you? What are the arguments for and against your choice?
10. This church is not without its qualities and things to say ‘well done’ for, and indeed, Jesus does begin by commending it. What were these commendable practices?

Vs. 4-6:

11. In this section, however, Jesus rebukes the church. Why? What has happened to it?
12. Do you get a sense that the Ephesians' good works described in vv. 2-3 outweigh their major fault of vv. 4-5, or vice-versa? Which seems more important to Jesus, that we love Him and others, or that we do lots of activities? (A marriage of the two is the ideal, of course, but if all the activity is not based on a foundation of love, what does Jesus have to say about this?)
13. In v. 5a, Jesus commands a 3-step response from the Ephesians. What is this?
14. In v. 5b, Jesus warns that if they do not respond as He wants, He will "remove your lampstand from its place." Given that the lampstand represents the church, what is Jesus saying about churches whose members do not love Him, each other and those outside their group?
15. It isn't known for sure, but most theologians think that the Nicolaitans of v. 6 were false teachers within the church who, wishing to compromise and make the church more palatable to the wider pagan society, taught that sexual licence and even idolatry were permissible for Christians living by grace. Are there any similarities between this and our own national church and society today? (Notice that both Jesus and the Ephesians hate the Nicolaitan *practices*, not the Nicolaitans themselves.)

V. 7:

16. However, what is Jesus' promise to those who heed His message, and who overcome (or persevere through) the lies and enticements of society at large? What does it mean to have "the right to eat from the tree of life", and what do you think is "the paradise of God"?

Application

1. The love which Jesus refers to in v. 4 may mean their initial love for Him, or love they once felt for each other as brothers and sisters, or love they once felt for humankind in general, or it could be a combination of all three. What is clear, however, is that this has waned, even though they are still working hard. What this shows is that individual Christians (and whole churches), can still do good works but really be going through the motions: we can forget or lose the original motivation for our Christian work (love), but continue as if on autopilot (or from other, more worldly motivations). Have you ever noticed this happening in your own Christian walk?
2. If ever this happens, does Jesus suggest your love, once gone, is gone forever, or can it be re-ignited? If so, how? Have you ever experienced a renewed love for Jesus and the world, having gone through a period of indifference?



Sermon 3: The Church in Smyrna

Date of Sermon: September 21, 2014

Reading: Revelation 2: 8-11

Background:

Smyrna was one of the 7 churches reviewed by Jesus in the book of Revelation. As we have learnt, 7 is a symbolic number in the Bible. In the Bible, the number 7 represents completeness. Thus these 7 churches represent all the congregations of the church throughout time. The churches are described as “*golden lampstands*” – representing their priceless value to God as they show the light of Christ in a dark world. The essential spirit of each church is described figuratively as an angel.

In the difficult times that Christians were living then and now, it’s important to remember that all the churches are *held* (Revelation 2:1) by God – whose omnipotence is revealed by his description as the “First and the Last” (1:17), the “Living One” (1:18) who....

walks (Rev. 2 verse 1b) – Jesus is present in the midst of his people, active, interested and involved in every church and who....

knows (Rev. 2 verse 2) everything about each church and the universe that He created, maintains and controls. God is sovereign.

As we read these 7 reports from Jesus, we’re invited to review our church and our personal life of discipleship from the perspective of Jesus. The Jesus who is magnificently revealed in Revelation as the King of Kings is also Lord of these 7 struggling congregations – this truth is a great encouragement.

In this study, we consider Jesus’ opinion of the church in Smyrna. Smyrna is Izmir in modern Turkey. At the time that this letter was written, the church contained a mixture of people including former Jews.

Smyrna had a large and lively Jewish population who worshipped in the synagogue. A faction of the members of the synagogue were intentionally and actively hostile to the Christians. This is part of the background to the letter.

Remember also that the Roman Empire was enforcing the practice of Emperor worship because the Emperor was deemed to be divine. This is also vital piece of background knowledge. The Christians were being persecuted by the Romans and this affected every aspect of their lives.

Ice-breaker:

Have you ever been picked on or discriminated against? Treated unfairly?

How did this make you feel?

Study: (see Helpful Hints)

In the church at Smyrna, the Lord finds nothing to condemn. But this letter to the church is important because it addresses the cost of discipleship and encourages us to look at our situation from the perspective of the majesty and sovereignty of Jesus that the book of Revelation reveals.

1. What can we tell about the situation in Smyrna from the text?

2. How are the Christians “rich” (verse 9b)

3. What do you think the following means “...I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and those who are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.” (verse 9b)

4. What does Jesus reveal to the Christians in Smyrna
 - a) about their present?
 - b) about their future?

5.
 - a) What do you think about the teaching given to the church in verse 10?
 - b) What experience have you had or witnessed of being faithful when you have been discriminated against (or persecuted) on account of your faith?

How did personal belief in the faithfulness and supremacy of Christ help you?

6. What do you think John is referring to when he concludes his letter “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death”? (verse 11).

Conclusion:

Take some time to identify places in the world where Christians are being persecuted and remember them in your prayers. You may like to consider signing up to receive regular information about these brothers and sisters and hold them in your regular prayers.

Have a look at the website of Christian Solidarity (www.csw.org.uk); Open Doors (www.opendoorsuk.org) and the website of Canon Andrew White, Vicar of St. George's, Baghdad (www.frrme.org).

Helpful Hints:

3. At this time, there was a long running controversy as to who was a true Jew – a person who belonged to God. In Romans 2:25-29, Paul gave the answer that the true sign of belonging to God is not obeying religious rules and possessing an outward mark on one's body (e.g. circumcision) but what one believes in one's heart/mind i.e. has someone's heart been regenerated by the receipt of the Holy Spirit.

With this in mind, John writes that he knows that members of the synagogue are slandering the Christians in Smyrna. They were slandering the Christians because they disagreed with their belief that Jesus was the Messiah.

It is generally accepted that there was another reason to explain why they were slandering the Christians to the Roman authorities. For pragmatic reasons (largely to keep the peace), the Romans had granted some exemptions to the Jews from taking part in the festivities of the Emperor cult. Given their dislike of the growing church, there is evidence to support the fact that some Jewish leaders were accusing the Christians of trying to claim these exemptions. The theologian and former Bishop Tom Wright writes:

"Perhaps it was accusations like that, with social and political consequences, that had given Smyrna's Christians a taste of poverty in an otherwise rich city (verse 9)?"¹

At first reading, the reference to the synagogue being a "synagogue of Satan" is understandably difficult. The explanation is as follows:

Satan is the "devil". This word comes from the Greek word "diabolos" meaning "accuser". Accordingly, given that members of the synagogue were slandering the Christians with accusations, they are literally accusers and opponents of Christians

4. Some Christians will be imprisoned on account of their faith and refusal to acknowledge Caesar as Lord. What's more, Christians will be persecuted.

Given John's figurative use of language in the book of Revelation, many biblical commentators suggest that the "ten days" is figurative since a "day" in John's writing sometimes means a general period of time. So "ten days" may mean a long time.

6. It is understandable to be afraid of persecution (particularly death) on account of one's faith. As we have learnt, this was the situation that Christians were confronting at the time that this letter was

¹ "Revelation For Everyone" N.T. Wright (2011 SPCK: page 17)

written. Accordingly, John addresses this in his letters that Jesus inspired him to write.

John refers to two deaths. The first is the bodily death which all will experience except those who will be alive when Christ returns. The “second death” refers to the ultimate fate of those who after Jesus’ glorious return and righteous judgement are consigned to eternal separation from God and His people.

Suggested Reading

“Revelation For Everyone” N.T. Wright (2011 SPCK)

“The Message of Revelation” Michael Wilcock (119 IVP – ‘Bible Speaks Today’ series)



Sermon 4: The Church in Pergamum

Date of Sermon: October 5, 2014

Reading: Revelation 2: 12-17

Background:

Pergamum was a city built on a hill 1,000 feet above the surrounding valley. Its name in Greek means “citadel”. It was an impressive city. In the middle of the city was an acropolis and a large number of temples to pagan Gods. Accordingly, Pergamum was regarded as being the primary religious city in the whole region of what is now western Turkey. As Liverpool influenced the music of the world in the late 1960’s.. so Pergamum influenced religion.

The pagan temples that dominated the city could be seen from miles around. The local inhabitants were proud of their architecture and their secular way of living. But to the small Christian community, these temples and their followers represented a threat – and a threat which the text reveals that they were not coping with.

Tom Wright writes: “The letter to the church in Pergamum refers to the city as the place “*where Satan has his throne*” (verse 13). Satan – “*the accuser*” or “*the devil*” is referred to elsewhere in Revelation as “*the ancient serpent*” (chapter 20 verse 2). We find links to Pergamum to explain this. Firstly, the city had a temple dedicated to the healing God Asclepius whose symbol was a serpent.”

Secondly as we considered in the introductory notes and sermon of this series, John implies that the Devil, at one level in the book of Revelation, “..is the imperial cult of Rome and its Emperors who consider themselves to be divine. Although John does not directly identify Rome as the Devil he believes that the Devil is using Rome for his own ends, not least to attack the church.” Significantly, Pergamum was the seat of the Roman governor for the whole region. He exercised the sword of authority. And Pergamum was famous for its support of worshipping the Roman Emperor.

Thus the issue that this letter raises is: How can a Christian live in a society like Pergamum? To what extent are Christians to assimilate with the culture? As we’ll read, a group within the church had assimilated some of the pagan values and practices into their faith. This was wrong.

The apostle Paul had addressed these issues in two letters (1 Corinthians 8-10 and Romans 14). He gave careful and nuanced advice: no compromise with pagan temples and cults, but flexibility on food that had been offered to idols. As we will learn, the problem in Pergamum was that some Christians had taken this permitted flexibility all the way into cultural assimilation. In this letter, Jesus replies.

So as we study the issue in the past, we are prompted to consider how we are to love today as “*salt and light*” within an ever changing society that denies or relativizes Christianity.

Ice-breaker:

Name some of the values that shape our society today? (E.g. freedom; pluralism etc.)

Study: (see Helpful Hints)

1. What does “*sharp double edged sword*” symbolize and who possesses it? (verse 12). Why is this phrase important?
2. What does Jesus commend the church for?
3. The problem in Pergamum was that the church was tolerating a group of _____ members who had allowed some of the values and practices of their pagan society into their faith. In so doing, they rejected the teaching of Paul. This _____ group was sexually immoral and culpable of idolatry. In the letter, the church is warned that unless _____ this issue is addressed, this group may undermine the _____ rest of the church as Balaam did in earlier times (see Numbers 22-25).

Thinking about today, how is the prevailing view of society undermining Christian faith? How ought we to respond and in what way?

(Note: I realize that this is a ‘big’ question.)

4. What is the “*hidden manna*” and “*white stone*”? What does John mean in _____ this verse? (verse 17)
5. What are some of the real challenges that you may have, as a Christian, to live _____ counter-culturally as a citizen of the Kingdom of God?

Conclusion:

From your discussion of question 5, spend some time supporting each other and praying together. Remember the promises of Jesus and seek His help and support from each other.

Helpful Hints:

1. In biblical times, possession of a sword denoted authority. Jesus is introduced as the one having a “sharp two-edged sword” - a description which comes from Revelation 1:16. It also refers back to and fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 49:2.

The sword comes from his mouth indicating that his word has power. Think of Jesus calming the storm on Lake Galilee; healing the sick; God creating the universe through his verbal command etc.

Through this symbolic reference, we are to remember that Jesus is all-powerful and he has authority to create, heal and judge. Jesus is more powerful than any government, person and Satan.

This truth should encourage and help us in our daily life because God is with his people.

4. On their journey through the wilderness from slavery to freedom in the Promised Land, God fed his people with “*manna*”. To the Christians in Pergamum who keep faith in God and honour him in their lives, whilst living in the wilderness of their times, He promises to give them “*hidden*” (or secret) manna to nourish them. The “*manna*” is the presence of God in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. It is hidden in the sense that God will only give it to those who accept Jesus as Lord.

Jesus also promises a “*white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it*” (verse 17). Pergamum’s impressive buildings were built from black local stone. When people wanted to put up inscriptions, they obtained white marble on which to carve the inscription. This was then affixed to the black buildings, where it stood out. In addition – and this may tie in with the “*hidden manna*” - there was the custom of guests at a feast being given a white stone with their name inscribed as a ticket of admission. There was also the practice whereby the names of the tribes of Israel were sewn on the white garment of the High Priest in the Temple. And Jesus is the Great High Priest because through Him we are led into the presence of God.

So putting all this together, the explanation may be:

When a person comes to faith in Jesus, they receive forgiveness of sins and a personal relationship with God (white stone) forever. White is the colour of purity and Jesus is pure and holy.

The explanation of a “new name” is difficult. It may refer to Isaiah 62:2 and 65:15 where the prophet states that the holy people of God will be given a “new name” by God. This may simply be that we are redeemed and have a new identity before God. The redeemed possess a personal relationship with Him and are beloved members of His kingdom.

Tom Wright develops this by suggesting that just as lovers may have an intimate and private name for each other, believers enjoy an intimate relationship with God.

Whatever the meanings of “*hidden*” and “*white stone*” are, the overall teaching is that to all believers who are faithful and live counter-culturally for the Kingdom of God, Jesus promises His presence, provision and intimacy with Him today and then for eternity. Jesus is the one who has authority. We are to be confident

in Him and honour Him - not the world.

