

Did you see the video of the goodwill basketball match between America and China last week?

Here is a photo from the match:



The American team were accompanying the Vice President on a Relationship building visit to China

Whilst we don't brawl, there can be similar tension and fall out amongst Christians over hot topics, and Unfortunately Revelation tends to be avoided because of differing opinions about how to interpret it.

This is particularly lamentable when Revelation is the only book which carries a blessing for those who read it to the church, and for those who hear it and take it to heart:

Rev 1:3 Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

So this morning – my prayer is that together we would be blessed as we listen to the message of Revelation.

One of the reasons the book is difficult to understand is that it is written in three literary genres - Epistle, Apocalypse and Prophecy.

First it is an epistle, a letter – to real people who had been under the terror of persecution for 30 years or so.

- The Jews' persecution of Christians
- Nero's Persecution of The Christians
- Sacking of Jerusalem and the dispersal of the Church leaders

Nero was particularly cruel and sadistic, towards Christians. It is widely suspected that a Fire which ravaged 10 of Rome's 14 districts had been started by Nero in response to his plans for a New Palace and opulent Gardens having been rejected by the city fathers, and so to divert suspicion from himself, he blamed the new sect called the Christians and so a wave of persecution and rage was unleashed on Christians in the city of Rome in particular, mostly by Nero himself. He had them rounded up, some were torn to death by dogs, some were crucified and possibly the most

gruesome of all, some were wrapped in animal skins which were soaked in oil, they were raised on poles all over his garden and then set alight to provide lighting for his sadistic and immoral parties. Even his immediate successors hated him so much that they destroyed or defaced anything he had erected in his own honour.

According to church tradition, Peter was crucified upside down during this period of persecution and Paul was beheaded.

We have reliable accounts from the early church fathers of what happened to the apostles.

6 were crucified
3 were beheaded
2 were hacked to death
1 was thrown to his death

Only John was left and the signs were that persecution would continue for some time even after Nero committed suicide:

Dirce

The Romans were very creative in their entertainment:

They loved to play out the Greek Myths in real life. There was one story, which ended with the death of the villainess – her name was Dirce who in the story is tied to the horns of a bull, who then tears her apart.

When we put on a play we have ways of faking death, but the Romans went further – they would incorporate their persecution of Christians in their plays and so there were christian women who because they worshiped Jesus as saviour and Lord, they were tied to a real live bull at the end of the play, and the bull would gore her to death in front of the baying Roman audience.¹

In order to persecute all Christians, it wasn't necessary for all of them to be martyred – because by persecuting a few Christians, fear spreads, and causes every Christian to consider their faith and whether or not they are prepared to die for their faith

But despite this persecution, people were becoming Believers and the church continued to grow.

¹ This scene was apparently recreated in spectacles in the Roman arena. [Clement](#), in his First Letter to the Corinthians, recounts how Christian women were [martyred](#).

We are seeing this phenomenon today – most famously in China where under persecution the number of Christians has grown from 1.2 million in 1950 to 30 million today.

If being a Christians attracts so much opposition, then why would anyone ever choose to become a Christian?

Well, the answer is that when you realise the treasure that Jesus is - you will go through anything for him. And that has been the testimony of so many martyrs and persecuted Christians down through the years.

So John finds himself nearing the end of his life, his band of brothers have all been martyred, and he is exiled in Patmos. It tells us that it was the Lords Day and he was in the Spirit.

What a testimony for an old saint,– John was ‘In the Spirit’ – he wasn’t feeling sorry for himself and moaning, he was in sweet relationship with the one person who would never leave him – Jesus. Behold I am with you always! So John is in the Spirit, worshipping Jesus and he receives this Revelation for seven churches in Turkey.

Think of how they responded when John writes to them to tell them that Jesus came to him in a vision with a message for each of these churches!

The messages for the seven churches are quite specific. Jesus commends them for the good things they are doing, but he also points out some areas where they need to repent and return to him.

This gives us an interesting insight into the responsibility of Christians facing persecution. They are not perfect, and even though they are facing persecution Jesus still requires them to live everyday godly lives, for example ensuring they keep their doctrine pure – even when facing the prospect of being tied to the horns of a bull. You may not think doctrine is much of an issue – but Jesus does he knows that right doctrine is necessary in his church

Can you imagine the impact on those first readers -Jesus has pinpointed their weaknesses and highlighted some issues – they would have been very motivated to obey him.

Love Jesus above everything (Ephesus)

Do not be afraid of persecution (Smyrna)

Repent of sexual immorality (Pergamum & Thyatira)

Reject false teaching (Pergamum and Thyatira)

Waken up and come to life (Sardis)

Keep going despite satanic opposition (Phil.)

Do not let your faith grow lukewarm (Laodicea)

But this book was not just for them, it is for us too – and the issues that mattered to Jesus in the first century church matter to Jesus today.

So let's stop in the sermon for a few moments, and reflect on the issues that Jesus wants us to be concerned about. I am going to put them on the screen, and invite you to pray about them – maybe a couple of you would pray for all of us in these areas:

Love Jesus above everything (Ephesus)

Do not be afraid of persecution (Smyrna)

Repent of sexual immorality (Pergamum & Thyatira)

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Waken up and come to life (Sardis)

Keep going despite satanic opposition (Phil.)

Do not let your faith grow lukewarm (Laodicea)

So Revelation is a letter, but it is also another form of literary genre – Apocalypse. You will know that Daniel and Ezekiel fall into this style of writing. The word apocalypse means an unveiling.

It is a pulling back of the veil, it is letting us see into the reality of the spiritual realms,

In Chapter 5 John brings us into the throne room in heaven, and the point of this is to help us have confidence that God is still on the throne, and that he is working out his purposes.

Let's break into Rev 5: 6ff

In this unveiling we see what John's flock need to hear – that in the reality of heaven Jesus is worshipped as the lamb who was slain, there are multitudes of choirs singing praise to the lamb, and the heavenly beings and the elders fall in worship of the lamb.

What a vision for this small group of Christians called to live holy lives as they anticipate persecution.

And this is true today – just as they were called to live out lives of faith in the lamb that was slain, so too are we. And whilst we live these lives out on this earth in our weaknesses and in our sexual temptations and in our doctrinal struggles, we are living out lives of worship to the one they are bowing before in heaven.

As we move into chapter 6 we read about a scroll with seven seals, we will concentrate on five of these seals, to give a flavour the four horsemen of the Apocalypse



Lets read verses 1-8

What we have here seems a bit strange. In each case a horse and rider is summoned into heaven, then dispatched to the earth to wreak havoc:

- The White Horse is dispatched to unleash Invasion and Conquest.
- The Red Horse is dispatched to unleash civil war and rebellion.
- The Black Horse is dispatched to unleash famine for some and luxurious living for others
- The Pale horse is dispatched to unleash disease, plague, epidemics and death of all kinds

What we see here are terrible events and happenings being unleashed in the world.

All of these events are constant realities throughout history – from this book was written, right up to present day – they continue to happen.

Chris Wright ² explains it thus:

² See Chris Wright, The God I don't Understand.

'John's vision of the four horsemen is intended to assert Christ's authority over a world of hard facts'

These horsemen do have power, but theirs is temporary, and subject to God's sovereign will as to when to give it and when to remove it.

Wright goes on to say that:

'The Lamb who was slain is the one who opens the scroll. It was by his death that Jesus became worthy to open the scroll. This means that Christ's power to control these evil forces is the same power he exerted on the cross. The cross was the worst that human evil and rebellion against God could do... the powers of evil, satanic allied with human, were ranged against Christ and hurled their worst at him.'

But Jesus, the perfect lamb of God, defeated them by his self-sacrificial obedience, and in calling us to follow him he tells us that just as he suffered in this world, so we will also:

Lets read the opening of the fifth seal:

6:9 When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

10 They called out in a loud voice, How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

11 Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow-servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been was completed.

Think of the encouragement this vision was for John and for the seven churches. 'Wait a little longer until the number has been completed.'

This vision, which is at the heart of the book of Revelation, is so crucial to the church today.

Because the church will always face persecution, and this book of revelation is crucial for the parts of the world like North Korea where systematic persecution is clearly happening to our brothers and sisters today.

Leave a legacy for Bible Translation.

Bible Translation of Revelation crucial for the church today – especially persecuted church.

Rev 7

¹³Then one of the elders asked me, These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?

¹⁴ I answered, Sir, you know. And he said, These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

¹⁵ Therefore,

they are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will spread his tent over them.

¹⁶ Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat upon them, nor any scorching heat.

¹⁷ For the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes

And that leads us to the final section – Prophecy.

The closing chapters of revelation give us some of the most hope filled verses in the book, and in the Bible.

In these last chapters we see a huge contrast between the City of Babylon and the City called the new Jerusalem.

Let's read 21:1-4

Earlier in Revelation John identified the seat of the evil in the world as being in the City of Rome – the city built on seven hills. This imagery was unmistakable for the initial recipients, it is not that the seat of evil always has been and always will be Rome, it is symbolic for the places in this world where the power of this world is concentrated. There are concentrated powers in Belfast as there are in every city in the world. The call to the church is to become a city within a city.

Whilst we wait for the New Jerusalem we are to bring the values of that new city to our city.

Remember the lessons we have learned on the way – God is on a mission to bless all nations in this world, and he calls us to do that

- To be a Kingdom where God is genuinely worshipped in peoples' hearts
- A Kingdom where all people are treated lovingly and justly
- To be a kingdom that shines brightly by the good deeds that are done.

Our good deeds may seem puny here and you may ask what differences will this make in the light of everything – look at the riots in England – what can one person do?

GOOD DEEDS!!!

The French Resistance Movement

There were dark days for the French Resistance Movement, and they seemed so insignificant against the might of Nazi Germany. If you had asked them did they not think their task was futile they would have answered?

'While we struggle against the forces which now dominate our nation, there is a huge force coming from across the channel, and we are making the way ready for them.'

Rev 14 :13 Then I heard a voice from heaven say, Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. Yes, says the Spirit, they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them.

Let's do all we can to create a safe place for people, and Let's do all we can to introduce them to the Lamb who is slain, and let's do all we can to wipe away every tear –

What a dream for here and now....but it will be nothing compared to the day that is coming: a day when the city of God will come amongst us, and the pain of suffering and death and the tears they bring will be wiped away, and God himself will move amongst us.

Lets Pray:

Until that Day we remember the lamb that was slain in communion....

⁹ After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.

¹⁰ And they cried out in a loud voice:

Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.

¹¹All the angels were standing round the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures. They fell down on their faces before the throne and worshipped God,

¹² saying:

Amen! Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honour and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!