

Sermon 13 September 2020 The message of Revelation is ‘worship’

If I was to ask you, ‘What is the message of the book of Revelation in a nutshell’, what would you say? I think many people would say something like ‘It’s a timetable of the events of the end of the world’, or something like that. What would you think if I said, ‘The message of Revelation is ‘worship’?’ The word ‘worship’ appears 24 times in the 22 chapters of the book and big sections of it describe the worship of God’s people in heaven. Worship is a central part of life in heaven. What else can one do, but worship when one is brought into the glorious presence of Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords

This last book of the NT is in many ways a summary of the rest of Scripture. The book of Revelation has 404 verses and in those verses there are 518 references from the rest of the Bible, mostly from the Old Testament. There is no picture or image in the book which hasn’t already been mentioned somewhere else in the Bible. So, in many ways the Book of Rev looks back as much as it looks forward. It puts the message of Scripture into a nutshell and that message says in effect, ‘The perfect world that God created has been ruined by the evil of Satan and the sin of humans, and so humans, whom God created for fellowship with Him have turned their backs on Him and separated themselves from Him. But God would not allow evil to have the last say. And through Jesus and His death and resurrection God has created a new humanity and He is creating a New Earth and a New Heaven for this new humanity – a new earth for a new people. And in that new heaven the atmosphere is one of worship.

John tells us that the first thing he sees in his vision of heaven is a throne. This throne is the central point of the scene before him. The worship is focused on the one on the throne. In the same way, worship focuses us; it centres us. In worship God gathers His people to Himself as centre. As we worship on our own and as we worship together, our lives are brought into alignment; they are recentred. What better way to start a day, than in recentring our lives on Jesus Christ? What better way to start the week than in worship together, focusing our lives afresh on the Lord?

There are those lovely words of the hymnwriter, John Whittier: ‘Drop Thy still dews of quietness, till all our strivings cease; take from our souls the strain and stress, and let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace.’ In worship our lives are reordered, recentred. If we don’t have that centre our lives can become eccentric. Eccentric means off-centre, and that is the danger if we do not find our centre in God through worship.

Eugene Petersen puts it this way, ‘People who do not worship live in a vast shopping mall where they go from shop to shop, expending enormous amounts of energy and making endless trips to meet first this need and then that. Life lurches from one satisfaction to another, fuelled by the successive illusions that purchasing this outfit or that car, eating this meal or drinking that beverage will centre life and give it coherence’.

Many of the Psalms speak of magnifying the Lord. To magnify is to enlarge. In worship we enlarge our image of God; we remind ourselves of how great God is. We remind ourselves of the greatness of His power, the greatness of His love and mercy, the greatness of His faithfulness and dependability. And in that way we bring things back into perspective. Instead of magnifying the problems and the other negatives of life and putting all the focus on them, we put our focus again on God.

I’m reminded of the words of that lovely old song, ‘Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in His wonderful face; and the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace.’ The things of earth, the concerns of my life and the world are brought into proper perspective. We don’t discount them, but we now see them in better perspective as we remember God’s greatness and His ability to carry us through whatever lies before us.

In worship we are not only reminded of who God is, but also of who we are. We are reminded that we are God’s beloved; we are reminded that in Jesus we are ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. Worship reminds us of who we are and whose we are. To worship is to ‘turn our eyes anew on Jesus, and to look full in his wonderful face’.

Speaking of songs, much of the worship in heaven seems to be through singing. Three times it is mentioned in Revelation 5. In v 9 we read, 'And they sang a new song: You are worthy...' Then v 12, 'In a loud voice they sang: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain...' And finally v 13, 'Every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea was singing, 'To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power forever and ever!'. The four living creatures said, 'Amen', and the elders fell down and worshipped.

Someone has said, 'The one who sings prays twice'. Some attribute those words to St Augustine. But whether it was him or not doesn't matter much – it remains a lovely thought. Music and song are a marvellous vehicle for expressing our praise and worship to God. Take for example these words in Rev 19, 'Hallelujah, for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth... and the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ and He shall reign forever and ever'. Those words could speak to me, but how much more when they are accompanied by the wonderful music to which Handel put them in the Hallelujah Chorus.

When someone in church has some strong emotion inside them, it is often in the singing of a hymn or song that the emotion is felt most strongly and may well come to the surface in tears. Why is that? I'm not a psychologist, but I think that singing, being a physical activity, connects the physical part of us with the thoughts that may otherwise be just that – thoughts and nothing more. Somehow singing enables us to feel and express the emotions that may otherwise remain trapped inside us.

Our response to God, just like our response to anyone we love, shouldn't be limited to the thoughts in our mind. How impoverished our lives would be if we didn't express the love we have for someone through our physical being – the loving look in our eyes; the loving touch through our hands and lips; the loving sound of words spoken or put to music in a love song. In the same way our worship becomes impoverished when it is just thoughts in our head. When that happens, instead of worship being a celebration it is rather just a 'cerebration' – a cerebral exercise. The Psalms are the hymnbook of the Old Testament. And they are full of emotions – exuberant joy, passionate love, deep brokenness of heart and brokenness of spirit, anger against enemies and sometimes even against God Himself.

Maybe we are so scared of emotionalism that we block any emotion at all. Worship which is just emotionalism is not true worship; but equally, worship devoid of any emotion is not true worship either. We are not just spiritual beings – we are also emotional and physical beings, and so the more of ourselves that enters into our worship the more meaningful our worship will be. If we find that kneeling or raising hands can enhance our worship, we should feel free to do so, but without making others feel that they need to worship in the same way.

In v1 of chapter 4 John tells us, 'I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven.' That door remains open for us. The way in is through worship – worship on our own and worship together. It is the access into the throne room of Jesus and you and I are invited to enter.

Amen