

Flis Banks, Reader
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
November 24, 2018 ~ ““Christ the King””

Revelation (Ch 1 Vs4-8)

Our two readings today are both attributed to someone called John, but apart from that, they have not many things in common. The Gospel, like the other Gospels, is written in a narrative style, recording actual events in the life of Jesus, in a way which is easy for us to relate to our historical understanding of what occurred in first century Palestine. The Revelation to St John is written in a totally different genre, the apocalyptic, which is unrelated to history as it actually occurred, or even as it will occur, but rather records what might occur at the end of history, following the direct intervention of God. That is, the fate of the world has been determined, and John records his visions of how the world will be terminated in its current form, along with most of its inhabitants, and replaced by a new world, under the direct rule of God.

The two books were almost certainly not written by the same John – that is the consensus of almost all authoritative biblical scholars, and the very different styles of the two books make it easy to believe. But they do have some things in common. Both speak in terms of Jesus’ Kingdom being a matter of heavenly matters, not earthly ones. Both were written around about the end of the first century, about 70 years after the death of Jesus, when Christianity was increasingly established as a distinct religion, but under severe persecution by the Roman Emperors, Nero and Domitian. And both were recorded, respected and distributed among early Christian writing, and were the subject of such a consensus of authenticity that they were included in today’s bible, as agreed among the main church traditions during the fourth century.

Apocalyptic writing has some things in common with prophesy and with wisdom writing, but it is clearly distinct from either. Prophecy relates to events that happen within history. In the Old Testament, the prophets in good times

often predict the scattering of peoples and domination by foreign powers due to complacency or disobedience of God's Law. In bad times, they often predict improvement in the historical situation - the return to Jerusalem, for example, encouraging exiled peoples to hold fast to the faith. Wisdom writing is beautiful and morally valuable, but typically does not relate to any specific period, worldly or other worldly.

Apocalyptic writing is typically written in times where things are so bad that the writer can foresee no improvement within a historical context, but only by the sweeping away of the earth in its current physical form, and replacement with something so completely different, that it cannot be thought of in terms of a regular historical progression. It can use very vivid imagery, often esoteric - that is difficult to interpret, especially outside the context of the audience for whom it was originally written.

Revelation is just such an apocalypse. It is not the only one in the Bible. There are others in the Apocrypha, or as sections of Old Testament books - for example in a large chunk of the book of Daniel. There were also several that we know about, which were written in periods close to the time that Revelation was written, but they never achieved the same consensus among Christians. They made people uncomfortable by a growing feeling of their lack of consistency with God's message, as revealed by the teaching of Jesus, and so were not included in the New Testament as we know it. In contrast, Revelation is completely consistent with Christianity, in both its message and its imagery, however distant it is from any scientific or historic reality, and however esoteric or to our eyes and in some ways incoherent.

Revelation is a wonderful and beautiful book, sections of which are regularly read in church and in private by Christians, and which inspire us with an absolute conviction in the power of God, to ultimately defeat evil and bring us to a new and perfect world - just as John was convinced in the penning his Revelation. Some people have believed that Revelation can also be read as a Guide to how the world will end in a historic and very concrete way - so far, they have all been wrong, proved by the world's continued existence.

Revelation cannot be used as a predictor, in the way that much prophesy could. It cannot be held to be consistent with history or science. But it can absolutely confirm our conviction that history and science are not everything that exist. Even if history and science lead to absolute disaster and devastation, there will be hope. God's power is not bounded by such earthly matters, and His power will extend beyond the end of this world, this galaxy and this universe. This book cannot be interpreted in any concrete sense, but rather finds its full meaning when it elicits feelings and emotions which need not, nor should, be conceptualised in worldly terms.

Amen.