

## Revelation 20

In my days in the armed forces, I had a variety of security roles. And one of them, was car door opener to a VIP. Now, there was slightly more involved to car door opening than you might think – but I had been carefully trained and had acquired great skill in the art of car-door opening. And on one occasion, the VIP was a member of the royal family – so I had turned out in uniform, my number one uniform, immaculate and flawless. And as the Black Bentley arrived at the corner of the road, on the eastern horizon appear the silhouette of a pigeon. But this was no ordinary pigeon. This was a pigeon with digestive problems. With such severe digestive problems, I am surprised he was able to part company with the ground. And the pigeon arrived directly above me, as the black Bentley arrived in front of me. And as I opened the door, the pigeon opened his bowels – and with lazer-guided precision, he downloaded contents of his bowels landed across my flawless uniform like a tin of grey paint across my uniform. The VIP looked at me and laughed, and I didn't have the sense he was laughing with me. And I was in trouble.

Today's passage is largely concerned with judgement of God, a reality Christians have feared throughout history. Knowing, that when we stand before God – even if we have the flawless uniform – we are going to be in trouble, because no one is perfect, and God is harsh. Today's passage is one of the major sources of this view of judgement.

If preaching with a view was ever about trying to impress a congregation with a sermon, Revelation 20, is perhaps the un-wisest of texts to choose. Revelation as a whole is a notoriously difficult text to interpret – and I understand Dave has brought you all the way through the book.

I suppose my own take on this text, is that it is a real letter, written by a real person, to real people, with real problems. In all likelihood, its author is a political prisoner, trying to encourage Christians to maintain a faithful Christian witness in the face of a hostile Roman Empire. And with the empire vetting every communication John is writing – it is best to write in a genre that few pagans would understand: Apocalyptic!

The context then, is one of persecution. And it's easy to have a Romantic view of persecution – that it can only do the church good, that it purifies our worship and roots out those people who are not serious about their relationship with God. There is a story of a church in South Korea, where two gunmen burst in, half way through the service and shouted, “if you're not a Christian, get out.” And church half emptied, and the gunmen put their guns down and said, “right, now we can worship God properly.” It sounded true when I heard it, and you might be forgiven for thinking – ah, persecution would be good for us! But the reality is that persecution hurts – even in our own country, before we start to consider the atrocities inflicted on some people throughout the world, simply because they were Christian.

When I was a soldier, I used to get teased for being a Christian, but the guy next to me was teased for being from Liverpool, and someone else was teased for being 18feet tall. Being teased simply for being a Christian was a compliment. But then, in the Roman empire, Christians were not persecuted simply because they were Christian. They were persecuted because of how following Jesus affected their lives. There were thousands of religions throughout the Roman empire, all of them tolerated because they were practiced in private. There was no conflict between these private, mystic beliefs – and coming out in public to confess that Caesar was Lord.

But ... the moment that you claimed Jesus is Lord, there was a conflict. If you claim that Jesus is Lord, he is Lord, not just of your private, personal beliefs. He is Lord of everything – not just the spiritual part of life, but Lord of everything. To claim that Jesus is Lord, is to claim that Caesar was not. And that is why Christians, unlike the other religions, were in so much trouble. They threatened the smooth running of the Empire.

Now, throughout Revelation, there are two images of Apocalyptic language that describe how the empire function. The beast and the whore. The beast, refers to the Roman military machine – its unrivalled power, the futility of resistance, the overwhelming display of force – the beast. But then, to run an empire, you cannot simply rely on military power. People need to be seduced into seeing all that the empire stands for is good. If you can get people to worship Caesar and all that he stands for, you don't need to police your empire so carefully. You're less likely to have riot and rebellion. And so the image of the whore, is that of the economic allure of Rome and all that it brings. The beast and the whore.

Now the beast is impossible to resist, but Christians did it anyway. They continued to claim Jesus as Lord and died as a result. Now, Jesus himself of course, had been crucified, he had died the death of a rebel against Rome. And for those who followed Jesus, his death was not simply a personal disaster. The death of Jesus was the victory of the beast. When the Son of God was crucified, the Kingdom of God was defeated – that is how it looked. God had lost control of his universe, and there was no longer any hope or justice. Only the inevitable victories of evil over good. But ... the story of Jesus did not end on Good Friday.

When Jesus was raised from the dead – he is vindicated. Death is defeated, the power of satan is overcome, the kingdom of God is coming. Now, of course, Jesus is not the last one to face death. Those who first read this text were a persecuted people. This is a text written for persecuted people, who would have known martyrs for the face, and who may well have to face martyrdom themselves.

So look at what happens in the text. Martyrs, having been through the mill already, are not to face the judgement that everyone else must face. Just like Jesus was not defeated by his death, so the martyrs have not been defeated by the beast. And who is it running the universe? Caesar and his empire? The beast is defeated, and it is the martyrs, the very ones who appear to have been defeated, who are now reigning with Christ.

So – for those whose loved ones have faced martyrdom, and who may well face it themselves, such a death looks like the ultimate victory of evil over good. But what John achieves here in the text, is to show that – at the very moment the beast creates martyrs – by putting martyrs to death, the destruction of the beast and the vindication of martyrs is assured.

This thousand year reign of the martyrs then – doesn't have to be a literal thousand years. This is not how it would have been read by a first century Jew in this situation. The thousand years speaks of the sheer magnitude of the vindication of those who suffer and die for the sake of the kingdom of God. The apostle John was not the last to use the idea of a thousand years this way. Think of Winston Churchill's speech, exhorting British commonwealth as the only people resisting a hostile empire, to ready themselves for action: Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves, that if the British Empire and her commonwealth, last for a thousand years, men will still say – this was their finest hour.

The thousand years here is nothing to do with an imagined future. It has everything to do with the present.

In Revelation, there clearly is reference here to the second coming of Christ, the defeat of evil, the destruction of Satan. And there is talk of the judgement that we all must face – everyone, except the martyrs – whose spilt blood exempts them. They have faced horror enough.

I wonder if we can, for a moment, hear John, try to stand as close as we can to him, and see what he's pointing to. The great white throne, the one seated on it, from whom heaven and earth flee away. He's not pictured this way because he is a cold judge – he has already embraced these martyrs. He is pictured this way, because by comparison – the all-encompassing, unassailable power of Caesar looks pitiful. This is not the God defeated by the Roman execution stake – but a God who is vindicated by it. But a God of judgement nevertheless.

When my oldest boy was about 2, I remember watching him while he slept. He looked frighteningly like me, but without the imperfections, and the mistakes, and the sin and the mess. And, for me, as I looked at him – I learned something of what genuine conviction from the Holy Spirit felt like. The most deeply felt form of judgement, is that encountered when we are confronted by sheer beauty. When we see beauty, the great white throne – you don't need to be hit with stick or shouted at by a sergeant major. Beauty carries its own judgement, and makes the whole world look different.

If we can stand next to John and see this throne he is pointing to – what do we see? What affect does it have on us? What does it highlight in your life? What tension do you feel between the call to worship Caesar, and the call to worship this Christ? And what difference will this make to the world around us?

I'm not sure how we see Christianity in the world from our relatively comfortable western homes. Whether we see it as a minority sect that isn't much use against the moral and economic and ecological injustices of our day. Whether, actually, we see ourselves as pretty powerless as Christians. Or whether we prefer to see our faith as something private that has little to do with the realities of the world out there.

Well, this passage is a reminder that these powerless, impoverished and insignificant believers, are in reality locked into the heart of who God is and how the world works. The martyrs, apparently defeated, the epitome of powerlessness, are actually the ones who exert real power – that in the long term – the thousand years - will bring down the empire. And the question it throws back onto us is the extent of our engagement with how the world works.

The Roman empire, like every other in history and right up to today, is largely concerned with engineering efficiency so that wealth is transported from the powerless to the powerful.

We don't have to look too hard at how this is true in our own present context. There are reckoned to be at least twenty millionaires on the cabinet of our government, including the prime minister and the deputy prime minister. The chancellor is a multi-millionaire. Refusing to exact taxes due from Corporations, but sending threatening letters to a family who've accidentally been overpaid by £200. This will be the focus of this evening – but it's

one example of how Caesar is worshipped today. As Christians, are we content with this modern-day worship of the beast and the whore? Or do we dare to call Jesus, Lord?

When we aspire to the German car on the pathway of our block-paved drive in front of our five-bedroom house – and when we aim for this Disneyfied life above all else, in which Christianity becomes nothing more than our ticket to heaven to round off the picture-perfect western lifestyle, who are we worshipping. And do we dare to call Jesus, Lord?

Or if we look at the massive economic imbalances of our age – when we do become aware that, since we came to church this morning over a thousand children have died as a result of preventable disease... do we excuse ourselves from caring too much because it's impossible to change the way that the world works, are we complicit in worshipping the beast? Or do we dare to call Jesus, Lord?

We are about to celebrate communion, being part of the body of Christ. We are about to share something of the defeat and death that Jesus himself faced, and the martyrs faced after him. There is a death that is remembered and embodied – a sacrificed recognised by those who call Jesus Lord. But there is resurrection here too. Vindication – a taste of being forgiven, restored, remade in his image. In this minuscule token of bread and wine, we share a meal. Here we encounter beauty, a beauty that will change us, and change the world – if we dare to share this meal, and call Jesus Lord.

I don't believe it's the place of a sermon to spell out the practicalities of how to change the world. God's gift of preaching, is a gift to the whole church – because if it really is God who is encountered here in our worship – then changing our lives and changing the world is going to happen. If we dare to call Jesus Lord.

