

Kiama Anglican Church**May 3, 2020****‘One Lord’**Daniel 7:9-10; 13-14Revelation 1:1-20

What happens to us all in a time of lockdown, of physical distancing and self-isolation? Our world closes in on us, the boundaries of our lives contract, we begin to talk about our ‘travels’ as travelling from the house to the backyard! We maintain strict physical distance, cutting ourselves off from normal social interaction, only communicating electronically or by phone. And the longer it goes on and the more isolated we feel, the smaller our world becomes.

It has never, in our lifetimes, been like this before. We’re making it up as we go along ... just when we think we’ve got it right, the rules change again and again we have to adjust. It is uncertain, bewildering, confusing – and they say it could go on until September.

I can only imagine that at least some of this could be similar to what it might be like to belong to a social minority, suffering persecution at the hands of those in authority. What might it have been like to be an aboriginal person in Australia in the 19th and early 20th centuries? Or an Italian in Sydney in the 1950s and 60s? Or a homosexual person in the 1980s? Or perhaps a Jew in Nazi Germany before and during the Second World War? The shrinking of personal boundaries, the lack of freedom for social interaction, the fear of what might change, anxiety for the present and uncertainty for the future – perhaps we are now getting a little insight into what persecution could mean.

And that’s what it must have been like – only worse – for the Christians of the first century, living in a world dominated by Rome, with little value placed on human life and the normality of atrocities such as crucifixion, gladiatorial sports or feeding people to the lions for entertainment. And that’s the historical and cultural background to what we are starting to read today, as we turn to the last New Testament book, the Revelation of John.

The weight of evidence points to around 95AD as the date of writing, a significant time of persecution for first century Christians. The author, again generally accepted as John the apostle, had himself been exiled on the island of Patmos as a result of this persecution, and he warns his readers to expect more to come (as we’ll see in some of the letters to the churches). He calls them to resist the demands of emperor worship, and to stand fast as believers and followers of Jesus, come what may.

In this opening chapter, as he introduces the bigger picture behind a world which seems to be collapsing in on itself, John points his readers first and

foremost to the exalted Christ! And what a privilege for us today, to be able to share in this picture, as we endure the collapsing of our own worlds!

Look first at who is the true author of this whole account – we’ve just acknowledged that it is widely accepted that it is John, but John himself describes it differently. *‘The revelation from Jesus Christ,’* he writes, *‘the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.’* (vs 1, 2). John is the human writer – or if you like, ‘recorder’ – but there is a sense in which these words are ‘revealed’ directly by God, through Jesus his Son. So let’s not be fooled – these are the authentic words of God himself.

‘Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come,’ (v.4) – this reflects God’s own description of his name to Moses at the burning bush – *‘I AM,’* – all of that which is past, present and future. *‘And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.’* (v.5) – these words seem to be dictated to John directly from God himself, and from Jesus his Son – both are clearly identified.

“Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” (v.7). Jesus, the living Lord of all, is *‘he who is coming’* ... and in a very real sense, he arrives in this word of majestic and glorious introduction to the revelation of John. Of course, he is also yet to come – fully and completely at the last day – but let us not miss him now, as we move into this series of Bible talks over the next 9-10 weeks. We don’t want to be found amongst the peoples on earth who will mourn because of him, because they have rejected all he has come to give, but rather amongst those who rejoice, because we know he is our Lord and God, and in him we rise above the persecutions, the viruses and all the frailties of our lives and relationships. *“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”* (v.8). Trust me!

John also provides his own credentials for what follows. He introduces himself and his experience, constantly making reference to the revelatory nature of what he is describing ... *‘I was in the Spirit,’ ‘I heard behind me,’ ‘I turned around to see,’ ‘when I saw him,’* etc. He also describes himself as *‘your brother and companion,’* who was *‘on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.’* (v.9). We get a tiny glimpse of John’s own suffering and isolation as a direct result of his identification with Jesus. And it was there, exiled on Patmos, that he received the revelation, and the instruction to write it down and send it to the churches. Patmos (circled on map), off-shore, south of Ephesus, is close to the circle of the seven churches to whom he is instructed to write – *‘Write ... what you see and send it to the*

seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.’ (v.11), all towns about 70 kilometres apart in the Roman province of Asia, part of modern Turkey, and not far from Gallipoli (also circled, and which was part of our focus last weekend).



So – what did John see? Close your eyes, listen carefully to John’s words, and try to imagine exactly what he saw. *‘When I turned I saw seven golden lampstands,¹³ and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest.¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.’* (vs 12-16).

Take your time, picture him in your own mind. Amongst the seven lampstands, representing the seven churches (v.20), walks Jesus, whose appearance is nothing short of remarkable. A long robe with a golden sash – pure white hair – piercing eyes like blazing fire – feet glowing as if red-hot – his voice like the roar of a rushing river – seven stars in his right hand, a sword coming from his mouth, and his whole face shining like the sun – impossible to look at for more than just a glimpse. Jesus – pure, powerful, majestic, on fire – blazing – unlike anyone or anything previously imagined – more brilliant than the noonday sun. And where do you find him? Walking amongst the churches – powerful, living, authoritative, glorious ... and present with his people in the church where they are – where WE are – where YOU are!

Wow! Grasp it, see it, catch even just a brief glimpse of who Jesus is, and what this might mean ... for you and your circumstances, as well as for all of us who are part of his church. For John, it was too much – he says, *‘When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.’* (v.17). Struck down with fear before this magnificent vision, so reminiscent of Daniel’s vision of the Ancient of Days and the son of man in Daniel 7, John has nothing to say, nothing to offer, nothing to do, but listen to what Jesus says to him – *‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.’* (vs 17-18).

There it is again – I am the eternal One – First and Last (same as Alpha and Omega), dead and now alive, for ever and ever – and holding the keys of authority in God’s kingdom. In Daniel’s words, *‘His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.’* (Dan 7:14).

There are times in our lives and experience when we could have reason to doubt all that – when it seems the powers and authorities of this world and our culture are the most powerful drivers and influencers of our lives –when something the size and disruptive power of COVID-19 not only threatens us but threatens the whole of the planet. So many lives have been lost, so much social, economic and political disaster has occurred, all, for us, so close after the devastation of drought, fire and floods, each bringing its own destruction to people’s lives and well-being. In the midst of all of this confusion and disruption to all we know as ‘normal’, where do we turn?

Let me suggest that even in times of persecution, even in times of bewildering natural or human disaster, even in times when we and others experience overwhelming anxiety, grief and loss, we must heed the words of Jesus, recorded here by John ... *‘Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it.’* (v.3). As we go on reading it, hearing it and (I pray) taking it to heart over these next weeks, may the all-powerful and all-knowing living Lord Jesus, who in his glory and majesty is ever present and always amongst his people, the church, bless each of us, and with his blessing, may we be assured that we can place our ultimate trust and confidence in him, and no other.

To us today, he says ... *‘Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever!’*

Rod Harding

May 3, 2020

Revelation 1:1-20

1 The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud 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.

⁴ John,

To the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

*⁷ “Look, he is coming with the clouds,”
and “every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him”;
and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.”
So shall it be! Amen.*

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

⁹ I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. ¹⁰ On the Lord’s Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, ¹¹ which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”

¹² I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷ *When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

¹⁹ *“Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later. ²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.*

Daniel 7:9-10; 13-14

⁹ *“As I looked,*

*“thrones were set in place,
and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow;
the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire,
and its wheels were all ablaze.*

¹⁰ *A river of fire was flowing,
coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him;
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated,
and the books were opened.*

...

¹³ *“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.*

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