

We are all in the midst, I suspect, of multiple revelations in this strange and difficult time we are all living through. Revelations about ourselves, Revelations about the nature of our social relationships, Revelations about Church and Churching.

On the island of Patmos, off the Turkish Coast, towards the end of the first century after Jesus' birth, John (the writer of John's Gospel and of the three New Testament letters that bear his name) was in a Roman government imposed social isolation of his own or, to be more blunt, exile. This elder, both in age and office, of the church at Ephesus was there as a consequence of his Christian faith.

And it was there he received a Revelation which he wrote down; this is the book of Revelation that we have in our Bibles.

This time last year we studied the opening of Genesis; this year we turn to the opening of the last book in our Bibles.

We have entitled this set of studies and sermons, "One LORD: Eight Churches"; we will be looking at the first four chapters of Revelation.

The first study encompasses all of Chapter One but, before we look briefly at what it is about, we need to understand a little bit about the writing itself and the religious and cultural circumstances surrounding it.

John is charged with the task of communicating what will be revealed to him to, in particular, seven churches in the Roman province of Asia (what we would call north western Turkey). These churches had all been established around about the middle of the first century in the towns and cities of the area.

The times, toward the end of the first century, were becoming particularly difficult for Christians in this part of the world. The whole area, it would seem, was committed to the cult of Emperor worship that was sweeping the Roman world. All were expected to commit to the fact or at least verbalise that "Caesar is Lord" in the sense of being a god. This of course was difficult for Christians and their refusal to do so had the potential to make

them social and cultural outcasts. Also difficult was that, in order to practise a trade or profession, generally you needed to belong to the appropriate guild which was inevitably caught up in the worship of a patron god and the worship practices surrounding it.

As we enter into these studies we need to also understand that much, indeed most of this 'letter' is 'apocalyptic' in character and as such contains many images and references which are strange to us but would have been more familiar to the first readers. Suffice to say that just as we will understand certain symbols and ideas in political cartoons without them being explained, 1st century readers would understand many of the images and symbols in this work. We will see more of this when we venture at some later date into the chapters from four on.

First we note that this is a letter; it is addressed like one in 1:1, finishes like one in 22:21 and its recipients (in the first place) are these seven churches in Asia.

We are then given a glimpse of the majesty of the Lord Jesus, the one like a son of man, in all his glory and power. Here is the one who is to be worshipped and served, not some self-deluded autocrat in Rome. Here is true power and majesty.

The Christians are assured of the omnipotence of the one they have committed their lives to.

We then come, in Chapter 2, to the letters to the seven individual churches. Each of these has a similar outline: a description of Jesus, positive and negative comments about the church, a call to action and an assurance of 'reward' for those who 'conquer' or overcome.

It is important to note that the admonishment to 'hear' at the end of each one encourages all the churches to hear what is said to all seven.

The final writing may well have been carried by John's messengers (angels) to each church in turn where it would have been read aloud. (And then perhaps copied)

The first church addressed is Ephesus, John's own church, founded by Paul and others in the middle of the century. The startling thing about this church is that it has 'lost its first love'. They are called to return to the things

they did at first and then, as they overcome, they will gain the right to eat from the tree of life, just like the one back in Genesis.

Next is the church at Smyrna which is commended for its endurance and assured that, though they are poor in earthly terms, their eternal life is certain. Indeed.

And on to Pergamum where the saints are commended for their faithful endurance but chastised for allowing among them those involved in sexual sin and idolatry, which was probably bound up with the worship of local gods and membership of various guilds.

Those in Thyatira are commended for their perseverance and growth but they too harbor among them those who speak heresy and participate in the cultic practices around them.

The church in Sardis Jesus knows, not for their good reputation, but for the fact that they are 'dead'. They are encouraged to 'wake up' and repent. For those few who have not 'soiled their clothes' the promise is that they will walk with Jesus.

And on to the second last church in our courier trip: Philadelphia. Though they have little in the way of strength they are commended for keeping Jesus' word and not denying his Name. These overcomers will be the pillars of the temple of God.

It seems the Lord has saved the worst till last. Laodicea, the lukewarm church, neither cold nor hot in its faith or service. They are encouraged to turn back, readmit Jesus and then Jesus will eat with them at the heavenly banquet and sit them on his throne with him

May we all 'have ears to hear what the Spirit says to the Churches.

And, as to the eighth church of the titles of our studies, the Spirit continues to have things to say to the churches...including our own.

Here we stand, with John, before a door ajar, opening into the gathering of another church (the word of course simply means a gathering), but this one is assembled before the throne of God and here, representing all those who have 'overcome' in all the ages, are the four and twenty elders bowed in worship before God himself.

This chapter then leads us into the rest of the book with its words from John about 'what you have seen, what is now, and what will take place later' ... As chapter 1v19 tells us.

So there we have it ...

John is encouraging and correcting the churches throughout Roman controlled Turkey. That sounds like what Paul was all about. So how is this compared to Paul's letters?

First it is true that this is all inspired Scripture and profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

But there is an important distinction here. The way I see it, this is not John writing but here it is John being dictated to. He is simply, in these seven letters, the amanuensis - the secretary who writes it down. The words come from the Triune God himself. It is like when the Prophets say, "Thus says the Lord".

That does not mean these letters are more inspired than Paul's but they are more direct and are to mature churches, not to newly established ones.

Also Paul had (most probably) been with his Lord for over 20 years when Revelation was written.

Let me finish by recommending a book to you - Tim Chester's, Revelation for You (God's Word for You) (United Kingdom, The Good Book Company, 2019) published just last year. It is available from Koorong and also on iBooks.

Please note that on the KAC website are the 'Booklet of Study Questions' as well as, for everyone's use (not just for Group Leaders), the book entitled 'Thoughts, Notes and Answers'.

And if you have any questions please don't hesitate to ask; in this time of social distancing we are only, as always, eager to help.

So, let me commend to you the study of these first four chapters of Revelation.