



Worthy is the Lamb

Sermon – Rod Harding

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Isaiah 53:6-12

Revelation 5:1-14

I'm sure you've had the kind of dream where you really want to do something, but everything else in the dream prevents you from doing it – or is it just me? Whether it's running away from a monster or something equally threatening – it's so important to do it, but something always stops you and you become more and more frustrated as the dream goes on. Sometimes I am so glad to wake up and realise it's a dream; at other times I want to return to the dream so I can have another go at getting it done. It could be worth checking in with someone who can interpret dreams – but I'm not sure I really want to know!

As I reflect on this passage, I reckon John, the old apostle, now in exile on the island of Patmos, must have felt something of the same frustration with the dream he described in chapters 4 and 5 of Revelation. Last Sunday, Steve helped us to think about the opening scene – the throne room of God, with the throne in the centre and '*someone sitting on it.*' (4:2). As he described this 'dream' (or vision), he saw others around the throne – the 24 elders, the seven blazing lamps, the crystal sea, the four living creatures – and everything was constantly honouring and praising '*him who sits on the throne*' (4:10), so that the elders '*lay their crowns before the throne*' (4:10), submitting their authority to the One at the centre, saying,

'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.' (4:11).

What a vision! What a scene! Why would you ever want to wake up from that? But there was a problem for John, which becomes evident when his description runs on into the next chapter.

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. (v.1)

I'd guess we are all familiar with the idea of a 'scroll' – a lengthy parchment with writing inside, rolled up, tied with a string and sealed with wax, so it can be unsealed, unrolled and read, section by section, when needed – a technology which existed in human history somewhere between rock carvings and digital downloads from the internet.

But this scroll was different. First, John had noticed that it had writing on both sides (who would have thought they already had double-sided printers in those days!); that could only mean it contained more information than could fit on one side only. And second, it had been sealed with seven seals, not just the mandatory one, which would have been normal for the majority of scrolls. If this was your dream, would it not have occurred to you to wonder what such a scroll might contain? Why was it written on both sides? Why did it need to be sealed seven times? Why was it in the hand of *'him who sits on the throne'*? And being in some kind of dream, wouldn't the fact that you didn't know and couldn't know until it was opened and read to you, begin to cause frustration? And then imagine that some other powerful figure, like *'a mighty angel'* (v.2), steps forward and asks in a voice loud enough to pierce through all the songs of praise, *'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?'* – and there's no-one able to respond. There is silence ... stillness

... like someone pressed the pause button and the whole scene has frozen – everything stopped!

Except for John. His curiosity and frustration wells up from within and overflows.

‘I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.’ (v.4)

Poor John – so close, but now it seems all shut down, with all the insights, wisdom, prophecy and predictions still locked away and unrevealed – right now would be the time I’d wake up!

But this is not my dream, nor was it just John’s vision. This was John *‘in the Spirit’* (4:2), and God had something important to reveal to him – and to us, through him – so he did not remain frustrated for long, nor did he return from the vision unsatisfied.

‘Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.” (v.5)

Aha! The Lion of Judah!

To us, that sounds somewhat familiar – of course, we identify *‘the Lion of Judah’* so easily with Jesus. But it might surprise you to know that that phrase occurs only once in the Bible – right here in Revelation 5...and nowhere else. So for John, it may have been a little obscure. Certainly in Genesis 49:9, as Jacob was blessing his sons, he said to Judah,

‘You are a lion’s cub, Judah,’

– and the association starts there. Hosea prophesies restoration for God’s people in these terms,

‘The Lord ... will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west.’ (Hos 11:10)

And, for many of us, there is CS Lewis’ Aslan, the lion, to link our minds to Jesus. But here, in this vision, I’m not sure that John would have connected the ideas so readily.

However, *‘the Root of David’* would have helped him. Much more familiar to John would be Jesus’ own self-identification as *‘Son of David’* and he would have known Isaiah’s prophecy,

‘A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.’ (11:1)

Jesse was, of course, David’s father, and the reference to Jesus is very clear and well-known, most certainly to John. So now, convinced, John looked around to find the *‘Lion’* of whom the angel had spoken – the one worthy to open the seals.

And he saw a Lamb! Now in case you hadn’t noticed, there is quite a striking difference between a lion and a lamb – it is hard to get the two images confused. John was looking for a lion...and saw a lamb, which he also noticed looked a little worse for wear, carrying scars that made it look as though it had been recently slain. But it wasn’t dead, it was standing, very much alive *‘at the centre of the throne’* (v.6) in the same place as the One on the throne, encircled by all the others. This lamb had some other unusual features – seven horns and seven eyes – which John now recognised as the seven spirits of God, already previously described in the blazing lamps of the previous chapter. And of course, the concept of a ‘lamb’ as a description of Jesus was much more familiar to John.

Abraham had told his only son, on their way up the mountain to sacrifice to God,

‘God himself will provide the lamb, my son.’ (Genesis 22:8)

In Exodus, as God prepared his people to leave Egypt, he required them to splash the blood of a lamb on their doorpost.

Isaiah, as we have read today, identified the ‘suffering servant’ as *‘led like a lamb to the slaughter’* (53:7) - clearly fulfilled in Jesus’ death on the cross. John himself quotes John the Baptist in his own account of Jesus’ life and ministry as saying,

‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ (John 1:29)

There is no confusion for John as to the identity of the Lamb!

In John’s description (or at least in our English NIV translation) the pronoun immediately changes in response to his recognition of who he was seeing – from ‘it’ (v.6) to ‘he’ in verse 7:

‘He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.’

He alone is worthy!

And the praise in the throne room immediately erupted again. The four living creatures and the 24 elders fell down before the Lamb, holding their musical instruments and the golden bowls of incense containing the prayers of the churches (another subject we don’t have time for today), and they broke into song – a ‘new song’ (different to the previous song of chapter 4). There the praise was focused solely on *‘the Lord God Almighty’*, but now the *new* song was in praise of the Lamb. And not just the Lamb himself, but all that the Lamb had achieved through his sacrificial death...

‘You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.’ (vs 9-10).

The Lamb is worthy because...he was slain; by his death, he ransomed people for God; those ransomed are representative of *‘every tribe and language and people and nation’*; he has made them *‘a kingdom and priests to serve our God’*; and *‘they will reign on the earth.’* The impact of all that needs some reflection to take it all in. This Lamb is worthy – so worthy that a vast choir of more than 100 million angels gathered around the throne to sing, and they were joined by *‘every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them,’* (v.13), so that this absolutely unbelievable gathering, a tad larger than the KAC virtual choir, came together to praise the Lamb, saying,

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise! ... To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!”
(vs 12-13).

And John still hadn’t learnt the content of the scroll! He will – as we’ll begin to find out next week, as the seals are progressively opened – but you can’t help wondering if he still felt he needed to know. What else did he need to know? What else did the struggling and persecuted churches to whom this letter was written for their encouragement and hope need to know? What else do we, members of Kiama Anglican Churches, need to know?

This is not so much a vision of the future in heaven, as it is a mandate for the mission of the church on earth! This is a vision of the present – this is now! Jesus has returned to the place he has always occupied – in the centre of everything, connected inseparably with God the Father, receiving all honour and glory and praise, because he has purchased God’s people, the church.

His sacrificial death has paid the price of our world’s (and our own) ignorance, rebellion and brokenness, called to himself people from every known (and unknown) people group, brought a diverse and separated people into unity and shared purpose, made them to be a kingdom – his kingdom, desiring to do his will and serve his purpose – and priests, to represent and serve God – where? Here! Now! ‘*On earth*’ (v.10) where he reigns through his people.

John’s vision was written down, so it could be shared, initially amongst the churches of Asia Minor, to whom the letter was first circulated, but also intended, in God’s good purpose, to be a vision for God’s people wherever they might be ‘*on earth*’. It speaks into your personal mission, wherever you are as you listen to this message, as you see yourself amongst that vast crowd, praising Jesus around the throne. It can also speak into our KAC mission, as we join with brothers and sisters in Kiama from all kinds of nations, cultures, languages, and previous religious experiences, gathered around the throne of the King in his kingdom, seeking to live in our community under his lordship, belonging to his kingdom and making a difference at every level of our lives and our interactions with others – living, as Jesus, ‘the Lamb’, taught us to pray,

‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’

Revelation 5:1-14

5 Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the

scroll or look inside. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying:

“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.

¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.”

¹¹ Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. ¹² In a loud voice they were saying:

“Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!”

¹³ Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

“To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, forever and ever!”

¹⁴ The four living creatures said, “Amen,” and the elders fell down and worshiped.