



# ‘Sweet or Sour’

Sermon – Rod Harding

21 November 2021

Ezekiel 2:9 – 3:9

Revelation 10:1-11

During this last week, Glenys and I went out to dinner. We went to a restaurant in Cronulla, where we had gone together nearly ten years ago, a couple of weeks after I had conducted Glenys’ mother’s funeral – it was in my diary as a ‘pastoral’ visit. This week was also our wedding anniversary, so going back to where it all began was very special.

Why am I telling you this story? It was an Asian restaurant – and one of the most popular Asian flavours is ‘sweet and sour’. It’s a combination of sweet flavours and sour flavours, resulting in a pleasurable mixing of the two, though we more often think of these flavours as separate.

You may have noticed the title of today’s sermon is ‘Sweet or Sour’. We’ve just listened to the reading of Revelation 10 and heard about the *‘little scroll’*, about which John was told,

*“Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but ‘in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.’”* (v.9).

There are obvious connections with Ezekiel’s vision (also read today) – and we should note that it is the contrast between the flavours, and not their similarity, which seems to be the point of both visions. But more of that a little later ...

It is my understanding (which is shared by many who have written on the book of Revelation) that the strange things we have been reading about over the past term – multi-faced creatures, weird adaptations of critters we know and some we don’t, almost unimaginable scenes, both of wonder and of woe –

are much more to do with the present than they are visions of the future. We do ourselves a great disservice when we try to understand everything in the apocalyptic letter of John to the churches of Asia Minor as if he is talking about the last days. He gets there eventually, in the fulfilment of all things in chapters 21 and 22, but the greatest part of John’s vision was to do with the present circumstances of the Christian communities in first century Roman culture in the seven churches to which the letter is addressed. When we get that important point, we are more ready to also get what it says to us today.

Most commentators focus on the significance of the persecution being faced by Christians in the last half of the first century. The general consensus is that Revelation was written late in Domitian’s rule as Roman Emperor, as late as 95 or 96AD, when persecution was real and present and not looking like it was going to get better any time soon. Against this background, the events described in John’s vision open a window into an alternative universe, another reality, taking place at the same time, providing an understanding that the present hardship is not the only way to see and make sense of our experience.

In this ‘other place’, God is on the throne, surrounded by the four living creatures, 24 elders and a vast multitude of angels and people of all nations, tribes, peoples and languages, all continuously worshipping and praising both God and ‘the Lamb who was slain’. Here, everything is as it should be, as first the seven seals of the scroll are opened, and then the first six of the seven trumpets have sounded. Each time, the seals and the trumpets have heralded judgement – death and destruction in seemingly increasing fury – yet there remains a constant reminder that God has not lost control and that those who belong to him will not only survive the heat, but can also glimpse something of the glory and wonder of all that God has done to

secure their protection, their survival and their day-by-day victory, no matter how adverse the conditions might be.

On the other hand, I read during the week a paper by Loren Stuckenbruck, currently professor of New Testament at the University of Munich. He proposes that Domitian was not entirely the rogue emperor portrayed by others and that the Roman Empire was socially, politically and economically secure as a result of his policies. While it is clear that persecution in some places was highly likely, it could also have been that some Christian communities might have been willing to prosper socially and economically by relaxing the call to Christian discipleship, being satisfied with a protected and comfortable lifestyle – a different, and challenging, scenario.

So let’s look at the passage before us today – Revelation chapter 10.

We should, of course, remind ourselves that we have just entered another ‘interlude’, like chapter 7, which came as a break between the sixth and seventh seals being opened. This chapter, and most of the next, is a similar break between the sixth and seventh trumpet blasts from the seven angels; we’ll eventually get to that seventh trumpet just before we leave this series next week. It’s like it’s all too much to roll straight on – we need a pause, a time to draw breath and take stock, before we go on to the impact of the final seal or the trumpet blast yet to come.

So here, in John’s vision ‘*another mighty angel*’ (v.1) appears – probably not the same one as in chapter 5, asking who was worthy to open the seals of the scroll (5:2), nor the one in chapter 7, who carried ‘*the seal of the living God*’ (7:2). This is *another* angel – but also clearly high-ranking. ‘*He was robed in a cloud* (signifying his close connection with God), *with a rainbow above his head* (providing a connection to God’s

covenant with Noah); *his face was like the sun* (reminiscent of the description of Jesus himself from 1:16), *and his legs were like fiery pillars* (strength and power, and also a reminder of the ‘*fiery pillar*’ which led Israel through the exodus event).’ (v.1). This new and powerful angel carries ‘*a little scroll, which lay open in his hand.*’ (v.2). Some suggest that this is the seven-sealed scroll from chapters 5-8, no longer sealed, but open – others say that can’t be the case, because this is a *little* scroll, hardly, therefore, needing seven seals. Either way, this ‘*little scroll*’ is about to take on a significance of its own.

But not before the mighty angel takes the tension of the moment a little further. ‘*He planted his right foot on the sea and his left foot on the land,*’ (v.2) – now pause, and just think of the size of this angel in John’s vision, as he stands over all of God’s creation, taking dominion over both the land and the sea and all that inhabits both realms.

Then, from that stance of authority, ‘*he gave a loud shout like the roar of a lion.*’ (v.3). I’m not sure I’ve heard a lion roar (except maybe at the zoo), but my understanding is that there is no other sound like it in the jungle to instil both fear and awe to all within earshot. In response to the roar of the angel, ‘*the voices of the seven thunders spoke.*’ (v.3). This is, without doubt, the voice of the Lord, as we read in Psalm 29 –

*‘The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic.’* (vs 3-4).

It results in even greater fear and awe in all who hear, especially John, who scrambles to take notes, before a voice from heaven tells him,

*‘Seal up what the seven thunders have said and do not write it down.’ (v.4).*

Clearly, the information contained in the *‘seven thunders’* is not yet ready to be revealed.

But it is coming soon! The mighty angel raises his right hand in the manner of oath-taking and swears by

*‘him who lives for ever and ever, who created the heavens and all that is in them, the earth and all that is in it, and the sea and all that is in it,’*

(v.6 –note that the angel who is standing over the creation now acknowledges the One who is the Creator) – and he says,

*‘There will be no more delay! But in the days when the seventh angel is about to sound his trumpet, the mystery of God will be accomplished, just as he announced to his servants the prophets.’ (vs 6-7).*

In other words, look out, it won’t be long now! That which God has previously kept hidden is about to be revealed – in accord with what his prophets have already been told.

So with all the pomp and ceremony heaven is able to muster, John is given an insight into the final purposes of God for his creation and all humanity. What a picture! What an interlude! In the first interlude (chapter 7), the glory of God was made clear, God’s people were sealed on their foreheads and the great multitude of representatives from every nation, tribe, people and language were clothed in white as they sang praises around the heavenly throne. Here in chapter 10, the imagery is quite different, but speaks of the same power, the same all-encompassing purpose, the same inevitability of the fulfilment of God’s plan – both now, in the experience of our present-world circumstances alongside this heavenly reality of God in control,

and also in the future, as we expect God to reveal more of his purpose and to act in the ultimate fulfilment of all things.

But the real climax of this interlude is yet to come. The ‘*voice from heaven*’ speaks again to John...

*‘Go, take the scroll that lies open in the hand of the angel who is standing on the sea and on the land.’ (v.8).*

John is called into the drama of the scene and, as he takes the scroll the angel says,

*‘Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but ‘in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.’ (v.9).*

Imagine hearing those words from the waiter in the Asian restaurant as she delivers the sweet and sour sauce to the table!

‘Sweet or Sour’? There’s our title, and that is the question. The answer lies in John’s obedience to the angel’s command.

*‘I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour.’ (v.10).*

It is *both*! In other words, the title should probably have been ‘Sweet and Sour’ – but I didn’t prepare this early enough to change it. Sweet to taste – the scroll brings good news, comforting, encouraging, motivating, providing hope for the present and assurance for the future. And sour to the stomach – the scroll also contains its element of bad news, bitterness, hardship, troubles and strife in the present, and ultimate judgement (prefigured by the current crises) in the future.

But John himself is immediately pulled back into the present, with an urgent and important task.

*‘Then I was told, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.”’ (v.11).*

His job, it would seem, is to return from the vision, having learned from the insights he has been given, to engage in ongoing prophesy, declaring God’s intentions for ‘*many peoples, nations, languages and kings.*’ As long as there is time, John is called to be a prophet of both the sweet and the sour in his life and ministry – and I suspect that if we are to learn anything from this, then so are we in our context today.

And that’s where the rubber hits the road! There is no doubt we live in troubled times – just like the Christians of the first century. We don’t live under the cruelties and persecution of Roman emperors, but we do live in an increasingly secular culture, which is rapidly becoming more and more at odds with our Christian values and moral codes. The legalising in recent years of abortion, same-sex marriage and now euthanasia will test us – we can remain opposed, drawing hostility from the wider community, or, if we want to adapt and be gracious towards those whose opinions are different to ours, we are abused and face hostility from within the church. In other parts of the world, Christians face serious persecution, imprisonment and death, just because they hold fast to their faith. More than anything else, the global crisis of COVID has placed everyone under threat – and many now struggle with regulations and mandates which attack our personal freedoms. In all these situations, Revelation speaks to us as God’s people, alerting us again to the good news of the gospel (sweet flavour), which encourages and provides purpose and hope, even in the midst of the troubles and pain of our daily experience, while the ‘troubles and pain’ are representative of the sour flavours of God’s opposition and judgement on the rebellion of humankind.

And if Stuckenbruck is right (and I think he could be), there are even more implications, especially for us who are God’s people in westernised and first-world countries such as ours. What is

the challenge of discipleship we face in our culture? Life for me is pretty comfortable, and my days are full of doing what suits me. Is that what God calls me (or you) to be about? Surely ‘*eating the scroll*’ means for us that we need to constantly remind ourselves of what is ‘*sweet*’ for us and embrace all that Jesus has achieved on our behalf, demonstrating his mercy and grace to us in the way we live with others in the Kiama community. And I believe it also means we must constantly think about what the scroll contains that is ‘*sour*’ and whether or not our lives should be so comfortable when the bad news is really so bad for all who are unaware of God’s love and purpose for them and remain under the awful prospect of his judgement. How can we be ‘prophets’ of both the ‘sweet and sour’ in our community now that God has revealed these things to us through John’s vision?

As we stand on the brink of a new mission and vision for our church within the wider Kiama community, how will you respond? Stuckenbruck concludes his paper,

*‘Christian communities who read John's visionary message – including those who today are enjoying privileges that go with social and economic success – have a lot to think about.’*