



Sermon by Diana Johnson

Bible reference(s)

St Mary and St Michael, Trumpington

17th May 2020

Streamed Evening Prayer 6.30pm Service

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O

Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. (Ps 19.14 alt.)

The Book of Revelation fascinates and also perplexes the modern reader and perhaps never more than when people are living through apocalyptic times: World Wars, Economic crashes... and pandemics. For many, though, it is the most obscure and controversial book in the Bible. Yet those who study it with care agree that it is a unique source of Christian teaching and one of timeless relevance – not simply for pandemics, then. It's full, if we were to search for it, of advice to modern people.¹

Neither the fanaticism of *some* who have fixed their attention on prophecy but not on Christ, nor the diversity of interpretative viewpoints should discourage us from pursuing Christian truth in this marvellous book. So that's what I want to do tonight.

At the start of our reading, John turns from an earlier beautiful description of the city of God, to the life within it. In the Greek and Roman world every notable city had at least one central temple. The *New Jerusalem* not only differs in this respect from ancient cities but also from all *Jewish* speculation about the age to come. Illuminated by the overflowing radiance of the presence of the glory of God, the Holy City no longer needs a temple². Yet paradoxically it does have a temple - for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb – The Lamb is the symbol for Jesus - are its temple.³ And in another sense, the whole city is a temple, since it is patterned after the Most Holy Place⁴. Jewish expectation – the expectation of the readers of Revelation - was centred on a rebuilt temple and the restoration of the ark of the covenant. In his glorious vision, John has picked up these hopes and he sees the fulfilment of them in the **total presence of God with his purified people**, while the Lamb, the sign of the new covenant that Jesus brings, is the fulfilment of the restoration of the Old

¹ Mounce RH *The Book Of Revelation (Rev)* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1977 (p. viii). Swete says, 'The Apocalypse offers to the pastors of the church an unrivalled store of materials for Christian teaching, if only the book is approached with an assurance of its prophetic character, chastened by a frank acceptance of the light which the growth of knowledge has cast and will continue to cast upon it.

² naos

³ v.22.

⁴ v.16

Testament ark of the covenant.⁵ And it's not, as we now find as we read further, only for Jewish people.



Verses 24-26 present a remarkable picture of "the nations" entering the city and bringing their splendour⁶ into it. John sees a vision of social life, bustling with activity. Elsewhere in Revelation, the nations⁷ are the pagan, rebellious peoples of the world who trample the Holy City⁸ and who have become drunk with the wine of Babylon, the mother of prostitutes⁹ and other such derogatory images. These nations will also be destroyed by the second coming of Christ¹⁰. But there is another use of 'nations and kings of the earth' - in Revelation. Here, they stand for those peoples of earth who are the servants of Christ, the redeemed nations who follow the Lamb and have resisted the beast and Babylon¹¹ and turned against all of that bad stuff. It is this group of God-fearing, non-Jewish foreigners that John describes figuratively as having their own part in the activity in the Holy City, the kingdom of God. That's pretty big, because that's where we come in – after all we Brits are one among many of these 'other nations'.

In the next chapter, the section continues the description of the Holy City begun earlier in the reading, but now with the emphasis on its **inner** life. John returns to his archetypal images from Genesis¹² and Ezekiel.¹³ The future age is like a paradise and this is briefly but beautifully described. Here Paradise is regained. As in the OT imagery of the age to come, metaphors of water and light abound.¹⁴ The river of the water of life recalls Ezekiel¹⁵ and a pastoral scene earlier in Revelation¹⁶. In both Testaments water is frequently associated with the salvation of God and the life-imparting and cleansing ministry of the Holy Spirit.¹⁷ In the new city of God the pure water does not issue from the temple as in Ezekiel but comes from the throne of God, since this whole city is a Most Holy Place with God at its centre. Life from God streams unceasingly through the new world. *So abundant is the tree – the tree of life – well, it has so much vitality that it bears a crop of fruit each month!* Its leaves produce healing for the nations. Are you getting a message here? This place is amazing...

...so why is it so amazing? Why does the writer get so carried away? The imagery of abundant fruit and medicinal leaves, of water and of light, should be understood as symbolic of the far-reaching effects of the death of Christ in the redeemed community, the Holy City. The community of the Church. **So powerful is the salvation of God that the effects of sin are completely overcome.**[Repeat] The eternal life God gives the redeemed community will be perpetually available, will sustain, and will cure eternally every former

⁵ Gaebelien FE *Expositors Bible Commentary Vol 12 Revelation* Grand Rapids: Zondervan1981 (see comments at 11:19; cf. John 4:21, 23)

⁶ doxa, "glory," "honour," "magnificence"

⁷ ethne

⁸ cf. 11:2; 11:18

⁹ 18:3, 23,

¹⁰ 19:15

¹¹ 1:5; 15:3; 19:16; 2:26; 5:9; 7:9; 12:5

¹² 1-3

¹³ 40 ff.

¹⁴ cf. Isa 12:3; Zech 14:7-8

¹⁵ 47:1ff cf. Joel 3:18

¹⁶ 7:17

¹⁷ Isa 44:3; cf. John 3:5; 4:13-14; 7:37-39; 13:10; 19:34; Titus 3:5

sin. That's why the writer gets so carried away. That's why we should sit up and take notice. And it's a freely given gift, too...



Thus the curse pronounced in Eden will be removed¹⁸. Here our true liturgy is fulfilled¹⁹. Just look at John's emphasis on God and the Lamb²⁰. They share the same glory, the same throne, the same temple significance. The Christ-focused nature of John's vision is everywhere evident. **Christ is at the centre of everything.** [Repeat] And so should **Christ be at the centre** for us, now, here in Trumpington. In this service, also, we are in **Christ's presence**. Think on that... And then back to the reading one last time.

A final burst of light engulfs the whole scene, and an announcement that the saints will reign for ever and ever fulfils the first promise of the book²¹. The logical sequence as well as the inner relationship of the words "his servants will serve"²² and "they will reign"²³ have deep implications for the whole nature of God's kingdom in contrast to that of the satanic Babylon. Surely it is fitting for such a book of prophecy as Revelation to close around the throne, with God's servants both worshipping and ruling. It's a heady vision...

...Is it your vision, your vision for yourself now? Ask yourself that, as we reflect for a moment longer on the amazing reading that has laid before us tonight.

Amen.

Word count: 1054 Time: 8.5 mins
Approx. 125 words min⁻¹

¹⁸ v.3; cf. Gen 3:17

¹⁹ cf. Rom 12:1

²⁰ 21:22-23; 22:1, 3

²¹ 1:6; cf. 5:10; 20:4 6: and see esp. 11:15

²² v.3

²³ v.5