



Christ Church Cathedral
OXFORD

23 August 2020: Matins Sermon

The Eleventh Sunday after Trinity

Psalm 115:1-12; Jonah 2; Revelation 1

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+ ‘When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, “Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades.”’ (Rev. 1: 17-18)

Are we living in the end times? We might be forgiven for thinking so. 2020 has presented different parts of the globe with a series of calamities ranging from extremes of weather: drought, fire, and devastating flood; warfare; alarming civil unrest; a rapid descent into unprecedented economic recession; a catastrophic explosion in a major capital city; and, of course, the pandemic. We may frequently find ourselves reminded of gospel predictions such as that which Luke put into Jesus’ mouth when he talked about the coming of the end: ‘Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues; and there will be dreadful portents and great signs from heaven.’ (Luke 21: 10-11)

As the heat wave of unusual duration ended in widespread thunderstorms, with torrential (almost ‘biblical’) rainfall followed by the inevitable flooding and fatal accidents, we were reminded of the ferocity and unpredictability of the natural world, the fragility of humanity’s existence. One does not have to belong to a millenarian sect, or to be a closet ‘prepper’ (that is someone who prepares for catastrophe by building bunkers or saferooms and stockpiling food and water) to wonder whether the end is indeed nigh.

In the early Christian centuries, a belief that the world would end soon – or at least that human earthly existence would cease, in the near, not distant future – was widespread. In writing to different Christian communities, Paul warned them to be ready for the revelation (*apokalypsis*; 1 Cor 16: 17), or manifestation – *parousia* (1 Cor 15: 23)– of Christ at his second coming on the day of the Lord. Even when the anticipated *parousia*, did not appear as soon as had first been thought,

Christians went on expecting it imminently throughout the first millennium after the birth of Christ, and beyond.

Their reading of the Revelation to John did much to reinforce such a view. Shaping his text in the form of a pastoral letter addressed to Christians in the Roman province of Asia – one that he envisaged would be read aloud in their services of worship – John offered a prophecy about the future. As he recounted the range of visual and auditory experiences he had witnessed, he testified to the divine plan for the end of time; he hoped thereby to prepare those who heard his message for that coming crisis. John's own term for this visionary experience was an *apokalypsis*, or revelation, the revelation of Christ and of his coming. This, he repeated at the very end of the book would happen very soon: 'the Lord ... has sent his angel to show his servants what must soon take place. "See, I am coming soon! Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book."' (Rev 22: 6-7).

The whole text is underpinned with a sense of urgency. It displays the same sort of belief in the imminence of the end that we find in Mark's gospel, for example where the evangelist had Jesus say, 'Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see that the kingdom of God has come with power' (Mark 9: 1; compare 13: 30). Although we might want to suggest that both Mark and John the divine have been proved wrong, in that the second coming has yet to occur, this does not mean that we can dismiss the warnings about the need for readiness as not relevant or applicable to us.

Jesus warned often enough in the gospels that even though no one knows the time or the hour of the coming of the Son of Man, we all need to keep awake and alert for the signs of its approach (eg. Matthew 24: 36). We each have just one opportunity to use the life we have been given. To live it as best we are able, using the gifts that God has given us to fulfil that for which we have been called, always alert to hearing God's word. How we live that life is important to us. But our choices are also precious to God. *Revelation* reminds us of the need to be mindful of how we live each day, not to allow ourselves to drift through life without thought or intention.

Since we cannot know when the day of the Lord will come, do we need to read John's Revelation in a state of anxiety, fretting about whether the bleak signs we see around us and across the globe are indeed the portents that signify the coming of the end? Certainly, there is plenty of cataclysm in the text. John does speak of doom, destruction, judgement and punishment. But at heart, this is also a hopeful and reassuring text. That message is made explicit in the most substantive part of the first chapter, after the titular prologue and the standard epistolary formula in which John introduced himself and addressed his intended recipients. He went on to describe his prophetic vision in terms

reminiscent of visions of the prophets such as Isaiah (Is 6), Jeremiah (Jer 1), or Ezekiel (Ez 1-3). Whereas the Old Testament prophets had reported what God had said to them – prefacing their reports with the words ‘Thus says the Lord ...’, John gave us Jesus’ testimony at first hand: this is the revelation of Jesus. John heard a voice – manifestly the voice of Christ – telling him to write and circulate the book. And then he saw a figure like the Son of Man, his face shining like the sun.

He spoke to John saying, ‘I was dead, and see I am alive for ever and ever.’ The Christ whom John saw, now exalted and seated on the right hand of God (Ps 110:1), is the same Christ who had lived, and taught, and suffered, and died. But he is also the Christ who rose again and appeared to his disciples, before ascending to heaven in front of their eyes. John fell at his feet as though dead. But Jesus placed his hand on him and said: ‘Do not be afraid’.

Those were the same words that Jesus had spoken to the disciples as he walked across the stormy waters of the lake towards them in the boat. The words that he said to Jairus, leader of the synagogue, when he believed that his daughter had died (Mark 5: 36). They also, deliberately, echoed words uttered by God in the Old Testament, particularly on occasions when he went on to make statements about himself, as for example when making the covenant with Abraham (Gen 15: 1), when appearing to Jacob in a vision (Gen 46: 3), or in the mouth of the prophet Isaiah (Is 41: 10; 43: 1). Christ comforted the visionary here in exactly the terms in which God had comforted the ancient people of Israel.

The message he had to offer was, however, more remarkable – even more awe-inspiring – than any of Yahweh’s utterances. For Jesus, too, linked the exhortation not to fear with the phrase ‘I am’ to define himself as ‘the first and the last, the living one who was dead and is now alive for ever and ever.’ In these words, Christ assured John, and us, that he has conquered death. Risen, ascended and glorified, he now holds the keys of Death and of Hades.

John’s vision of the risen Christ is a dramatic counterpart to the closing declaration Jesus made in Matthew’s gospel: ‘And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’ He made his presence known to John in this striking visionary appearance. Although none of us have experienced such a sight, we do all enjoy the comfort of knowing that Jesus is always present in our own midst, surrounding us with his love, walking with us through the difficulties and traumas of our individual and collective lives.

Through his vision, John received authority from Christ to act as a harbinger of future doom, but also and more importantly, to be a messenger offering encouragement for the Christians of Asia Minor, and also for those in later ages. Like the other reading appointed for matins this morning

(Jonah chapter 2), and today's psalm which reminded us 'the Lord hath been mindful of us, and he shall bless us' (Ps 115, 12), *Revelation* is essentially a hopeful text. The hope that it offers to us and to the churches is its confident belief that Jesus will return. By virtue of his resurrection, Jesus is the firstborn of the dead (cf. 1 Cor 15: 20-28). As the firstborn, Jesus becomes the promise, the commitment, the certainty that, as St Paul put it, 'neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (Rom 8: 38-9).

John's language resonates with Pauline and other early Christian writings about Christ. And what these quotations and allusions confirm is the truth of John's assurance: resurrection is the promise of the new heaven and the new earth, the very renewal of creation. It reminds us that we should not fear the presence of Christ among us. For he is the one who lifts from us even our deep-rooted fear of death, for he, the Living One, is victor over death. Fretting about whether these are the end times will achieve very little; remember what Jesus said in the sermon on the mount: 'Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ... Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.' (Matt 6: 27, 34) However bleak the times in which we find ourselves living, however great the troubles we each have today, we need to hold onto the fundamental truth that Christ has conquered death. As St Paul wrote, 'For as in Adam all die, even so, in Christ shall all be made alive' (1 Cor 15: 20).

In John's *Revelation*, Christ stands as challenger – and as the unflinching scourge of those who would turn from him – but also as our comforter and redeemer. Faith in Christ will bring redemption, freeing us from the bonds of the deep, from Hades, from the bowels of Sheol. Faith will bring us into the eternal light. Thus encouraged and sustained we may pray in the words of the seventeenth-century poet and cleric Robert Herrick, who accepted the troubles of his day, comforted by the promises of eternity.

'To God'

Do with me God! as Thou didst deal with John,

(Who writ that heavenly *Revelation*).

Let me (like him) first cracks of thunder hear;

Then let the harp's enchantments strike mine ear;

Here give me thorns; there in thy Kingdom, set

Upon my head the golden coronet;

There give me day; but here my dreadful night:

My sackcloth here; but there my stole of white.