

A Vision of Jesus

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[0:00] I wonder if you can relate to this scenario, whether it's in your own experience or you can put your feet as it were in my shoes.

! You've left the children in the living room and you've just popped out for maybe 20 seconds, 30 seconds. And then suddenly they're screaming, they're shouting, or worse, there's total silence. And you think, flip, let's get in there. And you don't know what kind of bedlam has unfolded. But the phrase that often comes out of my lips is, what on earth has happened here?

And as you do the parental investigating, you know, so-and-so's done this, so-and-so's done that, he says, she says, all the rest of it. You realise that there's probably more layers because actually their discontent started off maybe because of a bad school day.

Because they've fallen out with this person and they're feeling unsettled. There's always something beyond the initial surface issue. Now, I'm not exactly saying that being a church leader is like that all the time.

[1:13] But what I do, what I am sure is that often the presenting issues are never the thing that's really the most important. There's always something going on behind.

In fact, pastoral leadership is in many ways about that. It's going beyond the presenting issue, maybe the urgent issue. And seeing, being mindful that there is probably something, an issue that goes on beyond what you can initially see.

Everyone experience that in some way? Maybe in a workplace, maybe as we look, as we go around in our world. The presenting issue is not always the main issue.

And it is said quite often that in our world, and we've already mentioned it this morning in our prayers, we live, they call it, this is the acronym they use, a VUCA world.

This is what all the leadership folk will tell you. I think we've got a slide which illustrates this. We are in a VUCA world which is full of volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity.

[2:20] All these factors are actually increasing. Whereas perhaps when we grew up, we used to think, yeah, things were a bit more stable. You had a better idea of the outcomes. We, you know, things were a bit more straightforward.

This is a reality, folks, and I don't think I need to tell you that. The world is a VUCA place, as they call it. Volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous.

And I probably don't need to spell it out, do I? I mean, I just mentioned the initials AI. I think of cost of living. I think about the anxiety that's being caused, particularly as our younger generations and mental health crises.

It's all there. And I'm sure each of us in different ways are kind of living that, as we, perhaps for ourselves, or we're walking alongside those who are impacted by all of that.

And even the reality of our own personal finances or our illnesses that we are carrying are all testament to the fact that what is going on here, as it were, is difficult.

[3:26] And sometimes we don't know why, and sometimes it leaves us utterly confused. And so we enter a series looking at the book of Revelation, the final book in the canon of the Bible.

And I was just mentioning it to someone this morning. I was like, ooh, interesting. Yeah, lots of conspiracy theories have been written about this one, hasn't they? Et cetera. And for many, it's a book where we tread very carefully.

But I think we'll find, I hope, by the end of this talk and the series of talks that we'll be having through the rest of this month and November, that actually there's a real wonder here about God revealing himself to us.

But let's start with what is happening here, if we can have the next slide up here. Because similarly to me walking into my front room, we need to know what the presenting issues are.

And we are told a few things in very short form that will help us know what is going on here. So first of all, we heard, as Ros read, that this book, this Revelation, written in a sort of letter style, is from John.

[4:46] That's what it tells us in verse 4, doesn't give us much away there. And he's writing to seven churches in the province of Asia. So that's the sort of Turkey, Greece area of what we'd know in our modern world.

Verse 9 of chapter 1 tells us this. So this is John.

This is the Saint John, probably the writer of the Gospel, the writer of the letters in the New Testament. This is your kind of leading light of the early church in those early decades after Jesus had risen and ascended to the Father.

And here he is on Patmos. And I can assure you, he was not there for a holiday. He had been banished there. The Roman Empire, putting their fists, their iron fist on this uprising group that called themselves The Way.

They wanted to, well, they killed many of the early church leaders. And John, they banished to Patmos. That's why he says, on Patmos, because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

[6:09] He was witnessing to Jesus. That got him into a lot of trouble. And he's writing to a bunch of churches, seven churches locally, who were also under similar pressure.

The iron fist of the Roman Empire was coming. There were lots of heretics, people spreading kind of falsehoods about Jesus, coming into their midst, confusing people. It was a very difficult time.

And they were a tiny, you know, little house churches in these towns and cities that he's writing to. Amidst a bigger empire. And they must have felt utterly powerless.

What on earth is going on here? You know, Jesus has come. Surely the way was made straight. Surely your leading light, your leading leaders will be up there, able to preach, able to spread the gospel.

But no, quite the opposite. We've got John stuck on an island. And we've got churches that are struggling and being afflicted with all sorts of problems. What on earth is happening here?

[7:15] So John finds himself in this situation. And as we heard, he has a vision.

And the contents of that vision are what he writes down in the book of Revelation. Now, the word revelation comes from the Greek, which would also be sometimes translated as the apocalypse. The apocalypse. Now, I don't know what you think of when I say the word apocalypse. Immediately, I'm like bombs, helicopters in the Vietnam War, you know, all the kind of cultural kind of, whoa, this is last thing sort of stuff.

But actually, that word, the apocalypse, translated revelation, literally means an unveiling. It just means an unveiling. That's what the word apocalypse means.

As it were, drawing back the curtains. We have the next slide. And what is happening, and what happens to John, is that God draws back the curtains to reveal what is happening in the heavenlies.

[8:22] And it helps him see, and therefore us, what is really going on. What's at stake? What's the real power dynamic that is happening as he faces all these hardships and as the churches face all these hardships?

And so he has this vision. It says, on the Lord's day, I was in the Spirit, and he heard behind him a voice like a trumpet. I haven't bought my bugle again this week, which for you here last week caused all sorts of calamity.

But he hears a voice. And what follows is an incredibly multi-sensory experience. And as I read through it again, I just invite you to sort of feel into it, listen into it, sort of imagine in your eye what it must have been like for John to be caught up in this vision.

And the vision, as we see it today, I mean, it is strange, let's face it, and it's a sort of incredibly powerful vision of Jesus.

But it contains what you might call sort of hyperlinks for the rest of Scripture. So we've got to the last book in the Bible, and all of the images, you know what I mean by hyperlink, don't you?

[9:32] When you look through and you click on something that leads you back to some other website or some other thought. Well, it's like this picture, every word is hyperlinked. If you know your Scriptures, you'll find that a lot of the images that are used, the terms that are used, are all taken from other parts of the Bible.

And it's like, whoa, this culminates in this person of Jesus, who revealed in his heavenly splendour is something that we have not experienced ever on earth.

So let me just sort of take us through that, see if we can pick up on some of those hyperlinks which might bring to life. Some of the strangeness of this vision. So he turns round to see the voice that sounded like a trumpet, to see who was speaking to me.

And I turned and saw seven golden lampstands. Now there's a lot of number sevens in this vision and throughout the book. And seven would be the number of perfection. So there's this sense of which he's encountering perfection by seeing this seven repeatedly.

And he sees lampstands, seven lampstands. And we heard, there's a little explanation about that, that represents the seven churches that he is writing to. And he goes on.

[10:51] I turned around to see, and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man. Now again, that's a big hyperlink back to Daniel 7, where again, Daniel in exile sees a vision of, again, he calls it the Ancient of Days and the Son of Man coming from the Ancient of Days.

So there's this biblical figure who's like the Son of Man. Whoa, this could be the one who stands before him. The Son of Man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet, with a golden sash around his chest.

So you immediately get a picture of someone with immense dignity and power. And most probably what a priest would have worn. So here we have a high priest looking like this figure of the Son of Man.

And we heard, the hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow. His eyes were blazing like fire. And in fact, if you go back to Daniel 7, you'll see that the Ancient of Days, God himself is described in this bright, pure, holy state.

And that's how he is appearing to John. And what follows is quite frankly terrifying. His feet were bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters.

[12:05] And in his right hand, he held seven stars. And coming out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun, shining in all its brilliance.

Terrifying. And terrifying if you were to face someone like that. And given the sort of enemies and the foes John, the churches, were facing, that's a pretty amazing image to have.

And you have things like, you know, the sword coming out of his mouth. Now, obviously, the sword, again, hyperlink, is something that's known as the Word of God. The Word of God is known as a sword.

So coming out, a Roman sword, looks kind of tongue-shaped. He's got something that is a weapon against the foes. And the seven stars, again, the number seven, but these turn out to be the angels or the messengers or even the elders of these churches.

So this Jesus figure, the Son of Man figure, this beyond words kind of image, is holding in his hands the messengers of the churches.

[13:11] And it's all there in its mists, in the sound of the roaring waters. And John, seeing this vision, falls at his feet as though dead.

You can just imagine that, can't you? And what are the first words this awesome, powerful, sort of changeless, eternity of God vision says? Do not be afraid.

I am the first and the last. I am the living one. I was dead, and now look. I am alive forever and ever. And I hold the keys to death and Hades.

This vision was and is and shall be the vision that the church needs to see. And the vision itself and what follows in the book of Revelation addresses the current needs by unveiling what is beneath and behind them.

In the midst of Roman oppression, here is the king of kings. Here is the sovereign one, the powerful one, the one whose word, not only to hyperlink back to the beginning of Genesis, created all things, but has the power and authority to dismantle empires.

[14:37] And we know that over the many decades and years that followed Christianity did play its part in disrupting and bringing about the closure of the Roman Empire, mainly through conversion and the whole of Europe coming to know Jesus.

And just imagine that from the small beginnings of somebody trapped on an island with tiny churches. It was unimaginable. And yet, if we draw back the curtains, we see the power of God, the power of Jesus in that situation.

And it's like God wants to reveal his heart to John, to reveal the might and the splendour and the power that previously is hidden and might feel far from him.

And sometimes, when we have those situations which do seem confusing, difficult, in those illnesses we're travelling with, with the political instability of our world, we can feel like, what on earth is going on?

And it's in those moments we need to unveil the heavenlies. And it's in those moments we're going to reveal the heavenlies.

[16 : 28] And I want to say, well, surely that is what we need. We need, in whatever situation you're thinking about, whatever you've brought with this morning, how do we then draw back the curtains?

Because I believe that God has a revelation for each of us that will address the particular needs you have.

We'll go behind the curtains to those things that we haven't got a clue what's going on. And that will give us, just as it did John, some hope, some peace, and something to continue to live for and to witness about.

And so how do we draw back the curtains? We've got a nice picture there. We've got your curtain mechanisms in the back of your theatre curtain there. How do we do it? What lever do we need to pull?

Come on, Vicar, tell us. What lever do we need to pull to kind of get this curtain to come out so we can go, ah, yes, Jesus. Well, actually, there's a little hint that will help us find out how we might do that.

[17 : 32] And it's in this sort of introduction that John gives. And he says in his written intro, Grace and peace to you from him who is and was and is to come, the faithfulness and eternity of God, and from the seven spirits before his throne.

Interesting phrase, seven spirits. And if you look in your little footnotes of the Bibles when you get home, it's sometimes translated as the sevenfold spirit. Now, this is a bit of a discovery for me today.

It's a phrase I'd heard, but I'd never been curious enough to go, why is the sevenfold spirit? That's all. It's just another one of these sevens. And it's actually taken from the book of Isaiah, chapter 11, verse 2.

And the promise to Isaiah is that God will pour out his spirit. And this spirit is described in seven ways. It is, I'll get my notes, the spirit of the Lord.

So the Lord, the spirit of presence and authority. That's number one. Number two, the spirit of wisdom. Knowing how to live and how to judge acts rightly.

[18 : 36] And then the third one is the spirit of understanding. So that is grasping spiritual truths and the order. And number four is the spirit of counsel, receiving divine guidance and good advice.

So these are all the ways in which the spirit is described in Isaiah. Number five is the spirit of might, strength, courage from God.

Number six, I've run out of fingers. The spirit of knowledge, knowing God and his ways deeply. And number seven, the spirit of the fear of the Lord.

The spirit of deep awe and reverence towards God. And the reason why this caught my attention, and I think why John has included this, is because these are sort of, there's one spirit just as there is one God.

But it shows that God can operate in different ways. It's like multiple facets of a diamond. And we have here the fact that the spirit can operate, its kind of mode of operation is at least sevenfold.

[19 : 44] Now why do I mention that? It's because God is big enough to address us at whatever angle, whatever perspective we need. And it's not like we create a Jesus or a God of our own making.

I want to say no, that is not what we're about. But we're saying that if we know the God of the Bible, he will be able to reveal us himself to address our needs.

To address what is happening in front of us. And so, just as John has this revelation of Jesus in all his power and all his might, we might also find a portrait of Jesus who is welcoming children into his midst.

Or, a vision of Jesus as he stops in the crowd to heal a woman who's been bleeding for 12 years and otherwise ignored. Or, we might have a vision of Jesus who is turning the tables in the temple, seeking justice, zealously for his father.

Or, Jesus the parable teller, who is inviting people to consider the kingdom. Or, someone who is talking to the religious powers and authorities and disrupting those.

[21:00] Or, in fact, he's lying, dying on a cross for our sins and to defeat the powers of evil. You see, there's loads of ways of looking at Jesus, all of which are true.

But, they might speak to us in different ways. Ready to meet us in every situation.

And I guess that still doesn't go, well, how? How, Vicar? How do we draw back the curtains? How do we get that vision? Is there always going to be a loud trumpet call and we look back and go, ah, there it is. What I want to say is there is what we might call an ordinary way and an extraordinary way.

And even the ordinary way is not ordinary. So, if we want to have a vision of Jesus that will come and meet us where we're at, then the ordinary way, the normative way, is the reading of Scripture. And as we read through the Scripture, from page 1 to, whatever it is, 1,500, we create a true knowledge of what God is like, his character, the ways he works.

[22:12] And we build, and the more we read Scriptures, that's why Christians through the ages, and I would encourage every single one of us, we daily read in Scripture to refresh daily our vision of who God is.

He's so multifaceted, we can never, and so deep, we can never exhaust the character of God. We can never become too wise to know what God is like and how he behaves.

And so we create, as we read the Scriptures, as we see Jesus kind of walking off the pages in the Gospels and actually who is predicted and prophesied for throughout the Old Testament, we get an image, a seven-fold image of Jesus, as it were, that we can always draw upon in whatever scenario we are.

So there becomes sort of second instinct to say, okay, so this might be happening, but I know that my Lord is king, I know that my Lord is kind, I know that he is patient. And we begin to see through the curtain, even as we go about our daily lives.

But I mentioned if that's the ordinary way, then a more extraordinary way might be something that feels a little bit more like the Apostle John in this story.

[23:23] There might be an element that things are revealed to us in a more extraordinary way, and a way that has a sort of prophetic connection. And it may well help us connect what we know of God into particular scenarios.

And I want to say that those two, the extraordinary and ordinary are never separated. We never get a vision of Jesus that isn't backed up by what we know of him through the Scriptures. But sometimes, and many of us here would have experienced that, there is a moment which God wants to open the curtains to us and say and remind us of who he is, that he is present with us.

And this, in fact, is the way to go. This is what you need to trust. This is what you need to step forward. This is who you need to go to. And those extraordinary ways in which the Spirit of God, the sevenfold Spirit of God, is able to personally guide us as he personally unveils his heart to our heart.

Do you see what I mean? This is available to us, folks. Those of us who follow Jesus, we have the opportunity to have our hearts, our minds, our souls unveiled to God's heart.

And that is a wonderful miracle. And it's also what we can be seeking after as individuals, as a church, and as we seek to intercede and live for those around us.

[24:52] So it's a wonderful gift. And what I want to do, as I stop talking, is just to get in touch again with what situation has, well, that rises in your mind or what you've come with today.

Or even as I began to talk about this subject. And it may be a personal scenario, something you are confused or hurt by, or basically what on earth is going on.

It may be something wider, it might be something to do with church, or it might be a global scenario. Something incredibly complex. So I just invite you just to get in touch with what that is.

And maybe the Spirit will highlight an area that seems veiled to you. Thank you, Jesus, that you are the living one.

You are the first and the last. And you hold the keys to all things. So would you continue to unlock for us those knotted, complex, uncertain things.

[26:12] Even if it doesn't give us all the answers, Lord, give us a hope and a future and a way to move forward with you in our vision. Thank you, Jesus.

Thank you, Jesus. Thank you, Jesus.