

A greater unity

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 09 December 2018

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] What do you make of Jesus? Among all the present wrapping and turkey stuffing and chaos of the next nine days, I wonder if you're going to have a moment to think about him.

The baby in the manger, the refugee born in a stable, because he's there. He's there in the nativity scenes and he's even got his name into the title of Christmas, Christ.

But the bitterness of life seems to crowd him out, doesn't it? Somehow we've lost sight of him. He's lost somewhere under all the wrapping paper.

I guess for most of us, the baby in the manger seems harmless enough, surrounded by angel and wise men and perhaps the odd sheep. I mean, it feels like we can kind of get on with our lives just the same. Thank you very much.

This Christmas will be perhaps much like last Christmas and when it's over, we'll move on. We feel like Jesus isn't someone we need to bother about that much.

[1 : 03] Perhaps you think of Jesus as the baby in the manger, along with Santa Claus or the Christmas tree, just another part of the Christmas festivities. Now maybe you're here this morning and to be honest, you find it difficult to give much time to Jesus.

It feels like you're spinning too many plates. There's too many ideas buzzing around in your head. Too many things on your mind. And the last thing you think about doing is thinking about a baby in a manger.

The world is out of control. Brexit is a complete mess. And seeing your in-laws is going to be difficult again. And it seems like a baby in a manger, well, he's not going to help much, is he?

Well, today we're looking at the first book, the first chapter of Revelation in the Bible. And as many of you will know, Revelation was written by one of Jesus' disciples, John, to encourage Christians to keep going by describing who the real Jesus is.

Because the baby in the manger grew up. And the claim is that the behind-the-scenes of a chaotic world, Jesus is in complete control.

[2 : 19] I'd imagine most of you here have an Advent calendar. And if you do, you'll have opened 16 flaps or boxes, unless you forgot this morning, in which case you can do it this afternoon. But I wonder what was in the first 16 boxes.

What were behind those flaps? Chocolate? Pictures of reindeer, perhaps? Maybe nothing at all. Maybe it's been a bit of a disappointment this year. Well, I guess that's a bit like our view of the world, isn't it?

We want there to be something behind it all. We want some meaning in the universe. We want to open the flaps of our lives and make sense of everything. We want there to be someone behind it all.

But I guess for most of us, all we see is chocolate. That's all life's about. Or maybe there's nothing at all. Well, the book of Revelation was written to Christians to keep them going despite suffering and the difficulties of life, particularly suffering for following Jesus.

And it tells us who the real Jesus is. Who is this baby in the manger? Is he someone we don't really need to bother much about? Can we leave him hidden under the wrapping paper?

[3 : 29] Can we put him back in the box after Christmas, along with Santa Claus and the fairy lights? Well, I want us to have a look at this first chapter of Revelation. And if you've got a handout, it would be helpful to have a look on the back.

And the first thing I want us to see from this passage is the baby in the manger is the everlasting king. And that's from verses 1 to 16.

So have a look at Revelation 1 verse 1 with me, which Laura read to us. The revelation of Jesus Christ. Revelation means revealing.

It's like opening the wrapping paper of Christmas presents or peeling back the Advent calendar to see what's going on behind the scenes. And it's not guesswork.

It's not like John just made this up. In verse 1 it says, God gave him to show his servants the things that must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to John.

[4 : 32] So John didn't just make it up. He was told it by God through an angel. And in verse 4 and 5, John writes to the churches to tell them that this message he's giving them, he didn't just make it up.

He didn't just come up with something he thought was going on. He said that there is a chaotic world, but a God who's behind the scenes. A God who's always been there and who always will be there.

So have a look at verse 4 with me. He says, And then he says, Now you might know that the number 7 is a symbolic number in the book of Revelation.

It is a way of emphasizing perfection. So the 7 spirits are not 7 different spirits. They are one spirit, the Holy Spirit, God himself. And just in case we need any more proof that John's message really is from God, he says it's also from Jesus.

Have a look at verse 5 with me. And from Jesus Christ, the faithful or true witness, the firstborn of the dead and the ruler of the kings on earth.

[5 : 44] So John's saying that all three persons of the Trinity, God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, are all telling him this is the reality behind a chaotic world.

So John's saying that the baby in the manger who grew up and died on the cross rose from the dead. He's the firstborn of the dead. Not just a king of part of the world, but the kings of all the earth. Now I guess the thing is it doesn't really look like Jesus is king of all the earth, does it? The world is a chaotic mess. And it doesn't look like the baby in the manger is the everlasting king.

But it's what John sees going on behind the scenes. He doesn't see Jesus in the manger anymore. He sees Jesus as the risen king that he is.

And perhaps you're here this morning and you find the book of Revelation all a bit strange and confusing. It's got lots of strange imagery and picture language.

[6 : 46] And many of us are kind of tempted just to throw it all out. Well if that's you then hang on in there. Because what we get in Revelation is a vision John has of who this baby really is.

So have a look at verse 12 with me to see who John sees in his vision. John turns to see a voice speaking to him. Someone like a son of man.

Now a son of man is Jesus' way of referring to himself in the gospels. And in John chapter 1 verse 51 Jesus says that his disciples are going to see heaven opened. And angels ascending and descending on the son of man.

And he's referring to himself. Referring to Daniel chapter 7 verse 13. Where someone also like a son of man is given glory and honour and dominion and an everlasting kingdom.

So the son of man is a figure who's majestic, eternal and all powerful. And who will rule forever. So have a look at how John describes him in verses 13 onwards.

[7 : 55] He says that this son of man was clothed in a long robe with a sash around his chest. His hair is white like wool as white as snow.

Maybe referring to Daniel chapter 7 verse 9 or symbolising wisdom of this king. His eyes are like flames of fire seeing everything. His feet.

Verse 15. His feet were like burnished bronze crushing his enemies. His voice is like the roar of many waters. Perhaps a metaphor of life.

And from his hand, verse 16. He holds seven stars and a two-edged sword. Perhaps referring to God's word as in Hebrews chapter 4 verse 12. Or his power over his enemies.

And his face. Have a look at his face in verse 16. Well, you can't. It's too bright. His face is like the sun shining in full strength. Too dazzling to even look at.

[8 : 58] Now, I don't know if you've ever been to a baby shower where people bring baby photos of themselves. The idea is everyone brings their own baby photo along. And you kind of mix them all up.

Or so I'm told. And people have to guess who's who. And I don't know if you've ever tried it. But it's surprisingly difficult, actually. Because babies change a huge amount in just one year or so.

Very difficult to tell who babies are many years later, let alone a year after. Well, compare the baby in the manger with this king in Revelation.

No long robe or golden sash. Did he have any hair? Maybe. But unlikely to be white. What about his eyes? Maybe they were shut asleep.

Maybe not. But certainly no fire in them. His voice? Well, maybe he would have been crying. But not the sound of rushing waters. And he couldn't hold anything. He couldn't hold stars or a sword.

[10:00] And you could have looked at his face. If you looked at the baby in the manger, you would have seen a baby. He couldn't have looked more different from this king.

And yet, the claim of Christmas is that the God of history stepped into history in the person of Jesus Christ. Is it possible?

Is it possible that this baby in the manger was in fact the everlasting king? The ruler of the kings of the earth, the son of man from Daniel chapter 7.

The eternal king of the universe. Well, we read earlier, didn't we, in Luke's gospel, which Sue read to us in chapter 1, verse 32 and 33, that the angel had told Mary this is precisely who he is.

So I have a quick turn back to Luke chapter 1 with me. Just to see, this is not something new that John has made up. Luke chapter 1 and verse 32.

[11:08] The angel says, So that's no ordinary baby.

That's an everlasting king. Now perhaps you're here this morning and you've heard a lot of this before. And you kind of think, well, it's difficult to believe, isn't it? It's difficult to believe that the baby in the manger is really an eternal, everlasting king.

You find it quite difficult to take him out of a crib and put him on a throne. But ask yourself, is it really that surprising that the God of history would step into history?

If there is a God behind the chaos of the world, if the universe does have some meaning, then why would God not step into history? If God wants to have a relationship with mankind, surely the easiest thing is to become a man.

You can see him face to face. And the claim of Christmas is that if you looked into the eyes of the baby in the manger, you'd be looking at the everlasting king of kings, the one who came to restore us to the God that we were created for.

[12:31] So take another look at him. The baby in the manger is the everlasting king. Don't keep him in the manger. Don't hide him under all the wrapping paper. Don't let the business of Christmas or perhaps the business of your entire life crowd him out.

Stop you seeing who he really is. He was born as a baby in a manger. But he's now the king of kings, majestic, glorious.

His face is so bright you can't even look at it. Perhaps you're here and you're thinking, well, maybe this is true. Maybe God did come to earth as a baby in the person of Jesus.

Maybe the God of history did step into history. Maybe there is something going on behind the scenes. But if it's true, well, why didn't he show himself? If he is this great king that we get in Revelation, why doesn't he make it obvious?

It's a common question people often ask. And that brings us to the second thing I want us to see from Revelation chapter 1, which is that the baby in the manger will soon return as judge.

[13:39] That's from verses 1 to 17 again. The baby in the manger will soon return as judge. In other words, he will make it obvious. I don't know if you noticed in verse 1 of Revelation 1, but John writes that the revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants, the thing that must soon take place.

And verse 3, time is near. And verse 7, behold, he is coming. Jesus is going to return soon.

Now, you might not think that 2,000 years is soon. I guess most people wouldn't. But to God, it is soon, isn't it? If God is eternal, if all times are in his view, then all times are soon.

In the light of eternity, this life is just like a split second. It's overall too soon, isn't it? And so whether Jesus returns in the next nine days and spoils all your Christmas plans, or whether he doesn't return in our lifetime, he will return.

He will make everything in this world seem as nothing compared to his return, whether it's before Christmas or not. And so have a look at verse 7 with me. Verse 7, it says, Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all the tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.

[15:17] So to say that Jesus is coming is to say that it won't be long. It will happen soon. He's coming with the clouds, using the language of Daniel 7, verse 13, of the Son of Man coming with the clouds.

And here's the important thing. I don't know if you noticed it. It says every eye will see him in verse 7. So what about people that are already dead?

They'll see him. What about people who have never given Jesus a second thought? They'll see him too. What about people who are opposed to Jesus, like the people in verse 7 who pierced him on the cross?

They'll see him. What about my neighbours? They'll see him. What about Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin? They will see him. What about you?

You will see him. Every eye will see him. All the tribes of the earth. There's no mistaking it, is there? And look at how they respond in verse 7.

[16 : 24] Look at how those who have never acknowledged him as the everlasting king will respond. In verse 7 it says, And all the tribes of the earth will wail or mourn on account of him.

They'll cry out in fear of his judgement because he is the one that God has appointed to judge the world. Now you might think that Jesus returning as judge is kind of the stuff of fantasy, a good Hollywood blockbuster, Armageddon, the end of the world.

But here's the thing. All of us do want justice, don't we? We want all that's wrong with the world to be put right. We don't want evil to have the last word.

But if there is no judge, then of course there is no justice. Over the past few years, some of you might know that I've been working in forensic psychiatry, which is about the interaction of the criminal justice system and mental health.

And I guess it's exposed to me some of the evils in the world, but also some of the ways that our justice system tries to hold people accountable.

[17 : 36] Now sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes people are convicted, other times they escape justice. It's an imperfect system. But it gives me great comfort to know that there is a day of judgment, which no one will escape, because on that day every eye will see him.

So the baby in the manger, as judge, returning, is good news for our world. It means that our lives have significance. What we do matters. What you do tomorrow morning matters.

But it also means we need to get right with the everlasting king. We need to think about him more than we think about tinsel or stuffing the turkey or the Christmas presents.

See, the idea that Jesus will come as judge of the world is the culmination of everything that the entire Bible has said. It's not a new idea. Revelation is the last book of the Bible.

And the message is that Jesus is the everlasting king who will soon return as judge. So it shouldn't be a surprise if there is a God who cares about justice, then of course he will judge the world.

[18 : 53] But I guess it's difficult, isn't it, for us to take Jesus seriously if we only see him as a baby in the manger. I mean, if you leave him in the manger, if you put him back in the box after Christmas is over, he's pretty easy to ignore.

But remember that every single judge in the country used to be a baby. They were all babies once. Every single crown court judge, every judge sitting in the high court, every judge in the court of appeal, the Supreme Court, they were all babies.

It's a bit strange to think about, but it's true. Don't be deceived into thinking that just because Jesus is a baby in the manger, that he's not also the judge of the whole earth.

He grew up. He is the everlasting king who will return as judge. Now, I don't know how many of you searched far and wide for your Advent calendars this year, but every year I go online and have a look to see if any Advent calendars are for sale that are really about Advent.

Because, of course, they never really are. I guess many of you will know that Advent is not actually about Christmas. It's really about Jesus' second coming, even though it's come to refer to his first coming.

[20 : 05] But Advent originally was about Jesus' second coming as king and judge. But I couldn't find any Advent calendars that had that on the front.

I guess instead of a nativity scene, we should have something like the Last Judgment from the roof of the Sistine Chapel on the front. Now, I don't think they'd sell very well, but I guess they would make everyone think, wouldn't they?

You'd think twice if you had an Advent calendar that had that on the front. And John's vision in the book of Revelation is an opening of the flaps of the universe, revealing what's going on, who's really in charge, what's going on behind the scenes of a chaotic world.

And even though it doesn't seem like Jesus as the everlasting king, when we look at the world around us, John assures us that in a very short time, he will come with the clouds as king and judge, and every eye will see him.

So I wonder what you make of Jesus. Whatever else is going on in your mind, hopefully in the last few minutes, you've had a chance to think about who the real Jesus is among the business of Christmas.

[21 : 16] And you've seen something in Revelation chapter one of the kind of king he is. Eyes like fire, feet like bronze, his face dazzling like the sun, holding a two-edged sword.

And the question is, how do you respond to him? Well, that brings us to the third and final thing I want us to see from this chapter, which is that we should fall at his feet and worship him.

And that's in verses 17 to 20. See how John responds in verse 17. Have a look at 17 with me.

John says, Of course he did. Of course he fell at his feet.

How could you possibly stand when you'd seen a king like that? He's the king of kings, majestic in his appearance, unrivaled in his power, all-consuming in his brilliance.

[22 : 15] But I wonder if that's how you respond to Jesus. Perhaps you're quick to criticize him, quick to question him, quick to argue with him.

Well, John doesn't do any of that, does he? He falls at his feet in worship. He urges us to do the same, to acknowledge him with our whole lives. I don't know if you noticed in Revelation 1, but the question is not actually will you acknowledge him as king, so much as when will you acknowledge him as king?

Because eventually everyone will. Every eye will see him. In other words, are you verse 7 or verse 17?

See, verse 7 is at the end of time when Jesus returns. If you wait until then, you'll cry out in fear of his judgment. But verse 17 is now, seeing who he is and falling at his feet in worship.

And so have a look at, see what happens in verse 17 when John falls at his feet. See what happens to those who choose verse 17. He laid his right hand on me and said, fear not, I am the first and the last.

[23 : 33] I died and behold, I'm alive forever and I have the keys of death and Hades. Wouldn't you love that? Wouldn't you love to have this king put his right hand on you and say, don't be afraid.

Don't worry. Whatever your troubles are in life, I'm the first and the last. I'm eternal. I die, but I'm alive forever. Are you facing suffering or death?

Don't worry. I've got the keys of death and Hades. Death is such an enemy, isn't it? It robs us of those we love. It comes unexpectedly and all too soon.

It destroys families, friendships and communities. The National Health Service spends billions of pounds every year fighting against it. It is the ultimate enemy.

And yet wonderfully, Jesus has the keys of death. He has power over death. He rose from the dead never to die again. What a relief. There is someone behind the scenes of a chaotic world.

[24 : 42] There's someone in control, not just of this world, but of death itself. And he invites us to be part of his family. Have a look at verse 6.

It's easy to miss, but in verse 6, Jesus invites us to be part of his kingdom. He's made us a kingdom, priests to his God and father.

He invites us to be part of his family. Or later in verse 12, he talks about lampstands representing Jesus' church or verse 20, walking among his church.

Jesus says he's here with us. He says, don't be afraid, I'm with you. Like John, despite suffering, you can keep going. You're blessed if you read the words of this book.

As we saw in verse 3, blessed is the one who reads aloud this prophecy and blessed are those who take it to heart because the time is near. Millions of people around the world do not have access to a Bible, but you do.

[25 : 44] You've probably got one in your hand or next to the seat by you. So treasure it. It tells us who the real Jesus is. The baby in the manger is the everlasting king.

He walks among his church, holding the keys of death and Hades and he will come again as judge. Well, what does it mean to fall at his feet in verse 17?

Perhaps you're here this morning and you've never really done that before. You've looked at the baby from afar in the manger but you've never really fallen at his feet as king. Well, it means to treasure Jesus, doesn't it?

Treasure him more than any Christmas present you could get in nine days' time. It means to look for everything you could ever want in Jesus. So do you want new clothes for Christmas? Well, Jesus has got better clothes. He's got a robe, a long robe and a golden sash. Do you want a new house for Christmas with keys? Well, Jesus has got better keys, hasn't he?

[26 : 47] He's got keys to death and Hades. Do you want to unite the country around Brexit? Do you want to unite all countries in the world? Well, Jesus is the ruler of all the kings on earth.

He's the baby in the manger who will return as judge. But I guess you'll never take Jesus' second coming seriously unless you see that he came the first time.

You'll never fall at his feet like John or like the wise men unless you see who he really is. God did come to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. He will come again not as a baby but as the king of kings.

So choose to respond to him like verse 17 and not verse 7. Don't be those who wail in fear of his judgment. Be those who fall at his feet in worship.

Jesus will return soon. Don't put it off till next Christmas. Decide today to live for the everlasting king. Let's pray, shall we? Amen. Amen. Father, thank you so much that John gives us a vision of who the real Jesus is.

[28 : 00] We pray that amongst all the distractions you'd help us to focus our eyes and our minds on him and as a result to fall at his feet in worship with our whole lives.

Amen.