

The Big Reveal - Morning Service

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[0 : 0 0] Well, some of us are a bit thankful that summer is over. A number of us escaped unharmed. I have a broken hand and a bit of a concussion, which will explain any oddness in behaviour or speech.

More than normal. So I'm just, I'm putting it out there. And my curing project is the book of Revelation.

And I've been looking forward to doing this book for a very long time. It's the one book that is requested more often from you at St. John's. And a number of churches in Vancouver have looked at this.

And it's a stunning and very important book for us. So I'd like you to open up just at the first eight verses on page 1028. It's the perfect ending to the Bible, this book.

It's just beautiful. And the first couple of verses, the first three verses, give us an ABC to introduce us.

[1 : 1 6] And then there's one point in the second half of the passage. And because I have concussion, I'm going ACB. So there are three things that the introduction tells us.

A, the book is apocalyptic. And we know that from the very first word. The revelation of Jesus Christ.

The word in Greek is apocalypsis. And the book, as you read it, and I do hope you read it. I hope you don't just come to church. I do hope you take this book and read it.

Don't read about it. First, read the book. It's full of drama, but it breaks out of the bounds of drama. It's got symbol and song and poetry and vision and narrative.

And it breaks out of all of them. It nowhere quotes the Old Testament, but there are over 500 Old Testament allusions. Someone has counted them.

[2 : 1 5] Which is why this first word, apocalypse, is so important. Because this book belongs to a group of books that are apocalyptic, which were familiar to first century Christians and familiar to those who've looked at the Old Testament for a period of time.

Now, we use the word apocalyptic today absolutely wrongly. We use it to mean some disaster or some destruction. So I heard a woman interview the day after the earthquake in Italy recently, and she said the town was apocalyptic.

I also read a book over the summer that described some public toilets in Europe as apocalyptic. That's not what it means. It literally means to uncover, to reveal, to unveil what lies beneath.

Or if you want a rather fulsome description, I quote from J.J. Collins, Apocalypse is a genre of literature with a narrative framework in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal and spatial, involving another supernatural world.

Amen. I read a fascinating article recently. It was actually about the election in the US. It was written by a psychologist. And psychologists tell us, and he wrote in this article, that we all have a story, a life story that we tell ourselves.

[3 : 5 0] They call it a narrative identity. It's how we understand ourselves. We look back to past events, and we interpret them and reinterpret them, and we imagine our future based on this narrative identity.

And it's very shaped by other narratives that we live in. When we come to the book of Revelation, it's apocalyptic because it's deliberately disconcerting and disturbing and disorienting.

You come in and you realise that your narrative identity is much bigger than you had thought. And we're caught up to heaven and we find that our identity is actually part of the identity, the narrative identity of God.

And that's the point of apocalyptic literature. It draws you up, draws you out, and then you realise things are not as they appear. They're much bigger and more amazing than you had imagined. And the key way apocalyptic literature does this is by symbol. So Revelation is full of symbols, beasts and demons and scorpions and angels and colours and trees and trumpets and horses. [5 : 04] And the thing about symbols is we use them all the time and they feed our imagination and they feed us at the level of our hearts and senses. And this is an alternative group of symbols that undermine the shallow, superficial symbols that surround us in our culture.

These are symbols that give coherence to good and evil and meaning to our lives. That's why in the first verse it says, the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show.

The word show is the word symbol, sign, to symbolise his servants what must soon take place. So as we read through this book, don't expect the symbols to be tame and domestic and safe.

Expect them to burn with the fire of God, to purge your imagination, to counter the symbols that we worship today, and to expose real power and the purpose behind things.

And as we do, I think you'll find, and I've certainly found, that the symbols have a surplus of meaning. And the more you read them, the more you have a reservoir of understanding and insight.

[6 : 18] So first A, apocalyptic. Second C, context. If you look down at chapter 1 verse 4, it just starts, John to the seven churches that are in Asia.

My view is this is the Apostle John. I've heard no good reasons why it's not the Apostle John who wrote the gospel. He has been banished as an enemy of the state for his witness to Christ.

He's on the island of Patmos in exile, and he's writing to seven churches scattered around the coast of Asia Minor, which we'll come to in chapters 2 to 3. These Christians are under great pressure.

It's likely late 95 or so AD. Some of them had been Christians for a long time, you know, 50 years. And the Roman culture was becoming increasingly hostile to the Christian faith, particularly out in the provinces, not so much in Rome.

And sporadic persecution had broken out. And there's a letter a little later from authorities out in the boonies, writing to the authorities in Rome, trying to ask how we should torture Christians better and execute them for the sake of being Christian.

[7 : 30] Why? The official reason, and I quote from that letter, is that Christians have inflexible obstinacy. Christians were viewed in the Roman culture as just being plain stubborn.

And the reason was because, particularly in the provinces, when the city got together for a big event, they wanted to honour Caesar. Everyone wanted to honour Caesar.

And they'd offer an incense to Caesar. And everyone had to declare personally that there was one true Lord, and his name was Caesar. And the Christians just would not be good little citizens. And so they were inflexible and obstinate.

And the churches, the Christians in these churches, had it rough. Many of them had lost their jobs. Many of them were just under suspicion of being Christian. They couldn't join with the city and the worship that was going on.

And it's fascinating, isn't it, what happens when persecution begins. This happens right throughout history. First you think, if God is sovereign and powerful and full of love, why doesn't he do something about our situation?

[8 : 37] You know, if he knows everything and he's bringing the kingdom, why don't things go more easily for us? I mean, if we follow Jesus Christ, who's the answer to everything, why aren't we more popular?

Maybe you don't ask that. The first reaction, the first reaction of many Christians is just to stop public witness. You know, to be a secret Christian.

Still believe the gospel, but never mention it. Others take a more pragmatic route. We know from evidence that some Christians felt it was the right thing to act like they were good Romans and worship Caesar, but do it with their fingers crossed.

Others responded to the pressure by adapting the faith, making it more congenial to life in city. So the great thing about this is this whole letter, not just the chapters 2 and 3, the whole letter is written to churches that are normal, confused, under pressure, compromised, fearful, self-protective, living under the increasing threat of hostility and the scourge of false teaching.

Now, today is the 15th anniversary of 9-11. We live in a world where there's increasing persecution of Christians in the Middle East, certainly, hostility in the West.

[10:02] The word of revelation comes to all Christians who are under pressure with fresh vision, fresh imagination, fresh courage and rebuke. Now, one commentator I read said, revelation is not for the faint of heart.

That is 180 degrees wrong. It is for the faint of heart. It's for all of us who feel we need courage and heart. So that's C, the context.

A, apocalyptic. Well, I'm going to B now. C, context. And B, the first few verses promise the blessing of God.

This is great. Look at verse 3, please. This is the most self-conscious book in the Bible. Blessed is the one, verse 3, who reads aloud the words of this prophecy and blessed are those who hear and who keep what is written in it for the time is near.

So the book is not written to confuse or it's not written as a sort of a spiritual sudoku that you take home and play with until you get it right. God reveals the visions to John so that he will bring blessing so that God's blessing will go to a particular group of people who hear it and read it and keep it, obey the words written.

[11:21] And the last thing means that this book makes demands on us. That you can't understand it if you're going to try and keep God at a distance. It's not going to work. Now, basic requirement to understanding and receiving the blessing of God is a humble willingness to obey him.

Otherwise, it's going to remain a closed book and there's going to be no blessing. Yes, it'll be highly stimulating and intellectually dazzling and maybe even entertaining.

But the blessing of God flows to those who wish to obey what's written. So, as we come week by week, I hope you come ready to engage.

And, I mean, this is just wonderful. Here is a blessing up the front of the book to Christians who are under great difficulty and pressure. They look like they're oppressed and victims, but in reality they are the blessed of God.

And I think the way verse 3 reads means this is not just for the first hearers, is it? It's for anyone who hears, anyone who is a servant. And I think that's also why there is a chain in the communication in these first three verses.

[12:40] Did you notice in verses 1 and 2 there's a chain? The revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him to show to his servants the things which must soon take place.

He made it known as another person by sending his angel to his servant John who bore witness to the word of God and to the witness, same word, of Jesus Christ even to all that he saw.

So God to Jesus to the angel to John to his servants. Now why the chain? Why doesn't God just download the information instantly? And I think it is the importance of this idea of witness.

The churches are under pressure. The temptation was to go dark about their Christian faith. And one of the key themes of the book of Revelation is that in all the darkness and difficulty of the world in which we live God is absolutely sovereign and he is acting now in history to bring about his purposes and the primary way that he does that is through the faithful witness of his people.

That's why when Jesus is introduced in verse 5 he's called the faithful witness. Because God desires to communicate himself and to bless people and he includes us in this process.

[13:56] So God to Christ to angel to John to his servants includes us in spreading his blessing.

So they're the first three things ABC apocalyptic blessing and context and now we get to the one main point which is in verse 4b to verse 8 and it is this this one main point it is the coming of God.

God because the first thing God reveals in this book is himself. God draws us to himself by drawing near to us.

Now follow me here verse 4 and verse 8 God takes words from the Old Testament and adds something to them that's never been added before. Nowhere else in the Bible is God described this way.

In verse 4 John writes grace to you and peace from him who is and who was yes we're good with that and who is to come that's new. In verse 8 God says I am the Alpha and the Omega says the Lord God who is and who was and who is to come the Almighty.

Now verse 8 is one of only two places in the book of Revelation where God himself speaks and both times he says this I am the one who is and who was and who is to come.

[15:22] Now you would expect God to say who is and who was and who will be but he doesn't use the verb to be he uses this word to come and it's not in the future it's in the present tense so literally it says who is who was and who is now coming ongoingly right now and this word come you

use of a person you appear you're physically present you you're you're with the person and it usually there's a little sentence which explains the reason you know he is coming to fix my washer she is coming to show me how to tile the walls or whatever it's used of Jesus he is coming to judge the living and the dead but here there is no purpose given because when

God comes to us with his presence there is no higher purpose possible it's what we're made for it's what we long for it's why Christ has come so that here at the beginning of the book the time between the resurrection of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus is not empty time for God he hasn't withdrawn he's not hands off he's not left his church to the dialectical forces of history or the blind fates of the economic powers but day by day and hour by hour and moment by moment this is saying he is drawing close to each of us personally isn't that amazing if he does not hold his eternity to himself he doesn't keep our future back from us he is giving to us now our eternal future as he draws close to us personally in big ways and small ways in ways that we can see in ways that we never do and through the words of this book what does that mean what is that what difference does that mean and the answer is what did it mean for John it meant worship and in verse 4 halfway through so in verse 5 halfway through verse 5

John dives into two forms of worship and I want to finish with these the first is joyful worship verse 5 you see how he goes from speaking about God to him he says to Jesus who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom priests to his God and father to him be glory and dominion forever and ever amen how do you know God loves you now in the present how do we know that we know that because of what Jesus did in the past it is a time bending miracle as it were in the cross of Jesus Christ God takes the past and the future and bends it toward our good he died for us at his first coming not just to forgive us and to free us from sins but to draw us into what he's doing giving us a new identity kings and priests joining him in his identity so God the father constantly draws near to us and the reason he can is because everything that stood between God and us has been taken away and removed at the cost of Jesus blood to him be the glory that's joyful worship that's why our services are full of what Jesus did for us we come to the communion service we rehearse again and again and again and again his death on the cross but there's a second form of worship there's a weeping worship look at verse 7 please behold the first command in the book behold he is coming Jesus 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 even so amen this is weeping worship what John what John does is he mixes together two Old Testament texts one from Daniel one from Zechariah the one from Zechariah which is chapter 12 if you want to look it up sometime is an amazing statement where God himself says to his people

I am giving to you a spirit of grief and sadness so that when you look on me on whom you've pierced you'll mourn for him as one mourns for an only child and weeps bitterly over him as over a first born so originally it's original context it was about the gift of God spreading sadness through his people but it was a sadness that led to healing and to cleansing because grief and worship are not strangers they belong together the purpose of worship is not to make us feel good it's not to cut us off from suffering and evil and pain it's for us to see what's real to bring those things into the presence of God and the weeping here comes from the realisation of the great importance and beauty and sacrifice of Jesus Christ that we haven't treated him as he deserved we joined in crucifying him and so we weep and there's a bit of that in every true worship this text is also quoted the

[21 : 14] Zechariah text in the gospel of John at the very moment Jesus is on the cross and dies when the soldier pierces his side with the spear it's quoted because God wants us to see the significance of Jesus death the son of God pierced for us and it's through our tears God pours out cleansing the tears of repentance but here in Revelation chapter 1 John speaks about the ultimate coming of Jesus Christ the second coming of the son of God and there will be tears on that day we will realize when we see him in a way we never have before the extraordinary and extravagant price he paid by his blood for us but there will be another form of weeping on that day it will be the weeping of terrible regret and lost opportunity for all those who have not accepted Christ they too will see him as he really is they too will realize that he is

God's only chosen one the only name of salvation and they will weep because it's too late to repent and I think that's an almost unbearable thought and yet here it is at the beginning of the book of Revelation and this too enters into our worship and I leave you with this we haven't mentioned this but in the middle of verse five it's the first mention of the throne of God in heaven the symbol of

majesty and power and authority and rule and a massive encouragement to Christians under pressure living in a messy mix of many pressures and since we follow Christ we know that the way of weakness is the way of power we know that Christ was both the victim and the victor and since there is a throne in heaven we know and we pray with confidence we know that God's name will be hallowed his kingdom will come and his will will be done on earth as it is in heaven so let's kneel and begin praying for that now for all to can have services go