

STUDIES IN REVELATION —

(2) HOW OUGHT WE TO THINK ABOUT JESUS?

Bible Passage : Revelation 1:9-20

Over the summer it was hard to miss the fact that many were remembering the fact that it was thirty years since the death of Elvis Presley. And very often as that anniversary of Elvis's death comes around radio stations play his music and they also ask listeners which Elvis they liked best. Was it the Elvis of the late '50s—the raw rock and roll sensation? Or the smooth Elvis of the early '60s—the Hollywood heartthrob? Or the leather clad Elvis of the '68 comeback special? Or the rhinestone spangled Elvis of the early '70s during his Vegas period? In effect people are asked how they think about Elvis and how they remember him.

We face something of a similar issue when we think not of the King but of the King of Kings. Whenever we think about Jesus, how do we think about him? Some people of course only give any thought to Jesus at Christmas. So they mostly think of Jesus as the helpless baby in the manger. And that quite suits them since they think that such a Jesus doesn't demand too much from them.

For others they think primarily of Jesus as the man who walked the roads of Palestine 2,000 years ago. He is the Jesus much loved by academics. The Jesus whose life and teaching they can discuss and debate. He is also the Jesus loved by speech makers as He will always give them a pithy soundbite.

Others think of Jesus as that bloodied figure upon the cross. It is a view of Jesus that is very obvious in Catholic representations of Jesus. That He is this sad, gaunt looking figure, with a haunted look, represented in statues and stained glass.

But how ought we as Christians to think about Jesus? That is one of the central themes in the book of Revelation. How ought we as Christians to think about Jesus? It is of course a crucial question for us to answer as Christians. For how we think about Jesus determines the way in which we live the Christian life. How we will live the Christian life in a world that is constantly trying to conform us to its mould. And it is the answer to this question of how we ought to think about Jesus that we are confronted with at the outset of the book of Revelation.

We noted last time this rather unusual feature at the start of the book in vs 1,2 where John tells us how the book came about. And it is a theme that he returns to once again in vs 9,10. There he writes, 'I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet.'

Here the apostle identifies himself with his hearers. That he is a 'brother and companion.' That is a brother and companion 'in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus,' John has just told them that through Jesus Christ they have received a kingdom (vs 6) but the reality is that that kingdom is accompanied by suffering that calls for patient endurance. Patient endurance through the suffering that awaits the coming of the kingdom in all its fullness.

John tells them that this is the reality of life in the kingdom that they

have received through Jesus Christ. As an apostle he is not immune from that suffering. He is their companion in suffering. Indeed he is on the isle of Patmos 'on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.' Patmos was a penal colony in the Aegean Sea where socially disruptive people were sent to break rocks. And this is where this elderly apostle, probably now in his 80's or 90's, spent his days.

Here is the reality of what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ—that we share in that suffering and patient endurance. We should not be surprised when hardship comes our way—especially for the sake of the gospel. We should not be surprised when churches struggle, when people are hostile, when our family and friends don't want to know, when legislation is passed that is an affront to our faith, or even when there is outright persecution. We have a kingdom but we also have the suffering that goes with that and that calls for patient endurance.

But it was whilst there in the midst of his suffering and patient endurance that John underwent this remarkable experience in which the book of Revelation is rooted. He tells us that on the Lord's Day—most early Christians did not celebrate the Sabbath but they called Sunday the Lord's Day since that was the day when Jesus rose from the dead—he was 'in the Spirit.' Now this is one of those intriguing phrases that we find in Revelation. What does in the Spirit mean? Well, it probably refers to one of those ecstatic, visionary experiences that various figures in the OT and NT experienced as God gave them particular visions.

So here John was taken up by the Spirit when he heard this voice like a trumpet—a loud voice summoning him. And the voice said, 'Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.' These are the seven churches mentioned earlier in vs 4. And we will think a bit more about them in our next study.

Now John on hearing this voice behind him turned to 'see the voice that was speaking to me.' (vs 12) And on turning around John saw, seven golden lampstands, and among the lampstands was one like a son of man.' Now for those familiar with their OT John's words would instantly have brought to mind the book of Daniel. Where in chapter 7 'one like a son of man' came to the Ancient of Days—that is God—and he was given dominion and glory and a kingdom from every tribe and language to serve him. His rule would be everlasting and his kingdom would never be destroyed.' So immediately upon hearing these words that John saw 'one like a son of man' we are put on the alert that here John is encountering a glorious figure.

And the glory of that figure is reinforced as John begins to tell us in detail of the figure he saw. He tells us that this figure was:

- dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest—that is he is dressed in majestic splendour. Noblemen wore their sash around their chest and not around their waist like workmen
- His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow—again the image borrows from Daniel 7. There the Ancient of Days—God Himself—is spoken of as having 'hair like pure wool.'
- and his eyes were like blazing fire—an image again taken from Daniel, 10:6, which speaks of the penetrating insight of this figure.
- His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace—again echoing Daniel 10:6. These feet represent his powerful and immovable stance. Unlike the kingdoms of this world which have feet of clay as in Daniel 2:33
- and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters—he has a loud and powerful voice. This is the sound that accompanies the coming of God in Ezekiel 43:2

- In his right hand he held seven stars—this for the moment is something of a mystery that will subsequently be revealed
- and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword—His speech is not only powerful. It is also speech that carries judgement with it. In Is 49:2 the servant of the Lord is said to have sword in his mouth.
- His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance—in Scripture heavenly messengers glow with the glory of having been in God's presence and so it is with this figure 'like a son of man.' He radiates the glory of God.

Here John meets with an awe-inspiring figure. Everything about Him demonstrates majesty, power and divinity. And we get a further sense of the grandeur of this figure when we read that when John saw this figure he says 'I fell at his feet as though dead.' (vs 17)

Now at this point John has not told us who this figure is. Instead he is carrying us along in his own experience as these things occurred to him. And John as he falls down as though dead before this figure then feels a hand on him and hears a voice saying, 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.' (vs 17,18)

What a moment for John to hear those words, 'Do not be afraid.' For suddenly this voice like many waters is gentle and familiar. As John hears those words that were spoken by Jesus when in the midst of the storm they thought they were going to die. Those words spoken by Jesus when he appeared to the disciples after the resurrection—'Do not be afraid.'

And this voice becomes even more familiar as he says, 'I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!' Can you imagine John's elation in that moment when he realises that this glorious figure is none other than Jesus? The one who was dead but is now alive forevermore. What a moment for the

apostle John as he recognises this figure. But he hears here not only of the Jesus whom he knew, who died and rose again. But of the Jesus who is also 'the first and the last and the living one.' This is the language God the Father uses to describe Himself in verse 8. Jesus declares here His divinity. And also the fact that 'I have the keys of Death and Hades.' Jesus is the Living One—he is God. He is also the one who by His death has conquered death. And who now holds the power over death.

Here is the culmination of John's vision of the one like the Son of Man—it is Jesus—risen, ascended, reigning in glory, exercising divine rule and authority. And it brings us back to that question that we considered at the outset. The question of how we think about Jesus.

Now before going further it is worth pointing this out. That what John receives here is a vision of Jesus. As such, as I said last time, we are not being given here a photograph of Jesus. John is not telling us here what Jesus looks like. But through the use of symbolism he is telling us what Jesus is like. Now this point is important for 3 reasons:

The first is that it helps us to understand the nature of Revelation. It is a book of symbols. And I think many interpretations of the book go wrong because either they try to interpret the book literally and very quickly we find that that is simply not possible. Or they try to interpret the book both literally and symbolically and that creates all kinds of problems and inconsistencies in reading this book. But if we consistently interpret Revelation through its symbolism we find that the book is much more understandable.

Secondly, the book is written in symbolism because of necessity. These symbols were a kind of code for the believers who were under constant pressure. And to talk openly about many of the issues in the book could have been construed as treason.

Thirdly, the symbols in this book serve as a powerful counterpoint to the society that the original churches lived in. They lived in a world where all around them were the symbols of pagan society. And in particular symbols of the power of the Roman Empire. These symbols were all around in buildings, statues, festivals, temples and athletic games festivals. But here in this book Christians will discover a series of symbols that will show that there is another way—God’s way—of understanding the world in which they live.

So here in this powerfully symbolic language, drawn mostly from Scripture, John tells us about Jesus and what He is like.

In doing so he draws to his readers’ attention certain key ideas. And I want us to explore some of these ideas.

(1) The first of these is the idea of Jesus deity. That is that Jesus is God. This point is made clear in this description in a number of ways. His hair white like wool equates Jesus with the Ancient of Days, who is God in Daniel 7. When He calls Himself the ‘first and the last’ that is the equivalent of the ‘Alpha and Omega’ of vs 8. When He speaks His voice is like many waters, which we have seen in Ezekiel is identified with the coming of God. Also Jesus use of the phrase ‘I am’ echoes here, as it does in John’s gospel, Jesus identification of Himself with God’s own self-description in the OT. It is clear from this passage, and it will be made clear throughout this book, that Jesus is God.

The fact that Jesus is God led one famous figure in the early church, Clement of Rome, to write ‘we must think of Jesus just as we do of God.’ And this is crucial for us as Christians as we think about Jesus. We must think of Him as God. He was not just a man. He was not just a prophet. He was not just a teacher. He was not just the founder of Christianity. He is God. And whatever we believe about God, we believe about Jesus Christ.

Now to think of Jesus as God is a profound issue. It is not just a box that we tick in our heads. We cannot fully fathom this idea that Jesus is God. That the Father is God. That the Holy Spirit is God. This great matter of the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our feeble understanding. The great minds of the church have explored this concept for 2,000 years and have not fathomed it. Yet we recognise that it is true. We recognise that it is a truth that is taught in Scripture and has been confessed by the Church that Jesus is God.

It is a profound truth for us to explore and also to confess. For we will very soon discover that it puts us on a collision course with much of the thinking about God that is abroad in our world. Where people are happy to talk about God in such a vague way that God is nothing more than a projection of people’s ideas. He is nothing more than an abstraction. But once we confess that Jesus is God, it puts us on collision course with such woolly thinking. For once we confess Jesus is God we are telling people that He is to be worshipped. He is to be obeyed. And that puts us on a collision course with the world as it did these Christians in Asia Minor. Our world is happy with Jesus the teacher, Jesus the prophet, Jesus the baby in the manger. But not with Jesus as God because of the implications of that idea.

Yet it is the very truth of such an idea, that Jesus is God, that lies at the very heart of our salvation. That makes our salvation possible. That makes it so glorious. That the one who was born in the manger was very God of very God. That the one who gave us promises did so with divine authority. That the one who died on the cross was God. That the one who rose up from the dead did so by His divine power. That the one who ascended on high and poured out His Spirit upon the church and now lives within our hearts is none other than God Himself.

(2) We find very clearly expressed in these verses the idea of Jesus dominion.

He is God and not in some vague way. The fact that He is God means that He rules over all. That He is identified as the son of man from Daniel 7 speaks to us of Jesus everlasting dominion and authority over all men everywhere. This truth is further reinforced in His being called 'the First and the Last.' Also in the fact that He is 'alive for ever and ever.' And it is also expressed in the fact that He 'holds the keys of death and Hades.' Everything is under His dominion. Everything is under His lordship. There is nothing and no-one in all the created order, whether visible or invisible, that is not under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

Now this was a crucial idea in the context in which John was writing. For there had grown up over the previous century a cult of emperor worship. It began after the death of the emperors where the Roman senate would declare the deceased emperor divine. But by the time that John was writing at the end of the century the Emperor Domitian had decided that he should be called 'Lord and God' whilst he was alive. Now in the political world of Rome the Romans themselves were always a bit wary of such moves. But that was not true in the provinces of the empire such as Asia. Where local authorities were often keen to show off their Roman credentials and make a show of their loyalty to Rome. So here in Asia, where the seven churches, were there was this really strong cult of emperor worship.

But here we find declared the fact that Jesus is Lord. And where Jesus is Lord, there can be no other. One could not acknowledge Jesus as Lord and also acknowledge Caesar as Lord. The confession that Jesus is Lord would bring the Christians into conflict with the authorities. And it is a confession that continues to bring many Christians across our world into conflict with the authorities. As Christians realise they cannot confess Jesus as Lord and pay homage to the state at the same time.

In reality the Roman Empire was not very different from our own society. It was an empire that incorporated many nations and many religions and it sought to toleration of them all. It sought to give

them all their place. This both kept the peace and also meant all the divine powers were on their side. But Christians caused a problem. For their claims were exclusive. They popped their heads above the parapet and declared that 'Jesus is Lord' and there is no other. They claimed that other gods were false gods. They refused to simply add more gods such as the Caesars to the list of gods they were prepared to worship.

And so it is in our own society. Our society is 'tolerant' until Christians dare to make the claim that 'Jesus is Lord.' Until Christians dare to challenge the idea that not all gods are God. That not all faiths are correct. That you cannot pick and choose who you worship. But that Jesus is Lord and God and he alone is to be worshipped. Then the pressure comes on. Then we are vilified as 'fundamentalists' with all the negative overtones that that has in our day. A previous Home Secretary, David Blunkett, dismissed Evangelicals as those who committed murder in the name of religion.

For us in our day to stand up and declare that 'Jesus is Lord' will bring such vilification. And in the current state of our society that vilification will only increase because, as it was in Rome, it is politically expedient.

(3) So what of the church in such a society? This part of John's vision ends with a two-fold note of encouragement for the church. The first we find in vs 19. There Jesus commands John, 'Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.' As Lord of all Jesus is in a position to tell John about the present situation and what will take place in the future. Not because Jesus knows the future. But as this book will make abundantly clear, Jesus determines the future. The future of the church and of the world is in Jesus hands.

But also Jesus identifies for John the meaning of the stars in his hands and the seven golden lampstands that he stands in the midst of. These represent He tells John in vs 20 the angels of the

seven churches and the seven churches themselves. In other words as the church experiences pressure and hostility, Jesus is there in the midst. He is not far removed from the church. Instead He is the living one who is there in the midst. Furthermore He is the one who holds the keys of death and Hades. Jesus is with His people in the midst of all that they endure.

And as we look out upon the church today. Whether it is the suffering church across the world. Or the declining church under pressure to keep quiet and conform in our own society. We are assured by these truths. That Jesus our Lord and God holds the future in His hands and is their in the midst of His church. It is such a vision of Jesus as the risen, triumphant, ascended Lord and God that ought to sustain us.

Message: How Ought we to Think About Jesus?

Series: Studies in Revelation (2)

Bible Passage: Revelation 1:9–20

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