

20 Dec 2020

The King of Glory

Revelation 1:9-18

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The other day, I went out for a walk with a head full of thoughts, head down, not taking in anything around me. I was lost in my own little world; totally distracted; wrestling with stuff in my mind. I reckon you could have driven a car into me and I wouldn't have taken any notice. But then something caught my attention, and I looked up to see a wattle tree in full bloom that was teeming with butterflies. These little black and blue ones; dozens upon dozens of them, flying around this tree, like a beautifully choreographed dance. It was mesmerising. I reckon I stood there for a good five minutes, in the middle of the path, breathing in the heavenly scent of wattle and watching these little creatures. It was one of those moments where you're filled with awe and you can't help but praise God for the wonder of his creation. The sheer beauty of what he has done. And as I walked away, I was no longer thinking about my issues but about the wonder of what I'd just seen, and how I'd have missed it, had I not looked up.

Christmas is a bit like this. There's family we want to see, family we don't want to see, perhaps no family at all. We anticipate the joys and the conflicts, the happiness and pain. We schedule who to see when and what to cook first. There are presents to buy, meals to plan, fairy lights to untangle, trees to decorate and cards to send. We juggle endless expectations and invariably shatter a few along the way. All to the soundtrack of cheery carols that stopped lifting our spirits sometime before we turned 10. And in a blink of an eye, it's over. We pack up, go home, and forget it all for another year.

The routine of Christmas so often distracts us. So often it feels like year after year we walk through this season with our heads down, not taking in anything but the lights and sounds and well-worn routine. We forget to look up.

Who is it we celebrate at Christmas? It's Jesus, we know that. It's the Sunday school reply.

But who is he really? Who is the one we celebrate at Christmas?

This morning, let's look up. And to do that, we'll turn to an unlikely place.

From Revelation 1... [Read Rev 1:9-18].

It's generally accepted that John here was the son of Zebedee, one of the twelve disciples. He's described as the disciple Jesus loved; not meaning, of course, that Jesus didn't love the other disciples, but that there was a special bond between the two. As Jesus is dying on the cross, it's John he tasks with caring for his mother.

By this time though, John is an old man, some say around 90 years old, and is on Patmos, a prison island in the Mediterranean. It was a place where Rome sent its enemies. John was there because of his faith; v9 tells us because of 'the word of God and the testimony about Jesus'. John knows what it is to suffer for the name of Jesus. He knows that the Christian church throughout the Roman world is suffering under persecution also. And he, like Peter, whose pastoral heart we've seen over the last month or two; he cares deeply for his brothers and sisters in Christ. And he seeks to encourage them to remain faithful. This revelation he receives from Jesus, which he passes on to them and to us, is concerned less with exact details and meanings and timing – all the things we tend to get caught up in as we read Revelation. Rather, it's concerned with the big picture: God wins. Jesus triumphs over evil; he triumphs over death; and the final judgment is coming where Satan and all who belong to him will be sent to eternal torment. But the hope of those who believe in Jesus is sure, and it is a magnificent hope. So, we must continue in obedience, standing firm in faith, even in the face of opposition. Revelation is a message of warning, a message of hope, and a message of deep encouragement to Christians.

And it's a message which begins with an absolutely stunning vision of our Lord, Jesus Christ, as he truly is, in radiant glory and splendour, that is simply beyond our ability to comprehend or describe.

In his vision, John hears a voice behind him, an extraordinary voice like a trumpet, and he turns to see a figure of astonishing radiance, walking among seven lampstands. V20 tells us that these lampstands represent seven churches. Now, John has been instructed to write to seven actual, physical churches in a region that today is western Turkey. In the coming couple of chapters, Jesus will have a specific message for each of them. But we need to be aware that so much of Revelation is symbolic, and the number seven is incredibly important throughout Revelation, and the whole Bible, in fact.

Seven represents fullness or completion. And so, what we see here is Jesus, not just walking among the seven churches in western Turkey, but among the complete church. That is, he is in the midst of all of God's people throughout all time. He walked in the midst of the 1st century church. He walks in the midst of the 21st century church, spread throughout the world though we are. He walks among us, here, this morning. The risen, reigning Lord Jesus is present with us. He is Immanuel, God with us, today and every day. We don't meet together without him, we don't carry on his mission without him. He hasn't left us, he hasn't abandoned or forgotten us. He is very much with us. He sees and knows all things about us. And this is both a warning and a comfort.

It's a warning because he knows our sin, our failings, our disobedience. We get a glimpse of this in chapters 2 and 3 – he knew, for example, that the church in Ephesus had departed from their first love – from him. He knew that false teaching permeated the church at Pergamum. He knew that immorality was tolerated, even encouraged, among the church at Thyatira. And he said to each them, repent or be destroyed. Nothing is hidden from him; our Lord sees and knows.

What would he say to us, his people here at Toowoomba North? Have we forsaken our first love? Are we lukewarm? Have we neglected our mission to make disciples? Have we become tolerant of things which we shouldn't tolerate? What is it that we need to repent of?

Our Lord walks among the church. He sees and knows. It is a warning to us.

But it is also a great comfort. Our Lord is with us; we are not alone. We are not alone as we labour to complete the mission that he's given us. And we're not alone as we face opposition and suffering. The fact that Jesus is among us and knows what we go through as his body in this place, means that he knows our needs and provides for them. Encouragement. Strengthening. Correction. Rebuke. Spiritual growth. Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, and this is both a warning and a great comfort.

John continues in v13 ¹³ **and in the midst of the lampstands was one like a son of man.**^[as] This takes us back to Daniel 7, where in Daniel's vision, in the throne room of heaven, one like a son of man approached God and was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and all peoples worshiped him. His dominion was to be everlasting and his kingdom would never be destroyed. And this is who John sees. Jesus Christ in all his power and glory.

He was dressed in a robe extending down to his feet and he wore a wide golden belt^[at] around his chest. ¹⁴ His^[au] head and hair were as white as wool, even as white as snow,^[av] and his eyes were like a fiery^[aw] flame. ¹⁵ His feet were like polished bronze^[ax] refined^[ay] in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar^[az] of many waters. ¹⁶ He held^[ba] seven stars in his right hand, and a sharp double-edged sword extended out of his mouth. His^[bb] face shone like the sun shining at full strength.

The flowing robe and gold sash; pointing to his role as great high priest, ministering to his people and making atonement for our sin.

Hair white as wool; our God of infinite wisdom.

Eyes like a fiery flame, able to pierce the very heart of man and make judgement [see 19:2].

Feet of refined bronze; absolutely pure and holy.

A voice like the roar of many waters; the living word of God.

Holding seven stars in his right hand, which are the seven angels of the churches according to v20, indicating complete authority not only on earth but in the heavenly realms also.

A double-edged sword coming out of his mouth; his word which pierces even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow, judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart [Heb 4:12]; the living word by which the world and we, the church, will be judged.

And his face shining like the sun. Absolutely brilliant, radiant, and glorious, too wonderful for words. And in his presence, John, the beloved disciple, falls down at his feet as though dead. What else could one do, creature in the presence of the Creator, sinner in the presence of the Holy God? Before the splendour of the King, to finally fully understand how utterly weak, foolish, helpless and sinful we truly are; how utterly deserving of condemnation; before our Holy God to cry out with Isaiah 'woe is me!' [Is 6:5], to be filled with terror like the disciples [Mk 4:41], to hide our faces along with Moses [Ex 3:6], to join the kings of the earth begging rocks and mountains to fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne [Rev 6:17]. Our Lord is to be feared. To be revered. He is not to be messed with.

And yet, Jesus places his right hand on John and says, *do not be afraid*. **“Do not be afraid! I am the first and the last, ¹⁸ and the one who lives! I ^[be] was dead, but look, now I am alive—forever and ever—and I hold the keys of death and of Hades! ^[bf]”**

To those who believe he is our comfort and protector. The one who loves us and has saved us. The one who rose from the dead, triumphant; our assurance that we too may live because of him. The one who reaches out his hand to comfort us. If we are his, we do not need to fear.

To those who first heard the message of Revelation, as they faced persecution for their faith, what comfort and encouragement this vision of Jesus would have been. This is their King. Glorious, all-powerful, triumphant. They are not alone. Their suffering is not in vain. They press on, in faith and obedience, because he is Immanuel, God with them. And it would have been a warning not to fall away. He is the righteous Judge, who sees and knows all things.

And for us, John's vision of Jesus is a powerful reminder. This is our Saviour. This is our King. All authority, glory and power belong to him. All strength, all wisdom. Absolutely holy. Absolutely pure. Absolutely just. Victorious over evil, victorious over death, the judge of all people. Radiant in glory and majesty. His dominion everlasting.

We can't even begin to comprehend the wonder of Jesus Christ, can we.

And yet there will come a time where every single person who has ever or will ever live will come face to face with him and fall at his feet as John did. In awe, or in terror. To receive the crown of life, or to receive his wrath. To be comforted, or to be condemned.

And the absolute wonder of Christmas is that Jesus Christ left his Father's side in heaven and came to earth, not in radiant glory, but as a helpless baby. Born to an un-wed teenage mother, into poverty and disgrace. To live for many years as a refugee. To train as a carpenter. To minister for three years. To be despised and rejected, misunderstood and reviled. To be tried unjustly, flogged, crucified. To bear our sin in his body on that tree and to pay the penalty for all of it, and to rise victorious, that all who believe in him may have life eternal with him in glory.

He is Lord and King. He is Judge of all people. He is our Saviour. He is Immanuel, God with us and he walks in our midst, even now.

And so as we approach Christmas time, John's vision carries a warning. Our Saviour is the righteous Judge who sees and knows all things. So, we hold fast to him and continue in faith and obedience. We mustn't forget or neglect our first love.

It carries a message of hope. The child we celebrate at Christmas time went on to die for the sins of all who would believe in him and purchase for them life eternal. We are forgiven, free, and will live forevermore in his presence because of what Jesus has done.

And it carries a message of deep encouragement for Christians all over the world. Our Saviour has triumphed over sin and evil and death. One day soon, he will vanquish them forever. Those who suffer for his name will be vindicated. And even now, we do not need to fear because he is Immanuel, God with us. The King of glory who leads us on.

So this Christmas time, we remember who it is we celebrate. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords. The first and the last, the Living One, more radiant than the sun. We remember and we rejoice in him. In John's words:

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.