

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 16th May 2010

'Past Imperfect Future Tense' – 'The Church and its Witness'

Revelation 11: 1 – 19

Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Chapter 11 – Introduction - Revelation, like packets of cigarettes, should come with a severe health warning – taking it literally can seriously damage your peace of mind, but ignore it at your peril because it conveys in amazing picture form great truths. Richard Bauckham has this to say, when we are dealing with such powerful imagery: "The role of Christ in Revelation is to establish God's kingdom on earth to turn *the kingdom of the world* (currently ruled by evil) into *the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ*." Ch.11 is a riveting apocalyptic and eschatological unveiling of the Church and its witness through its prophetic ministry! What does this mean? John is using what theologians call apocalyptic language; its simplest meaning is 'unveiling or revelatory', and eschatology is a word which describes and means 'final destiny.' So here we have the unveiling of the Church and all that it will and has suffered through the ages, combined with its powerful prophetic witness.

The 7 trumpets and the 2 witnesses: When we look at an outline of the structure of Revelation, we find that chapters 8 to 11 form that part known as the '7 trumpets'. The figure 7 reoccurs time and time again and it's a symbol representing completeness. Chapter 11 is in 2 parts; the first being the 2 prophetic witnesses which are dealt with in the first 14 verses. These verses outline the need for the church to be a prophetic witness and conclude with the disasters to befall an unjust and unrepentant world and in which the climax of God's purpose is achieved. The first 13 verses give John's fullest treatment of the way in which the Churches witness secures the repentance and faith of the nations. The story of the 2 witnesses is a parable which symbolises the church in its role of witnessing to the world and which represents all those through the ages who have faithfully and often fearlessly witnessed to Christ – many of whom *did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death*. (Rev 12:11) These witnesses are now described in symbolic terms as *the two olive trees and the two lampstands*. John has taken this from Zec. 4 and particularly v 3.

The Church and its witness in the time of trial: Verses 1-2 speak of the temple at Jerusalem and its worshippers as a symbol of the church, being measured off for protection in the period of trial – not that the church would be immune from suffering, but that she cannot perish. It's really unlikely that John wished this prophecy to be taken literally, as the city and the temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed a generation earlier. Rather as in chapter 7, he appears to have adapted an earlier Jewish prophecy. The spiritual meaning that we believe he wished to convey was the truth of the security of the church in its endurance of suffering. Whilst v1 conveys the idea of the church, v2 represents the world outside the church. The world outside the church is clearly prey to every kind of ungodly force.

The Church and its prophetic witness: Read v3; John is affirming the prophethood of all believers. In the OT the Holy Spirit was given to particular people at particular times for particular purposes, but they looked forward to a time when the prophecy of Joel (2:28) would come to pass and the prophetic gift would be available to everyone. The church to be a witnessing church is called to be a powerful prophetic witness to the world.

The Church and its witness in a time of persecution: Read v7; for the first time in Revelation we meet a figure who represents the major antagonist of the church in the last days. That he comes up from the Abyss indicates his demonic character. Several commentators believe that John is referring to imperial Rome in its persecution of the church. Cf Jesus warning in Mark 13 v9. But whilst the beast that arises appears to have killed and desecrated the Church, John confirms that evil has been overcome and the power of the resurrection is greater than any evil, cf v11.

The Church and its witness at the final Judgement: The last 5 verses of the chapter vs15 -19 announce the final judgement in terms of the total victory of God and Christ as the 7th angel sounds his trumpet. St John wants us to grasp that God is not absent but he is present with us – even to the end of the age. Before the ultimate fulfillment of v15 there comes judgement. Read v18; Ben Witherington writes this; *it needs to be recognised that a God without judgement is also a God who does not care about justice, which is to say a God who is neither holy nor righteous nor fair. According to John and other NT writers, God's love is a holy love and therefore it could not neglect the issues of justice and fairness.* What we can be absolutely sure of is that God's judgement is tempered by mercy and the awesome love that he has for each one of us, saint and sinner alike. Read Col. 1:13 -23



Witness: questions to discuss - Before discussion, read the Bible passage and ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Consider one or two questions below – don't feel you have to use them all. Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer, worship and ministry.

Is. 9:7; 1Cor. 3:16; 1 Kings 17:1; James 5:17; Rev12:11; Zec.4:3; Acts 1:8; 1Cor. 14:1; Mk. 13:9; 1 Jn. 4:16; Col. 1:13-23

1. What for you are the most important lessons from Revelation that you have learnt and understood so far?
2. Is our study of Revelation helping you to become more confident in Christ or is it seriously damaging your peace of mind? Share and be honest!
3. Discuss the differences it would make to us as Christians if we were suffering a period of real trial?
4. Are we at St Pauls a prophetic witnessing community of God's people? Do we eagerly desire spiritual gifts?
5. If God is not fair or just, what does that say of the sacrifice of men like Oscar Romero or Dietrich Bonhoeffer?
6. What will be the fate of those who perpetrate injustice and evil?