



Introduction

The Book of Revelation is a mystery to many. Luther would have preferred it to be excluded from the New Testament and DH Lawrence wrote that just as inevitably Jesus had to have a Judas among his disciples so there had to be a Revelation in the New Testament.

It is probably the most intimidating book in the Bible with obscure symbols and details that can leave us floundering and wondering whether we are missing something! As if there is some kind of code that we have failed to crack!

So why bother with Revelation at all? Well we have two clues in the first three verses:

Firstly in verse 1 with the first four words John introduces the book as “ the revelation of Jesus Christ” and sets the scene for Revelation’s unique contribution to our picture of Jesus and who he is, without Revelation our understanding of Jesus would not be complete. The Gospels give us accounts of the life of Jesus from four different viewpoints, the letters discuss the significance of Christ and his resurrection but Revelation shows Jesus Christ from an entirely new perspective – as the centre of history, the one with whom lies the destiny and purpose of the world read 1:17 -18. **Secondly** in verse 3 we have a blessing – read verse 3. Revelation doesn’t solve the mystery surrounding the end of the world and the return of Jesus but it is a crucial message of final hope and confidence in Christ that is as much of a blessing today to 21st century Christians as it was to 1st Century Christians.

Background

To get started in Revelation let us go back to the first century and to the island of Patmos 40 miles off SW Turkey. Today it is a holiday destination but in the 1st century it was ‘Alcatraz’ – a hard labour Roman prison camp where those who were imprisoned usually wasted away and died. In this desolate ‘hopeless’ place 60 years after Jesus, John was banished as a result of his Christian witness, and it was here that he wrote his revelations to the seven churches of Asia Minor – read v11. These & churches were communities of Christians troubled by questions such as *Where was Jesus now? When was he coming back?*

Although at the time John wrote there was little evidence of systematic persecution and martyrdom Christians were finding themselves increasingly at odds with the society in which they lived; squeezed out from Judaism on the one hand from which there had been a certain degree of protection, and having an increasingly uncomfortable ride with the pagan society in which they lived on the other.

Apart from this tension was the constant pressure of a pagan atmosphere – streets littered with temples idols, statues, fertility cults, obscene graffiti and tacky souvenirs! Though Christians had given up worshipping pagan gods they knew they represented powerful forces which could easily dominate peoples’ lives – sex (Aphrodite) could enrich or ruin, alcohol (Dionysus) inspire hospitality or provoke destruction, Trade (Hermes) could bring civilisation and education or exploitation and enslavement.

The ‘gods’ of the first century are still worshipped today and have just as much power to seduce and destroy today as then and it is into this kind of world that John ‘s visions speak – visions that go on to

explore the nature of evil, visions that set forth Christ crucified as the fulcrum of God's purposes in history, visions that show what is involved in God's ultimate purposes in terms of judgement, and visions that establish the role of the church to suffer and witness. His visions are realistic – he knows the weaknesses of the church yet he believes God can sustain them; he knows the power and glory of the State yet is wise to the deceptiveness of economic prosperity; he knows how great the forces of evil are yet is clear on the ultimate reality of the triumph of the cross of Christ.

Application today

The prophetic insights of the revelation of John are needed as much now as is in the first century AD. As we look back on an imperfect past and look forward to a somewhat tense future, the prophetic insights of John have as much to say as to how we are Church now as it did to the Church then.

- **Confidence in the future of his plans and purposes** – the key difference between Christians and the rest of the world is our faith in Christ as the hope and future of the world. – as we express succinctly “ Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again!” Lets engage with His living word, listen together to what the Spirit is saying,
- **Confidence in the power of the Spirit at work in and through us** to challenge the realities of the battle between good and evil in the world. Lets put into practice the gifts he has given
- **Confidence in the Church as God's agent for change** – you and I being those who will not only make a difference in the world but make the world a different place Lets in the power of the Spirit step out in faith and love into new territory, new places new plans and purposes with full confidence in our Saviour Jesus Christ

Revelation is: a book that will challenges us as it paints a picture of things to come and a better world.

Revelation is: a book that demands of us an engagement with the realities of the struggle between good and evil, not just for the future but in the present.

Revelation is: a book that arouses in us a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a hunger and thirst for the coming of God's kingdom in the here and now.

As prophetic vision it will call us from the imperfect past into the tension of the now and the not yet future.

In Chapter 1 we have this promise, this prophetic pronouncement which telegraphs a key to the overall content of Revelation – read v 7 and 8. Christ will come again and in contrast to the first coming it will not be in obscurity but will be apparent to all (7 and 8 are a fusion of Daniel 7:13 and Zech 12:10). Even those who were the enemies of Christ “those who pierced him” will see him. Here at the beginning of Rev John affirms that at the centre of the events of world history stands Christ and his victory over death on the cross – read v8. God's purposes for his creation, for each one of us are unfolding “for I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future,” His Son has promised to be with us always “to the very end of the age.”His promises are fixed, determined, resolute, for he is “the Alpha and Omega...the one who is, who was and who is to come.”