

## I SAW NO TEMPLE IN THE CITY<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, 26 May 2019**

The Easter season in Year C has the only sustained set of readings from Revelation in the three-year Sunday lectionary. I suspect that most preachers avoid the book because of the difficulty in its interpretation and the history of mad conclusions drawn from it. The problem is that we do not know how to read it. This ignorance, combined with a literalist approach to the Bible, leads to the madness that we usually associate with it.

Revelation was written during the reign of the Roman Emperor Domitian, who ruled from 81-96 AD. He conducted a brutal campaign to strengthen the cult of emperor worship. He deified his brother, Titus, who was his predecessor, although he did not himself take on a god-like title. Most of the subjects of the empire were polytheists and did not resist the imperial cult. Jews and Christians, however, with their firm monotheism, were subject to persecution. It is not necessary, however, to think that Domitian's persecution was the principal reason for the book. Actual persecutions were sporadic and depended on local conditions. "Revelation anticipates very serious persecution to come because it sees an escalating conflict resulting from faithful Christian witness with its necessary refusal to compromise with idolatry in any area of life."<sup>2</sup>

The author of Revelation was exiled from the city of Ephesus to the Greek island of Patmos. Called John, he was not the apostle John, one of the sons of Zebedee. Neither was he the author of John's gospel, who was not the son of Zebedee either but probably the one described as the "disciple Jesus loved". The different authorship is established by an analysis of the forms of Greek used in the two books.

The alternative name for this book is the "Apocalypse". This term refers to a literary form that we find also in the Hebrew scriptures, particularly in the book Daniel. The intention of apocalyptic writing is to create a new perspective on a world controlled by the dominant oppressive powers. In Daniel, that power is the Babylonian Empire that has taken the Hebrews into captivity. In Revelation, it is the Roman Empire. No matter how intelligible this book was to its original readers, its content passes us by. To put the matter bluntly, we have lost the code.

Imagine living under an oppressive regime and seeking to send a message to fellow sufferers. An open letter would be dangerous. The authorities might get hold of it. Instead, you might write a science fiction novel about a cosmic battle between good and evil. Your readers would understand the context from their point of view, while the authorities, if they bothered to read it, might interpret it from their perspective or, more likely, ignore it altogether. Revelation is something like that.

Revelation constructs a picture of the ultimate collapse of the Roman Empire, which he calls "Babylon". His use of this term links Revelation with the Old Testament book Daniel, written during the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. The Jewish background of his readers would have made the connection quite clear and effective.

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<sup>1</sup> Readings: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10-14, 21, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

<sup>2</sup> John Barton and John Muddiman (eds), *The Oxford Bible Commentary*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 1288. Its introduction to Revelation has informed much of the commentary in this sermon.

The opening chapters of the book contain letters written to seven significant churches: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. Laodicea is famously described as “lukewarm, neither hot nor cold”.<sup>3</sup> We visited Laodicea in 1991. The site sits below the famous ancient spa city of Hierapolis, now known as Pammukale. Hot water from the springs was piped down to Laodicea, arriving there only lukewarm.<sup>4</sup>

This real-life reference to the city highlights how the letters to the seven churches typify the different kinds of pressures that Revelation’s author thought would come and the different kinds of responses that Christians might have. Although they appear to be judgements from afar, they are real-life descriptions containing real-life challenges. Thus, John set the scene for the drama that he would unfold.

What was the point of the drama? First, it was not principally a prediction of what the end of time might be like, although that was its scenario. Its intention was much more immediate. It was to turn his readers away from seeing the world through the eyes of their present and future oppressors. The message of Revelation is twofold. Christians are called to be faithful at whatever cost. For many, the cost would be their lives. Whatever happened, however, the gospel will ultimately triumph. If I were to put the message in one word, that word would be “hope”.

Hope was already a feature of the Christian life. Paul, writing to the Romans forty years earlier, had said:

For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.<sup>5</sup>

Revelation presented a picture of what that hope might be like. It did this through the vision of a new city. Apart from the symbolic descriptions, the new city had recognisable features. It was walled, as the cities that the readers lived in were. It had gates for access. Most strikingly, a river ran down its main street. This was not a fanciful attribute for a Hellenistic city. If you visit, for example, the ruins of Antalya or Perge in modern Turkey, you will find a main street with arcaded shops down each side. At the top end of the street is a fountain, or nymphaeum, from which water used to flow down a channel in the middle of the main street.

This gives us the hint that the readers were to recognise this city as the one that they lived in. The changed viewpoint was not something awaited at the so-called end of time. The changed viewpoint was for now. The most significant change was that this city had no temple. This is not to say that it did not have places of worship. It was that this city had no place, either Jewish or pagan, where sacrificial animals were slaughtered to appease the gods. This is because no intermediary is now necessary between us and God. As Father Gregory reminded us at Easter, the events of the Passion and Resurrection take us back to the creation myth, to a place where we can meet God face to face.

Conservative Christians in our own country suggest that the Christian religion is under some form of persecution. I do not accept that analysis of Australia, but it is the case that, in the Middle East, Africa and parts of Asia, Christians are the most persecuted minority.<sup>6</sup> Even

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<sup>3</sup> Revelation 3:16

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1977/08/what-hierapolis-tells-us-about-laodicea>

<sup>5</sup> Romans 8:24

<sup>6</sup> See Rupert Shortt, “Where Christianity fights for its life”, *The Tablet*, 17 April 2019. <https://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/15806/where-christianity-fights-for-its-life>

without knowing that, we could not escape the effects of intercommunal violence around the world. I do not need to enumerate them. We pray for those affected nearly every week. Each week seems to bring a new subject for our prayers. If things looked grim for John, they also look grim for us.

We are just as much in need of hope as were the early Christians. But our need is not just on the larger scale. It is on the personal. After today, my next appearance here will be on 7 July, when we return from a period with our family in the USA. While we are there, our elder grandson, Ben, will graduate from high school, an event the Americans celebrate with great ceremony. While we are away, I will celebrate my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. I never thought that I would turn 80. It's not that I thought that I would die sooner. It's that I didn't think about it at all. Now that it is fast approaching, I am a little surprised. Not only did I never think of being 80, I couldn't have imagined that I would be standing here today to tell you about it.

My life has unfolded in ways entirely unlike those that I had earlier imagined. Woody Allen is reported to have said, adapting an old Yiddish proverb, "If you want to make God laugh, tell him your plans". I must have caused much laughter in heaven.

My feelings are a little mixed. Sometimes I get the distinct feeling of guilt. Australia's population is ageing and where will the money come from to support us? The church is ageing and who will fill the pews? Should I feel guilty for not having conveniently died earlier? More seriously, I have come face to face with my own mortality.

In saying this, I do not mean that I have become obsessed with the end of life. Being a responsible citizen, I have a will, powers of attorney etc. It is the case that my death is coming closer. The point is, however, that I risk coming under the control of a different oppressor, time; that I will begin to worry about time, about how much is left to me, about what I will or might do with it, about what I might never do. That is being oppressed by time.

The answer is the same as that presented in Revelation. I must maintain a view not determined by my oppressor. Like the early Christians, I must continue to live where I am placed and live there in the same hope that John encourages. As Mother Julian reported from her vision, "... all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well".<sup>7</sup>

In which case, we could do worse than pray with Walter Brueggemann:

God before and God behind,  
God for us and God for your own self,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
    creator of sea and sky,  
    governor of day and night.  
We give thanks for your ordered gift of life to us,  
    for the rhythms that reassure,  
    for the equilibriums that sustain,  
    for the reliabilities that curb our anxieties.  
We treasure from you,  
    days to work and nights to rest.  
We cherish from you,  
    days to control and nights to yield.

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<sup>7</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, 1393, 13<sup>th</sup> Revelation, Chapter 27, <https://jesus.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/revelations-of-divine-love.pdf>

We savour from you,  
    days to plan and nights to dream.  
Be our day and our night,  
    our heaven and our earth,  
    our sea and our sky,  
and in the end our true home. Amen.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <https://margaretfeinberg.com/wednesdays-with-walter-brueggemann-6/>

**The New Jerusalem**  
**Spain, perhaps Toledo, 1220**



**The ruins of the aqueduct delivering the lukewarm water to Laodicea**



**Nymphaeum at Perge, Turkey**  
**and**  
**Reconstructed image of Perge's nymphaeum**

