

St. Aidan's West Epping, 5th May 2019

“UNVEILING THE FUTURE”

(Acts 9:1-6; Psalm 30; Revelation 5:1-14; John 21:1-14)

What does the future hold? It's a big question for us in all sorts of ways. We wonder about the result of the next election. We have an illness, or someone close to us has one, and we wonder how everything will turn out. We wonder about our church, and where things are heading. We see students protesting because they are concerned about the future in the light of climate change, and they don't believe that those in power are taking it seriously. Perhaps there is something ahead that is particularly concerning us right now.

I get various junk emails very day on my computer. One which comes from time to time is from a clairvoyant urging me to follow through her message because there is something wonderful that is going to happen to me, or there is something I need to be warned about. Those emails go straight into the trash where they belong! But other people may well want to know what she has to say, or they may consult astrologers or tarot readers in the hope of learning about the future.

Of course, God holds the whole world in his hands, and the future is in his hands. I am happy to entrust the future to him.

But I do not seek to be foolish about the future. As a responsible human being, I seek to be wise in preparing for the future. If there are things it would be wise to do, I should seek to do them. If there are things it would be wise to find out, I should seek to find them out in time. If I have a sermon coming up, I don't assume that God will miraculously give me the words on the day: I will need to prepare. If the car registration is coming up, I know that I will need to get the paperwork sorted, the check carried out, the insurance renewed. I know a certain amount about the future, and that knowledge helps me to know things I should be thinking about and things I should be doing. And sometimes my questions about the future will help me to see things I need to pray about.

But if we want to see the big picture about the future, the **scriptures** are where we need to look: not the soothsayer or the clairvoyant or the astrologer!

As Ross will have mentioned last Sunday, we have readings over the coming weeks from that strange final book of the Bible, the Revelation to John. It was written at a time when persecution of Christians was growing, and in many parts of the Roman Empire there was pressure on Christians to turn away from their faith, or to compromise in their behaviour.

What was the future for the church? Would large numbers of Christians be martyred? Would the Roman Empire overrun the church, and destroy the work of the Gospel? The future was looking grim.

The Book of Revelation, with its strange images and events, was written in a style that would make sense to many Christians, but was unlikely to be meaningful to the Roman oppressors. It had an important message for Christians concerned about the future. Beyond the tension between the Roman Empire and the Church, there was a battle going on between good and evil, between the kingdom of God and the power of the Evil One. The book gave its readers the assurance that God was still in control, even at this difficult time, and that he would ultimately have the victory. The task of Christians was to remain faithful to Christ: they would share in the victory and the blessings of God's kingdom.

In today's reading from Chapter 5, we are transported into the courts of heaven itself. It is a picture of wonder, splendour, awe. The Lord is on his throne surrounded by worshippers, some nearer, some further away. In the hand of God, John sees a scroll. Unusually, it is written on both sides – normally only one side of a scroll was used. The scroll is thus jam-packed: there is nothing more to be added to it.

The scroll in fact contains God's plan for creation, his plan of salvation for the world. But the scroll is sealed with seven seals: it cannot be opened. God's wonderful plan cannot be known. And if the seals cannot be broken, how can God's plan come to pass? Surely if the seals cannot be opened and the scrolls unveiled, there is no hope for creation, certainly no hope for the church.

What is needed is someone who is worthy to open the seals. Then God's purposes can come to pass. And the call goes out: “Who is worthy to open the scroll and break its seals?” The problem is that we humans are unworthy.

Adam was called to care for the world: he quickly rejected his role as God's servant, and we humans have followed in his footsteps. We are not fit to be in charge. We are not worthy! A perfect man is needed. And in the light of human sin, God called a nation to be the community who would show his truth and goodness to the world: but the kings and rulers and the people of Israel fell far short as well, resisting the call of God and his prophets. They were not worthy. A perfect Israelite was needed.

John weeps bitterly. All seems hopeless. No one is worthy to set God's great plan in motion. What is to happen? Is all lost? What hope is there for the future?

But is there *really* no one who is worthy to open the seals? An elder tells John to stop weeping. The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, and thus **he** can open the scroll and its seven seals. The Lion: an image of power, in fact an image associated in the Book of Exodus with the tribe of Judah. The Root of David: an image from Isaiah, who looks forward to a revival of the glory of Israel under a descendant of King David, who of course came from the tribe of Judah.

So John looks for a powerful lion, but what does he see? He sees not a lion, but a **lamb** bearing the marks of slaughter. But the lamb is no longer dead: it is alive and standing. And it is no ordinary lamb. It has seven horns, pointing to his complete power, and seven eyes, indicating his complete knowledge. Seven means completeness and perfection. In fact, it is from the Lamb that the seven spirits, the Spirit of God in all his fullness, will go out into all the world.

The lion who is the Lamb! This is Jesus Christ himself who lived the perfect human life, unlike Adam, and unlike all of us. Jesus Christ, the perfect Ruler of God's people, who exercised his power in serving, even dying for the salvation for all his people.

The Lamb takes the scroll, ready to open it. Yes, this great plan of God can now be uncovered, and it can be carried out. We are being told that Jesus Christ is the key to history: God's plan and purposes are bound up with him, and our future and our hope are bound up in him.

What a contrast these images present! A lion: a creature of power and might, an awesome creature.

But this lion is identified as a lamb: weak, gentle, apparently helpless – and indeed this lamb has been slaughtered, sacrificed. If you have read the Narnia stories by C.S. Lewis, you may remember how Aslan the lion has both these sides. Aslan is awesome and powerful, and yet gentle with his followers, and vulnerable when sacrifice is required to rescue his people.

And to underline the authority of the Lamb, we see how the rest of this chapter is filled with worship, not just worship of the Lord on his throne, but worship directed towards the Lamb. We see four creatures which have already appeared in the book, together with twenty-four elders, and then also thousands of angels and elders, singing that the Lamb is worthy of power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing. Jesus is worthy because his death has paid the price of salvation for God's people from every tribe and language and people and nation, giving us privileged membership of God's kingdom.

But the circle of worshippers grows and grows. By the end of the chapter, John hears every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, singing praises to God on his throne, and to the Lamb. Indeed later in the service we will join the chorus saying these very words of praise. Here we have a clear indication of the divine authority of Jesus, God coming amongst us to save his people.

The victory of the Lamb is a major theme of this Book of Revelation. He has won the victory by his death on the cross, but the culmination of that victory still awaits us. I suggested to the congregation at St. Alban's last Sunday that we might think of ourselves at the "In-Betweeners". We live between the first coming of Jesus and his return in glory. We know what has happened, but we don't see yet what is to happen.

What we do know is that the future lies in God's hands, and Jesus has assured us that the victory over sin and evil will be his. Yes, there may be tough times in this in-between period, but God is working his purposes out.

We don't know all the details of the future that we might like to know, but we know the things that really matter. And we know that God is with us, helping and strengthening and guiding us into the future. And we know that at the right time, all creation will see and acknowledge Jesus, the Lion who is the Lamb, as worthy of all honour and praise. Let us trust and follow him now, in the future and for eternity. Amen

Paul Weaver