

St. Aidan's West Epping, 12th May 2019

“HOPE IN TOUGH TIMES”

(Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23; Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30)

I have been a supporter of the Anglican Church Missionary Society for over 50 years. During most of that time I have received an annual prayer diary, giving the names of missionaries, the country where they are working, and a little about the ministries they are involved in. In the last couple of decades photos of the missionaries have been included.

But over the last ten years or so I have noticed a number of missionaries whose surnames have not been given, whose country is not identified, and whose photo shows the person in silhouette or from behind, so that their face cannot be seen clearly. Why is this? Because if they were clearly and publicly identified, it could be dangerous for them and their families, and those with whom they work. We have been aware for many years of a number of Moslem or hardline Communist countries where being a Christian can be difficult and even dangerous, but now this is becoming the case even in many countries where the church was not previously under attack. And of course, even in our own country, there are those who mock or attack the church and the Christian faith at every opportunity.

The Book of Revelation was written at a time when the young church was being persecuted in many places. This book, with its symbolic numbers and dramatic images and striking language, was written in the apocalyptic style. It is strange to us, and it was unfamiliar to the oppressive Roman authorities. But many Christian readers of the time would have seen what it was all about. Its message was a message of hope and challenge. Yes, life was tough for many Christians. Yes, it seemed as if the world was out of control. But God was actually working his purposes out, and he would sort things out in due course. But meanwhile, the task of Christians was to hang in there, to keep being faithful to Christ. God would indeed have the victory over all evil. And God would in time establish his wondrous kingdom. There was wonderful blessing coming to those who were faithful to Jesus. So keep going in faith and in faithfulness!

Last week in Chapter 5, we heard about a scroll sealed with seven seals. I said that this scroll held the great purposes of God. It needed to be opened so that those plans could go forward. At first it seemed that no one was worthy to open the seals, but then we were introduced to the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, who had had a great victory and who was indeed worthy.

But John saw not a lion but a lamb, with marks of slaughter, but also with signs of power and knowledge. And it is clear that the conquering Lion who is the Lamb was Jesus himself.

Yes, Jesus, through his death on the cross, had won the great victory over evil and death. He held the key to the future: through him God's great plan for creation and for his people could be unfolded. And in chapter 6 six of those seven seals were opened.

Chapter 6 is dramatic indeed, and perhaps not what John or any of us might have expected. For as the seals are opened, things seem to get worse, not better. They reveal military conquest, war, injustice and oppression, disease and death, persecution, natural disaster. Not a very positive picture, if that is what God's people are to look to.

But wait a second! These are also things that Jesus described, warning his followers about the future as his crucifixion drew near. And we know that these things are indeed part of history, and still part of the world as we know it today. What the seals reveal is **the world gone wrong**. I have pointed out before that as people went wrong, the world went wrong too. As we humans are that mix of goodness and evil, so the world itself is so wonderful and works so beautifully in so many ways, but it is also a place where there is danger and disease and death.

Some of that is simply what we often call *nature*, and some of it is the fault of us human beings. And even now, we see people in power who are more interested in what seems profitable and comfortable here and now, rather than what is truly good for our world and our planet.

Only six seals are opened in Chapter 6. The seventh seal must wait, and instead we are taken back to the courts of heaven. At the beginning of Chapter 7 we are told that this seventh seal must not be opened until all God's servants are marked with a seal on their foreheads. And how many servants are there? We are told that there are 144000: 12000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel. In the book of Revelation, 12 represents the people of God in their fullness, just as the 12 tribes make up the people of Israel.

One of the confusing things about the Book of Revelation is that it sometimes uses the one word in different ways. We heard earlier of the seven seals that prevented the great scroll being opened by anyone who was unfit. In the same way the seal on the tomb of Jesus was meant to prevent an unauthorized person opening that tomb.

But the seals on the foreheads of the 144000 seem to be different. They are identifying marks: the seals mark these out as God's people, in a sense owned and cared for by God, even in these challenging circumstances. The seals make clear that no matter how hard things get for these people, God will be faithful to them, and he will never disown them. They truly belong to God for eternity.

And now we come to the scene that was read for us this morning: the second half of Chapter 7. Having heard that 144000 people were marked with God's seal, owned by him as his servants, John sees a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages. God's people no longer belong only to the nation of Israel but to all nations of the world.

It is not that these people are a replacement of the people of Israel. The point is that no longer are the people of God restricted to one nation, but they come from all nations. We must remember that the numbers in Revelation are so often symbolic. And let's face it: how does an ordinary person count a crowd of people numbering 144000? What we call the catholic church is the church, the people of God, throughout the world.

And if we sometimes hear people claiming that only their particular group belongs to the 144000 people of God, we must still remember that God's people come from *every* tribe and people and nation – not just one elite group. As Paul puts it: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female: we are all one in Christ Jesus”, the Lion who is the Lamb. These servants of God are robed in white, the colour of joy and light and purity. They are holding palm branches, a sign of celebration and victory. And they cry out “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.”

John is asked a question by one of the elders. “Who are these who are robed in white, and where do they come from?” John quite rightly replies saying “You are the one who knows.” Of course, the question was not some sort of quiz for John. The question needed to be asked so that the question could be answered. “These are the ones who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Yes, persecution has indeed been going on, but that is not the end of the story for these faithful Christians, even for those who have lost their lives for their witness to Christ. They have come to the end of their lives on earth, and now they share in the glorious worship of heaven.

They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb. Of course, this is a picture of all who have put their trust in Jesus who died for them, shedding his blood for the life of the world. They are spiritually cleansed, their sins are forgiven, and they are accepted as righteous in God's sight, welcomed into God's perfect kingdom.

And there is one more thing that brings out the blessing God has for all his people, especially those who have suffered for their faith. We are told that God himself will shelter them. They will hunger and thirst no more. The sun will do them no harm. The Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd.

Now we have a third picture describing Jesus, the Lion who is the Lamb: this Lamb is also the *Shepherd*, who will guide his people to springs of the water of life. God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of these faithful servants. How appropriate it was to share in Psalm 23 this morning, and to hear part of John 10 with its description of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who lays down his life for his sheep.

So we live in today's world with its struggles and pains, but as believers in Christ we are promised that the day is coming when God's eternal blessings will indeed come to all his people.

Hence the call of this book to keep going in faith, to keep going in faithfulness. It is worth it, even when it is challenging, even when it is difficult. Let us then take up our cross day by day, and keep following Jesus, the good shepherd who died for us, his sheep. Amen.

Paul Weaver