

‘LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 1 (Introduction)’

Revelation 1:9-20

That is quite a reading, isn't it? I don't know how you process stuff that you read or hear read – for some people it's just a question of listening to the sounds and seeing the words in your head: for others you actually visualise what the passage is about, you hear it in pictures. If you're one of the latter, then the images going through your head must have been pretty mind-blowing. There's old John, probably now into his late 80s or early 90s, exiled on the rugged Greek island of Patmos because he wouldn't shut up preaching and where the Roman authorities thought he couldn't do too much harm. It's Sunday and he's caught up in an attitude of worship when he suddenly gets this absolutely amazing vision.

It's a vision that has intrigued people down through the centuries, a vision of great battles, fantastic creatures, awesome and earth-shattering events, glorious glimpses of God in all his splendour and majesty. Obviously it "means" something, but no-one's entirely clear what, so it is a rich seam to mine for PhD theses, doomsday sects, a lot of prophetic drivel and weird novels. Some people have become so caught up in the details of it all that they have pretty well lost sight of the bigger picture. Some people have used their interpretation of the vision to do some very strange things themselves. Some people think it's just so weird that they don't bother with it at all.

And that vision, which we now know as *The Book of Revelation*, begins with an astounding vision of the Risen Jesus Christ. As John is entranced by the power of the Holy Spirit, he sees Jesus and hears him telling John to write down all he sees and to send messages to seven churches in the west of Asia Minor, an area we know as Turkey today. These churches were around thirty or forty years old by now, well established and almost certainly trying to cope with the pressures of living in a pagan culture where the persecution of the Roman Emperors was starting to have an effect on them. They form a kind of circular route around the area and the letters which Jesus dictates to John were to be taken round to them and read in their regular meetings.

As we shall see – because we're going to spend the next few Sunday looking at them in turn – the letters contain elements of challenge, encouragement and rebuke. They are all linked very closely to their geographical and cultural situations, have references to the vision of Jesus Christ that John has had and are to be taken very seriously not only by the members of all those churches but by all who are able to listen (2:7,11,17 etc.) – that's you and me, folks. There's loads of really interesting stuff in each of them and all kinds of details which we could spend a great deal of time discussing, but, as with the rest of the book (and, indeed, the rest of the Bible) we must not let the cryptic and complicated divert us from the direct, powerful and obvious messages contained within them that are still very relevant to us as Christians living in the twenty-first century. If you want to pick up on any of the background or get into the details of the language and the images used, then I can direct you to some very good books, if you want. And there will be the usual discussion notes each week, so that you can get together with other people – ideally in one of the house groups – and talk about the issues that are raised.

This morning, though, we're going to begin at the beginning. And this vision, which goes on for another 21 chapters, starts with Jesus Christ. That's where we should always begin. He's the foundation, the focus, the heart of our faith, and if we don't begin with Jesus we easily lose our way. The trouble is, John's vision is just so amazing that he has real difficulty putting it into words. The experience is overwhelming for him and he can't find a way to express it adequately other than by using a series of metaphors and similes. It's kind of dream-like. You know how it is when you wake up from a vivid dream – you've seen all kinds of things that in the dream seem perfectly acceptable, normal in that unreal reality. And then you try to process that, either for your own satisfaction or to try and explain it to someone else, but you can't do it. It's like those wonderful etchings by Max Escher where the perspective is all up the creek: it never really fits, does it?

Well, that's the situation John's in here. Just one example – he sees Jesus with a sharp sword coming out of his mouth. It doesn't really fit, especially when he says that Jesus was speaking very loudly and clearly. How could he do that with a sword in his mouth? It's just John's way of trying to explain it. And it has, as one commentator (John Sweet: SCM commentary) puts it, led to “*some unhappy results in Christian art*”. Those of you who were here a few weeks ago may remember my unfortunate attempt to explain the word “*ineffable*” (it was all over Facebook before I even got home!). Well, this really is something “*ineffable*”, something that cannot be captured in words. And we could have all kinds of fun this morning trying to sort it all out, finding allegorical meaning in it all, attempting to produce a picture of this astonishing person who appears before John. Some people do try. This is Leon Morris writing in the Tyndale New Testament Commentary, an otherwise impeccable source of help:

“The feet are likened to chalkolibanon. This word is not found anywhere before this book, and neither here nor in its other occurrence in 2:18 does the context make clear what it means. AV renders it ‘fine brass’, taking its cue from the chalko- (thought this properly denotes copper or bronze rather than brass. It seems probable that we should understand the term of some alloy of copper, but the evidence does not permit us to say with certainty which particular alloy.”

Now, if you're the sort of person who needs to know exactly what alloy John was referring to here to describe the glowing feet of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, then I suggest you have lost the plot both in terms of understanding poetry and, more to the point, in terms of hearing what God has to say through these words. Trying to explain all that kind of stuff is, in George Caird's memorable phrase, “*attempting to unweave the rainbow*”. So let's not get bogged down in the detail of whether Christ's feet looked more like brass than bronze or whether his voice was more like a waterfall than the sound of breakers crashing against the shore of Patmos, but step back and see what God has to say to us through this fabulous vision that John was told to write down. What is this picture all about? Well, it's about Jesus and the way in which we relate to him and he to us.

1. AWESOME

This vision is awesome – not awesome in the sense that your new pink i-Phone cover is “like, awesome”, but awesome in the proper sense of inspiring awe, dread, amazement. John picks up on some of the imagery that is used to describe the “Son of Man” figure, the coming Messiah, in *The Book of Daniel* in the Old Testament. Here are attributes of God himself. And the vision is absolutely wonderful. Walking between the seven golden lampstands that represent the seven churches to whom John is to write, churches that are to blaze with the light of Christ, is a person dressed in an impressive robe with a wide, priestly golden sash. And he looks just amazing.

Do you remember those old ReadyBrek adverts on the television? Two children glowing with a kind of aura that came either from filling themselves with ReadyBrek or living too close to a nuclear power station. Here is Jesus, throbbing with light and energy, with dazzlingly white hair and glowing feet, his eyes fizzing in his face. His face shines like the sun in all its brilliance. Even to those of us used to special effects on television and in the cinema, this would have looked spectacular. This is really what it means to be glorified and you can imagine that Peter, James and John had a similar vision when Jesus was transfigured before them. Tom Wright in *Simply Christian*, writes about looking at God as being like “*staring into the sun*”. It must have been like that for John.

And then John mentions the voice – “*like the sound of rushing waters*”. This would have made Brian Blessed sound like a choirboy, or the person who does those gravelly voice-overs for horror films sound like the BeeGees. Again, it's difficult for us to imagine it and John has done his best with that image, but what we are looking at here is a seriously splendid vision. This is Jesus, folks, the person we follow, the shining, pulsating, reverberating core of our faith, the one who is at the heart of our church, the dynamic of our whole lives collectively and personally. This is our Lord, whom we so often dismiss as “*meek and*

mild” and try to capture and domesticate with our doctrines and dogma, the one whom we feel we can safely hide away until we need him for our own petty purposes, the King of kings and Lord of lords, co-Creator with the Father, Redeemer of all people, champion and victor over the forces of evil. This is Jesus – bow before him and adore him!

And John, being human, is overwhelmed by it all. He’d come out of his cell to worship, as he did so often, no doubt. I imagine he was praying, singing to himself, expressing his praise to Jesus as happened every Sunday at least – and suddenly Jesus turned up. John didn’t know what to do. Just as, I suspect, we wouldn’t know what to do if Jesus really made his presence felt here one Sunday morning. John was so overwhelmed, in fact, that he fainted. This isn’t John bowing down in worship – this is John totally overcome and rolling helpless at the feet of his Saviour and Lord. This is what we mean by being “*slain in the Spirit*”. John is excited, scared, overawed, deliriously happy and unbelievably frightened. As we would be if we stopped for a moment to think about who it is that we are worshipping here week by week.

2. ASSURING

So Jesus, Risen Lord, Almighty Vanquisher of sin and death, reaches down to the blubbling heap at his glowing feet and says those four words that we read again and again in Scripture when something strange has happened presaging a command to service – “*Do not be afraid*”. John feels Christ’s hand on his life – literally. There is a comfort in his words and a reassurance in his touch. Maybe John was expecting a slash from Jesus’ oral sword or a burn from his glowing feet, but he has a touch of encouragement. Jesus cares about him.

The light of the Risen Jesus Christ’s appearance is not there to dazzle and to blind, but to illuminate and guide. Tom Wright, again, writes of the way in which the light of Jesus Christ helps us to understand everything else. There is a real sense of enlightenment here. As Jesus’ appearance blazes in front of him, so it all becomes real to John. The legendary Nashville musician and producer T-Bone Burnett, who is a committed Christian, was asked why his work wasn’t more explicit about Jesus and he replied that you can either write about the light or write about what you can see because of the light. The light of Jesus, flooding the darkness, his words of comfort and encouragement, and the gentle touch of his hand on our lives remind us that he is someone who assures us, someone in whom we can seek refuge, someone who cares about us with a compassion that blazes within him. But why should we feel reassured by this?

Well, there are two things, really, two reasons why we can feel a sense of assurance about this awesome figure. And they are both pretty key to understanding the rest of the book and, indeed, the seven letters which are our immediate concern, because John was told to write to Christians who were finding it a real struggle to stick to their faith and their commitment to Jesus in the face of a very hostile culture, a culture in which it seemed that the pagan gods and the deified Emperors were gaining the upper hand

3. ALIVE

Firstly, we can find that sense of assurance because Jesus is alive. I suppose, if you want yet another A, you could say he is alive and active. You see, as we’ve just said, John was going to send this account of his vision off to a bunch of Christians who were living in a culture where the focus of people’s worship and belief – their superstition, if you like – was a bunch of pagan gods and a succession of Roman Emperors who wanted to be treated like gods. There’s an awful lot in this book about offering worship to other gods, both from the pantheon of pagan gods and, more especially, to the Emperors who demanded worship and homage over all other gods and beliefs.

So Jesus says, “*Don’t be afraid ... I am the Living One; I was dead and behold I am alive for ever and ever*”. Domitian and the other Emperors would die and that would be that. The Roman gods whose inert

stone statues populated the temples and circuses of Rome and the wider Empire were totally useless when it came to doing anything other than making the place look attractive with their statues. They were as good as dead – not that they'd ever been alive, except in the imagination of their bewildered followers. They were like the gods of whom Isaiah wrote so scathingly in *Isaiah 44:13ff* or Jeremiah so humorously in *Jeremiah 10:3ff*.

But Jesus is alive! He has been dead, but he was brought back to life. He has been through death and out the other side. He is the trailblazer for those who believe in him, who commit their lives to him. Paul writes all about that in his *Letters to the Corinthians*. Where Jesus has gone, we will follow. And because he is alive he is better than all the other gods, he is the one who has proved his words, who has delivered on his promises. That's the first reason we can know his assurance – because he keeps his word, and he's alive to prove it.

4. ALL-POWERFUL

But secondly, he is all-powerful. He is “*the First and the Last*” – over and above all other things, both temporal and eternal, both material and spiritual. Paul, again, stresses that in *Philippians 2:6-11* and *Colossians 1:15-20*. And he is the one who “*holds the keys of death and Hades*” (Hades was the Greek underworld, the place you went when you died). In other words, there is absolutely nothing beyond his reach and beyond his control.

And this all-powerful, almighty Jesus Christ holds the seven churches of the next couple of chapters in his hands. He will guide them, build them up, protect them and, if necessary, destroy them. He is an amazing person, this Jesus Christ. And the awesomeness of his appearance is really a manifestation, a visible reflection of the awesomeness of his ability and power. We must, surely, feel reassured by a person who can do all things, who can overcome all things, who is in a league of his own where gods and powers and spirits are concerned. The pagan gods proved to be worthless. The Emperors died and were forgotten. Jesus lives and reigns for ever. He is not forgotten and one day all will bow at his feet in worship. The rest of this book is all about that, about the victory of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, over all that is opposed to God and all that attempts to hurt and harm humanity.

Before anything else is written down in this book, Jesus demonstrates his greatness, his awesome power and presence. John is left in no doubt that this is a great God and his words to his people are therefore urgent and important. “Write it all down,” he is told. And to start with, he is to write to these seven churches messages that burn with the intensity of his appearance, that throb with the life of his being, that pierce into their dark corners with the searching gaze of his blazing eyes. This is a great God and we are left, like John, with no option but to worship him, to fall before him in awed obeisance.

And we are left, like the Christians in the churches of Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea, with no option but to listen to what he has to say and act upon it. Over the next few weeks we shall look at those letters and, I hope, learn from them so that we can be better followers of the One who is awesome, assuring, alive and all-powerful. But now, let's worship.

Discussion notes on the next page

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Questions for discussion

1. What is your impression of *The Book of Revelation* ?
2. How should we approach the imagery of John's vision? Are we to take all he says about Jesus here literally? Why/why not?
3. What does Jesus mean when he says "*I am the First and the Last*"?
4. What do you find scary about Jesus? What do you find reassuring about Jesus?
5. How do visions such as this one of Jesus – or the whole of *the Book of Revelation* – help you in your Christian life?

6. What do you expect from the next few sermons on The Letters to the Seven Churches (*Revelation 2,3*)?