

**“YOU’VE GOT THE TIME 6 – JAMES TO REVELATION”**

*James 1:22; Revelation 22:1-21*

As we’ve already said (several times), today is Advent Sunday, the beginning of the period which leads up to Christmas. It’s a period of expectation, of anticipation. The word “Advent” comes, via Old French, from a Latin word meaning “arrival” or “coming”. So it is all about awaiting the coming of Jesus Christ. In just four weeks’ time we’ll be back here celebrating the coming of Jesus into our world, God in human form coming to live amongst us. But down through history the Christian Church has celebrated the first coming of Jesus with an eye firmly on his Second Coming. Since Jesus disappeared back to the side of God the Father in heaven, those who follow him have expected his return. As you have listened to the New Testament letters you’ll have found plenty of references to the expectation that Jesus will come back to this earth in some way – and the first Christians were expecting it to happen pretty soon. In fact, in his letters to the Thessalonians Paul is concerned that some people have given up work and are just sitting around waiting for Jesus to come back.

That Jesus will return is not in doubt – but there are all kinds of different interpretations as to how, when and where it will happen. All kinds of apocalyptic sects down through the years have claimed that they have pinpointed the day of Christ’s return. There’s an American pastor, whose name escapes me now, who has made a couple of predictions this year (both now proved wrong), and a website on which someone with an open Bible and a copy of the latest newspaper gives a daily percentage likelihood of Jesus’ return. Jesus himself makes clear that we are not privileged to know the time of his return, nor should we waste time trying to find out. It will happen, he tells us, “*like a thief in the night*”.

However, the Apostle John, who was exiled by the Romans on the little Greek island of Patmos because he wouldn’t stop preaching the gospel, had an amazing vision that gave a glimpse into the events which might accompany Christ’s return. It’s the last book you’ve listened to in this forty day journey through the New Testament and the one from which we’ve read this morning: *Revelation*. It’s an account of what was revealed to John by an angel – the word “apocalypse”, which is often used as an alternative to *Revelation*, means just that: unveiling or revealing. Those of you who were here this time last year may remember that we looked at the first three chapters where Jesus speaks to seven of the churches in the eastern Mediterranean area, but we didn’t venture beyond that (although we did do a series on the rest of it some years ago).

It’s an amazing book, isn’t it? And it has caused all sorts of problems for Christians and others down through the years. Part of the reason for those problems is that, on the one hand, many people have taken it all very literally, which is clearly impossible; and, on the other hand, many people have tried to read far too much into it. Let’s deal with the first problem first.

John was granted a glimpse of things that no other human being has ever seen – the angel guide took him into heaven itself and John was able to watch as the events of the end times unfolded before his very eyes. But because no-one had ever seen anything like this before, a lot of it was just beyond his comprehension, and certainly beyond his ability to describe. He simply didn’t have the words to tell people what it was he saw – so there are a lot of phrases such as “something like ...” or “it looked like ...” This book is very much a poetic book, full of symbolism and metaphors. Did you notice, just as one example, the number of times the number seven is used? And there are some very strange creatures mentioned as well.

Rodney Matthews is a fantasy artist who has designed record sleeves for all kinds of hard rock groups and he has tried to create pictures of what John tries to describe – as have many other artists down through the centuries – but the very fact that it takes a fantasy artist to do this should tell us something about what John sees. This is a vision of something that is totally beyond our human experience, but, as always, we try to make sense of it as best we can. I’m not going to go into all the details this morning – even if I could – but just make a couple of general points which might help you in your understanding of this book.

We know from our history books that John wrote this account of his vision at a time when the persecution of Christians was really starting to bite. Depending on how you date the book, it was written either when Nero was Emperor of Rome or when Domitian was Emperor – whichever it was, we know that they were both extremely brutal and violent Emperors. If you were living at that time and had come to faith in Jesus, the Son of God Almighty, you might be wondering what the point of it all was. Jesus had promised to return soon and there wasn't much sign of that happening. And he had promised protection for his followers, which was also looking to be a pretty empty promise. This book is intended as an encouragement to such people. It is a powerful description of the eventual victory of Jesus, the triumph of good over evil. God will vindicate his followers and those who perpetrate evil will be punished. There are many references here to Rome – the Empire, not the Church, as many would have it – but in kind of code that would have been easily understood by the Christians and dismissed by the Romans as empty fantasy, and it is clear that Rome's Empire will fall – which is exactly what did happen.

Whatever else this might or might not be, this is not a book that will supply all the answers about the end of the world and the Second Coming of Jesus. You cannot read it and work out exactly what is going to happen when. It is not written in some intricate code that only the truly knowledgeable can fathom. This is a wonderful, epic poem that says “Don't worry! It's tough at the moment. But Christ will overcome. You will be safe for eternity.” The struggling Christians of the first century – and Christians struggling ever since – can look into this book and be assured that it is worth it: Jesus is King above all other kings, Lord above all other lords. Evil, in the form of Satan, will ultimately be defeated and those who have chosen to follow Jesus will receive their reward when he returns. Stick with it. Don't give up. God has got it all under control.

And the final, triumphant climax to the book – to the whole Bible, as we now have it – is the wonderful picture that we have in the chapter we read together. (Once again, let's not be too literalist in our approach – for those who are worried about their pets, for example, “*dogs*” is a contemporary slang word for those who are ritually unclean.) *Vv 1-5* are often read at funerals as an encouragement to those who mourn, but we can also see them as an encouragement for ourselves when we are grappling with the difficulties that this life throws at us. And notice that Jesus promises three times that he will return (*vv7,12,20*). As we prepare to celebrate the first coming of Jesus, we remind ourselves that Jesus is coming again and when he does all will be well – if we have committed ourselves to following Jesus and have lived as he has told us to. There's an invitation to everyone to do that in *v17*.

And there, as in all the books of the New Testament we have listened to over the past forty days – indeed, as in all the Bible – is the rub. What difference has listening to the New Testament made to you? What difference does reading the Bible make to you? Has it been like listening to any other audio book? Do you treat the Bible like a novel or a story book and enjoy it but not let it affect you in any way? Are you really looking forward to the return of Jesus Christ? Are you ready to respond to the invitation he sends out? Are you really wanting to live this life as he commands so that you can enjoy his presence for eternity when it's over?

At the beginning of this last week we read through the *Letter of James*, one of the seven little letters that were written by James (Jesus' brother and Bishop of Jerusalem), Peter (the apostle), John (another of the original apostles) and Jude (very probably another of Jesus' brothers) to the members of the churches which were springing up around the Mediterranean, letters of encouragement and exhortation – sometimes quite specific in the issues they deal with and also sometimes in a kind of code (*2 John* for example). James is anxious that many people are treating the teaching of Jesus with respect and reverence, claiming to be good Christians therefore, but not really living it all out. It is James who writes in *James 2:26*, that “*faith without deeds is dead*”. Just as we saw in Paul's *Letter to the Romans* a couple of weeks ago, if you believe this stuff, it's got to make a difference to you.

And, more pertinently to our forty day exercise, James says in *James 1:22*, “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*” That's the real problem, isn't it? It's great listening to it or reading it – either the very words of the Bible itself, or the exposition of it by preachers and

writers – but we’re not too sure about doing it. We love discussing it and sharing our views about it. We devour books about it from the Christian bookshop. We like to have little excerpts from it on our walls and in our notebooks. But doing it – well, that’s a different matter. It might mean we have to change our cherished ways of doing things. It might mean we have to be a bit distinctive. It might mean we have to look at life a bit differently, change our priorities, shift our focus.

But basically, if you’ve listened to the Bible being read, or read it yourself, over the past forty days or the past forty years, and you’re not prepared to do anything about it, then it’s been a complete waste of time. You’ve deceived yourselves. How does that relate to the words we’ve read this morning, for example? Well, let’s just look at *Revelation 22:17*, the invitation which Jesus puts out to all those who read these words. It sounds good, doesn’t it? But what do you need to do if it’s going to have any effect?

## **1. RESPOND TO THE INVITATION**

Jesus invites you to be a part of all this, to join him here and now in living according to God’s way and then to join him for all eternity enjoying the fruits of the victory over evil. It’s an invitation that is offered through the Holy Spirit, through the bride of Christ – that is, the Church – and through John himself, “*he who hears*”, who has heard all that the angel has had to tell him and written it down for the rest of us. Jesus says “*Come!*”. And an invitation is no good unless you respond, unless you accept that invitation and join in whatever it was that you were invited to. There may be some of you here this morning who have not even responded to that initial invitation to come and join Jesus. You’ve never taken that first step and said that you want to walk his way. You’ve heard all about it. You’ve got some idea of what it’s all about and there’s a fair bit about it that’s attractive – but you’ve never said yes. Perhaps you’ve listened to the New Testament these past six weeks and there has been much that you’ve found helpful and attractive, but you haven’t got to the point – or even realised that you have to get to the point – of saying “Yes, Jesus, I want to come and join you.” Will you this morning? Will you respond to the invitation that Jesus holds out to you and commit to follow him?

## **2. RECEIVE GOD’S GIFT**

You may reply that you’d like to respond, but you’re not quite sure what it means. Well, this verse makes it clear that you need to come and “*take the free gift of the water of life*”. Part of John’s vision in this last chapter is that he sees a river of the water of life flowing from the throne of God. This is basically God’s gift of new life, God’s offer to transform your life from one which is heading inexorably for death, for an eternity cut off from him, into a life that is full of fulfilment and satisfaction now and promises an eternity with Jesus in God’s new creation. John writes her about “*whoever is thirsty*”. If you’re a literalist, fair enough – that won’t make a great deal of sense. But we’re talking hear about those who are desperate for a new way of life, a new start, a new approach to things. What you’ve got now isn’t enough. Oh, you may have all that you need materially (although you’ll always find something else to want), you may have a good job, a nice family, great friends, lots of stuff to make your life interesting, but there’s still a thirst, a desire for something more that you can’t quite describe, a void that needs to be filled – and which is, at times, an aching void. St Augustine put it well when he said, “*Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.*” Jesus is offering to fill that void, quench that thirst, renew your zest for life. The free gift is there – but you have to reach out and take it. Does that help you decide whether you want to respond to the invitation?

## **3. RENEW YOUR ATTITUDES**

People often say that God’s free gift has no strings attached. Well, that’s true to a certain extent. Anyone – absolutely anyone – can reach out and accept the offer. You don’t need to be especially good, there are no qualifications you have to have, you don’t need to prove any particular pedigree – whoever you are

you can receive God's free gift of life. But once you've done that, then there is a commitment required – and that takes us back to the words we were looking at a couple of weeks ago, in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. You will need to allow the Holy Spirit of God to renew your attitudes, to transform your way of looking at the world. John's vision is of a world transformed by the absence of evil and the triumph of good and we need to start to think that way even now, to begin to look at things in an alternative way, where material goods and selfish ambition and ego-focussed living are not the main things, where we begin to demonstrate true transformation, authentic service and sacrificial love. It's tough at first – Jesus never said it would be easy – but it gets better and more fulfilling as you move on.

#### **4. REJOICE WITH THE SAINTS**

It may not be easy following Jesus once you've responded to his invitation, received God's gift and started to renew your attitudes, but the benefits are amazing. Look back a couple of chapters in *Revelation* and you'll see that a positive response to this invitation means you'll be able to rejoice with the saints. It really is fulfilling! James says it (*James 1:2,3*). Peter says it (*1 Peter 4:12,13*). John says it (in the words we've just read). You can know that deep sense of peace and live with a serenity that means you know that you are on the winning side, that whatever persecution, whatever difficulties, whatever problems you may have to put up with, God is with you and Jesus has sorted it all out.

#### **5. REIGN WITH CHRIST**

And eventually, we will all get to share in that. *Revelation 22:5* reminds us that we will “*reign for ever and ever*”. Jesus has won the decisive battle over sin and death and we'll be able to enjoy sharing in the fruits of that. And notice I said “*has won*”. The decisive battle was fought and won over the weekend of the first Easter. On Friday Jesus smashed for ever the hold that sin has over us – there is now a choice and we can exercise that choice as we respond to Jesus' invitation to accept God's free gift. On Sunday Jesus smashed for ever the power that death has over us. No longer do we need to fear death as the end, no longer do we need to fear standing before our Creator, no longer do we need to fear the prospect of an empty eternity. Jesus won the battle that turned the tide of the war and we know that there is now only one ultimate outcome – Jesus will reign for ever. And we will reign with him for ever.

You see, that's the message that John intended to encourage the beleaguered Christians of the first century as they struggled under the persecution of the mighty Roman Empire. But it's also the message that can encourage us today, it's the amazing possibility that is held out to us as we respond to that gracious invitation to “*Come ... take the free gift of the water of life.*”

It's been great reading through or listening to the New Testament together over these past forty days. We've had some great discussions in our home groups and at Church Night. It's been good to share with people as they've discovered things they'd never noticed before or grasped an argument that had always eluded them up until now. We've been able to see just what an amazing set of stories and letters and visions this collection is. But let me emphasise once again what James writes in his letter: “*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*” Respond to it this morning – and look forward to all that God yet has in store for you!

Let's just pause for a few moments and reflect on all that. Maybe what you've heard this morning has touched a chord in your life. Maybe something that you've heard from the New Testament over these past six weeks has left a deep impression on you and you need to do something about it. Maybe you want to respond and accept the offer of new life that God holds out. In the quiet, bring those things to God and ask for his help in doing something about them. Then we'll pray.

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But we read in *James 1:22*, "*Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*" If you've listened to the Bible being read, or read it yourself, over the past forty days or the past forty years, and you're not prepared to do anything about it, then it's been a complete waste of time. How does that relate to *Revelation 22:17*, the invitation which Jesus puts out to all those who read these words.

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## **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you find most amazing about *Revelation*? Why?
2. Why should we not take it all literally or use it to try and work out the time of Christ's return?
3. What do you understand by "*the water of life*"?
4. Why should we rejoice when things aren't going well? How does it help (if indeed it does!)?
5. What are you most looking forward to about the life to come?
6. How have you found the exercise of listening to the whole New Testament in 40 days? What have you found most/least helpful?