

A New Creation

Revelation 21:1-6

I have a bit of a problem this week. You see, there's a substantial similarity between the themes in this week's Gospel and Acts stories, and the themes we find next week (which Ann & Margaret are going to be reflecting on). That only really leaves a choice between Revelation and the Psalm as a focus... choices, choices...

The interesting thing about Revelation is there is hardly nothing we know about its context, other than it was probably written during a time of persecution. There is little we know about its author, either, except that he (presumably) had learnt about Christianity from the community that followed John. And there is even debate about the genre of the text.

This last point might be a little surprising, because usually the genre is the most evident point we can discover. It is also quite important, because the genre of a text tells us something about how to interpret it. All too often we risk getting tied in knots when we think story is history or poetry is prediction. At least as a letter, one has certain expectations that has changed little over the years – and here we come to our problem.

You see, Revelation is written as a circular letter that is sent to seven churches in Asia. On the surface, this makes it a letter. However, the bulk of the text reads in the genre of an apocalypse; a genre which gives Revelation its name. An apocalypse was a genre that appeared during the invasion of the Greeks with Alexander the Great and most notably is found in the book of Daniel, which was written around the time Antiochus Epiphanes was persecuting the Jewish people and the Jews in turn were struggling for their freedom. In order for the author to give people hope when it was too dangerous to write explicitly, the author set the book at the time of the Babylonian Exile and used it to “predict” what was happening at the time. This is why the “history” in Daniel gets more accurate as it looks further to the future, but there are significant errors in the parts that are set around the Exile. There are also apocalypses that are not part of the biblical cannon.

But I digress. The point is the original audience of Revelation would have known well the genre of the apocalypse and its inclusion of coded language that hid the true intent from those outside their community. So it certainly could have been a circular letter written in the genre of an apocalypse. However, the number seven was also highly symbolic and we see it used repeatedly throughout the book. In Jewish thought, there were seventy nations, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was allegedly completed by seventy scholars, and a jubilee happened every seven weeks (not to mention that a week had seven days). It was a complete number and highly symbolic. So the fact this text starts saying it is sent to “seven” churches in Asia could also be symbolic rather than it being a true letter written to those churches.

Today's (and next week's) reading leads towards the climax of Revelation, and together they give us much of the final two chapters. After all the fear and

tribulation that is depicted in the previous chapters, after the very real question of who can withstand what they were experiencing, almost certainly after the destruction of Jerusalem due to the revolt that ended in 70CE, we now get a grand vision of a new creation.

This new creation is something that is so different to anything that had been experienced on earth. The sea, which in Jewish thought was a symbol of chaos, is no more. The water of life, which was known in this tradition, springs forth. There is new life, new hope, and God is in the midst of this. Imagine the persecuted Christians hearing that, especially after the destruction of Jerusalem.

In Greco-Roman culture, the Emperor was often thought to be a god. Indeed, other than the Jews, everyone who lived in the Roman empire were expected to offer sacrifices to the Emperor. However, in this city God resides. There is no emperor to claim allegiance or threaten these Christians because they refused to acknowledge the emperor as divine. Instead, the Holy One lives with the people, protects them, and shares their lives. In short, things will get better.

This reassurance that God is in control things will get better is one of the key themes of apocalyptic writing from its earliest days. It seeks to give its audience the strength to keep living out the Gospel in their time and place, regardless of the challenges to it.

Our context is so different to that of the first people to hear this text. We are no longer persecuted for our beliefs. Indeed, Christianity is so embedded into society that people do not seem to understand how much our culture has been shaped by it. This gives us a very different set of challenges to what the first audience would have experienced.

However, one challenge remains the same: the question of how we live out the reign of God in our time and place. What does it look like to be the church here and now? And on one level, the answer is the same as it was then. So, let us hear the words attributed to the same author when he wrote about Jesus' last time he taught the disciples. In this we hear another version of today's reading – what a new creation looks like.

John 13:31-35