

SERMON FOR CHRIST THE KING 26.11.17
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD
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When I was younger, I was a fan of comic books. The X-men were my particular favourite, now made into a successful film franchise. I grew up with those comics, and they were a part of my cultural landscape at the time. Perhaps for those not of my generation it would be Walt Disney cartoons featuring characters such as goofy and daffy duck. Whether or not you have had much exposure to comic books or cartoons you will appreciate the fact they are larger than life, over the top, extreme, and in some cases rather unsettling. They employ images that are of cultural relevance and morph them in to something otherworldly, often as a form of escapism for those who read them.

The imagery from today's readings is like something out of a comic book. Not in the sense that it is comical, but that the imagery is over the top, grand, and full of strange images. Yet these strange images in fact convey some truth and value. I remember one teacher of mine saying that the Book of revelation is very 'comic book' like. For it is a part of what is characterised as 'apocalyptic literature.' Writings

used to give a window into end times, and warnings of future judgement. They are writings that rely heavily on imagery and symbol. They are always extra-ordinary. It is therefore the same with the 'apocalyptic literature' we read this morning, the book of Daniel and the letter of Revelation.

Revelation is particularly interesting. It is a literary hybrid. On one hand it is apocalyptic, meaning it is an apocalypse, a literary form in which the author speaks in visionary fashion, giving revelations about the future (or heavenly) realms. On the other hand, it is an epistle, a letter written to seven Asian Christian congregations. It is also situational, like Paul's entire collection of letters. It speaks to a specific community in a specific place at a specific time, but also carries eternal truths. Often this hybrid nature makes it confusing and at times unsettling. It is as if you are reading something out of a novel or comic in the fantasy genre.

We know the Fantasy genre is one sub group of literature. You would not read a fantasy novel as an historical biography. Therefore, let us just dwell on that word *genre* for a moment. Genre is the term for any category of literature or other forms of art or entertainment, based on

some set of stylistic criteria. The book of Daniel and Revelation both fit in to the genre known as apocalyptic.

This idea of genre is very important as we grapple with the texts today. Genre comes in to play because the way we read a particular piece of writing mostly always frames the way we approach it. If I were to tell you to read the Hobbit by J.R.R Tolkien as a historical biography, you would find it a rather confusing task. It is the same as we approach today's reading on revelation; we have to read it through the lens of apocalyptic literature.

So the task becomes determining what the eternal truths in the text are. What are the symbols and what do they mean? It is a passage packed full of theological weight. In the space of a few short sentences, it declares significant Christian truths. Firstly, it pronounces that Jesus is the "Faithful witness", meaning, that by his earthly life and death he is one who is faithful to the end. He is "the firstborn of the dead". Making a clear statement about his resurrection from the dead and our participation in that resurrection. Thirdly it states a radical political statement that Christ is the "ruler of the Kings of the earth", placing him in direct conflict with the current kings and rulers of the world.

These three powerful statements were written to Christian communities that lived in fear of the present age. Not dissimilar as some do now. These ancient Communities perhaps faced death and persecution. Therefore, these three truths would have been deeply reassuring and encouraging. For encouragement was always the objective of apocalyptic literature, to reassure the readers that God was in control. For the genre of 'apocalypse' is most often than not connected with some sort of crisis, bringing about a sense of social, political, or religious powerlessness. Sometimes the crisis is clear to the reader, such as the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D.

However, sometimes the present crisis is not evident, and may have been of importance only to the original author and readers. Apocalyptic works declare that difficult conditions of the present world, brought about by the current crisis, will end in judgement for the wicked and vindication for the righteous, both from the hand of God.

This is clearly seen in the revelation passage:

*"Look! He is coming with the clouds;
every eye will see him,
even those who pierced him;*

*and on his account all the tribes of the earth will wail.
So it is to be. Amen.”*

To a community facing a calamity this would have brought immense hope. Therefore, if this was true for them, what does it bring to us today?

We in New Zealand do not live under oppressive regimes that persecute religious groups. However, we do live in a society where our values and worldview clash with its own at times. In addition, on a more world wide scale, as we have seen recently in Paris, our worldview and values are often in direct conflict with certain groups.

Life is also hard at times on an individual basis; we suffer illness, loss of loved ones, financial problems, mental health issues and many other things.

This letter of revelation, which uses imagery to convey truth, reassures us that God is with us, despite what we may feel. Christ is the faithful witness, and he witnesses to us the fact that death is not the end. That despite the political landscape of the world, the turmoil that surrounds us, he is King over the earth.

Nevertheless, he is not like other Kings, he does not rule through violence or intimidation. He does not grab power for selfish gain. Christ the King is instead is a unifying source for all humanity. For he is above all creeds, race and culture, all that divides us, especially in the times in which we now live, where divisions among nations and political ideologies is felt as strongly as ever.

Lastly, and importantly for us as Christians, he is the King of Salvation, he is the one “who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood.” It is a Kingship, which finds its true meaning in today’s passage from John’s Gospel. Jesus’ confrontation with the Roman Prefect Pilate. The image of Kingship that Jesus reveals is one that ‘came into the world, to testify to the truth.’ A kingship of servant-hood, sacrifice and humility.

We are therefore also called to be “faithful witnesses”, who find their purpose in the service and care of others. Earthly leaders are to be images of the divine leader and earthly power is to be defined by the self-sacrificing love of God, seen in the life of Jesus Christ. For he is the Prince of Peace, Lord of Lords and the King of Kings.

Amen.