

Exodus 16: 4 – 15; Revelation 2: 12 – 17

We don't get to hear much of Revelation in our lectionary so I took the opportunity of lockdown to try and spend some time unravelling it for myself. I made some progress but still feel somewhat thwarted by it!

I do now realise however how very visual it is, quite a lot of it in a scary, hallucinogenic or psychedelic trip way which is really not my comfort zone – in a film it's not something I would pay to go and see at the cinema especially as most films don't deal with the God's Great News of the end of the book!

On the other hand, quite a lot of the symbols we use to depict our faith are taken from its imagery. For instance, the picture on the side of the organ, which is a copy of a 17th Century painting by Murillo called 'The Immaculate Conception' (and a digression here, that refers to Mary the mother of Jesus being born free from original sin and filled with God's grace from the first moment of her existence). We know it's Mary because the fact that she's standing on the moon and is 'clothed with the sun' is the description of a woman in Revelation 12 who is associated with Mary.

Revelation 2: 12 – 17:

So if we look at the passage we've heard this evening, the letter to the third church of seven (we heard about the first two churches last week). Tonight we heard that ***'These are the words of him who has the sharp two edged sword'***.

If we track back a chapter, John says that he turned to see who had told him to write the letters and he says, (and I'd like you to draw this in your mind so that you can see what John saw) ***'I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands I saw one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.'***

I wonder how you dealt with the image of the sword? I find it too uncomfortable to picture it, I find myself wanting to gag! And I wonder what you think is the intention of this sword – is it a reflection of how battles are to be fought? Is it indicating how justice is going to be delivered? And I also wonder about who forged the sword for this purpose, whatever it is?

Recently I watched a show on Channel 5 called 'Forged in Fire' which is a competition between blade smiths to make the best knife, or other designated weapon. All the contestants in the episode I watched were big muscly men and the judges, again all men, when testing the blades for strength and cutting ability acted like fierce warriors attacking something.

I contrast that with the female blacksmith in the film 'A Knight's Tale' who uses her skills to create a lighter, better articulated armour. And if you doubt my suggestion that the creative hand could be of a feminine kind, I wrote this sermon on St Anselm's Day during the week and the Song of Anselm as written in our Common Worship book begins: ***'Jesus, like a mother you gather your people to you; you are gentle with us as a mother with her children. Often you weep over our sins and our pride, tenderly you draw us from hatred and judgement'***.

Perhaps if I asked you tomorrow what you feel about the purpose of this sword you would give me a different one to tonight's, and perhaps a different one again next week ...

We will pause from imagery for a moment and look at what is said to the church at Pergamum. They apparently live *'where Satan's throne is'*. This might relate to Pergamum being the seat of government for the Roman rule of Asia and its temple in honour of Rome and Augustus (the contemporary authoritarian evil of the times in which Revelation was written, is Rome) or it might relate to one of the other temples in the city such as the one to Zeus. The church is praised for staying faithful **BUT**, there's always a 'but' in these letters, it seems that some of the congregation are hedging their bets and following other teachings as well.

Faith and trust are very similar aren't they? The message from the one who has the sharp two-edged sword is that we should be like the person who bets only on the winner and not 'either way'. Perhaps you can identify things you do that suggest you have not laid everything on Jesus being the Victor.

The letter ends: *'to everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna'* ... you immediately see why the companion reading this evening was the passage from Exodus, another story about trusting in God.

In Exodus the bread is discovered as a fresh falling each morning apart from the Sabbath and is reflected in the words of the Lord's Prayer: *'give us this day our daily bread.'* In the desert the Israelites have nothing apart from what God gives them and it is a lesson in trust. I think perhaps this promise of hidden manna refers to that renewing sense of peace we get when we trust in God. I have never, thank God, been in a position where I have literally had to wait to see if I would be provided with a gift of needed bread, but I imagine for those who have and who have prayed and who have been fed, that they know in whom to put their trust. The reference to manna in Revelation perhaps also gives us a picture of the Eucharist and the heavenly banquet ...

The one who conquers will also get a white stone, and on the white stone will be written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it. The stone is apparently an entry ticket, and white because that is the colour of victory. And a secret new name – what is that about? I presume that it is this image that leads some people to choose a new name at confirmation and why monks and nuns take a new name.

I was thinking that the only new name you'd really want is one that means 'love' ... and that took me to an irreverent image of heaven being like a bus and the driver greeting everyone who boards with a *'you alright luv'!*

The comfort of Revelation is made clear in the final chapters – that all will be well. You may or may not find the more wild images of John's vision helpful in thinking about what horrors will be overcome before there is a new heaven and a new earth but perhaps we can take on board the admonishments to the churches and take a step nearer our heavenly Father and his Son our Saviour.