

Readings for the week:

Revelation - Chapter 7

John's Gospel - Chapter 10

Acts of the Apostles - Chapter 9

Woodstock

12 May 2019 (Easter 4)

10.30 a.m.

When I was eight years old I had my first encounter with the writings of J.R.R. Tolkien. Our class teacher in Middle School read us *The Hobbit*. Here it is: quite a slim book, now turned into three very long films! I really enjoyed it, and a few years later I borrowed Tolkien's much more substantial trilogy, *The Lord of the Rings*, from our local library, and I read that for myself. Actually, I was really hooked on *The Lord of the Rings*, and I read it several times. I can still remember my parents gently suggesting that I might like to read something else! I think they were a bit worried that I was getting too involved with it.

It's easy, isn't it, to get immersed in a fictional world or an imaginary world – one which makes perfect sense and seems very familiar to the insider, but which may seem quite strange or baffling or even disturbing to a person on the outside. In that fictional or imaginary world, of course, real-life issues do come up and are addressed: issues of trust and truth, moral choices, questions of purpose and value and love, and all the rest. That's the case in Tolkien, and all the fantasy spin-offs from his stories, in Harry Potter, in Star Wars, in *Game of Thrones*, and yes, in *East Enders*, *Coronation Street* and *The Archers* as well.

I say all this by way of introduction to the readings set for us to ponder today. Two of the three readings, at least, may have made us scratch our heads or raise a quizzical eyebrow. Jesus' conversation in John 10 was probably alright. But what about Revelation 7, with its bizarre imagery and peculiar behaviour? Less a vision of heaven, we might think, than a warning against eating cheese before going to bed! And Acts 9? A straightforward story, told in a very matter-of-fact way, but centring around Peter's raising of Dorcas or Tabitha from her deathbed. What are we to make of that?

I want to suggest that making sense of these passages requires us to step back and take a long view. A bit like getting an idea of what's going on in Albert Square or Ambridge rather than just dipping in to one episode of *East Enders* or *The Archers* and coming away totally bemused! If we take time to understand the bigger picture, or the fuller story, of these books, then we'll not only see more clearly what these passages are about, but also learn some important lessons for questions which are really pressing today.

So let's begin with Revelation 7, and with a very sharp question: **how do we cope with a world in crisis?**

Revelation isn't an easy book, is it? It's hard to read – hard to hear – hard to take in – hard to understand. And that's largely because it's a very different kind and style of book from the rest of the New Testament. It's the odd one out among the gospels and letters. It's like finding a cookery book on a shelf of novels. Revelation is full of codes and symbols that need to be explained, like political cartoons that represent Britain by a lion and Russia by a bear and the United States by the figure of Uncle Sam. And Revelation depicts a world where the established powers and authorities, with all their confidence and all their might, have set themselves against God. These authorities are now being called to account. The order of things that has been accepted, or endured, for generations is now falling apart. In chapter 6 this is symbolised by the opening of a sealed scroll, releasing war, famine, disease and death into the world.

The imagery may be that of the first century, but the reality, surely, is that of the twenty-first. We inhabit a world which seems to lurch from crisis to crisis: the parliamentary antics over Brexit just one example of widespread disaffection and discontent. Leaders of all shades and experts of all kinds are held in contempt. We pick our way around post-truth and fake news. And, as the relief and campaigning work of Christian Aid reminds us, millions suffer through poverty and we all live in the shadow of climate change. Revelation 6 ends with this anxious question: 'Who is able to stand?' Who indeed!

Our reading today, from chapter 7, presents God's answer to the world's crisis. Here we see a group of people drawn from the broadest possible range of humanity – every nation, every tribe, every people and every language – looking to God in worship and trust. This is a model of the Church, and a model for the Church. When it is truly itself, the Church is a

community spanning the whole diversity of the human race. When it is truly itself, the Church brings people together to acknowledge God for who God is – that’s what worship means. And when it is truly itself, the Church unites people in living for God, even when that is unpopular and costly. Our response to a world in crisis, then, is not to panic, and it’s not to turn away from the world, but to recognise and to testify that the world’s first need is to let God be God, and to respond to God with love and trust.

Our second question, looking at John 10, is this: **where do we find life and hope?**

Four weeks ago, on Palm Sunday, I was leading worship at Kidlington, and we began our reflection on the story of Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem by thinking about the human quest for a strong leader. In difficult and challenging and threatening times, people look around for a saviour figure, for someone strong enough, confident enough, to take charge. One of the things, frankly, that worries me about the present febrile state of British politics is that people are drawn to extremists who promise radical and simple solutions to complex problems. Plenty of examples in world history of such leaders, exploiting peoples’ hopes and, perhaps more often, exploiting their fears. And we see such leaders today, in Russia, and in Turkey, and elsewhere. Saviour figures. Messianic figures.

And so to the conversation between Jesus and the Jews in John 10. ‘Are you the Messiah?’ they ask. ‘Tell us!’

John’s Gospel is a very different sort of book to Revelation. But it also has its big story. At the end of chapter 20 the writer explains why he has chosen the material he’s included, and he writes this: ‘Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.’ So, where do we find life? In Jesus. Where do we find hope? In Jesus. Who is the Messiah? Jesus Christ, the Son of God. And we loop back to the very beginning of the gospel, to the amazing words we often read at Christmas time, where John makes clear that in Jesus God has come into the world in a new and unique way, taking our flesh, sharing our life and so making possible a new future for everyone.

‘If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’

Is Jesus the one? Jesus says yes. And he draws attention to his words, and his works, and to the response of his disciples. He possesses a unique authority, given by the Father. In troubled times, whether in our own hearts and lives, or in the wider world, we can find in Jesus wisdom to guide us, grace to heal us, hope to inspire us and love to hold us.

And on to our final question, and to Acts chapter 9: **how shall we face death?**

In a way, Acts 9 is the hardest of today's readings. It's the easiest one to read and to grasp, because it's free of the weird imagery of Revelation and the rather opaque language of the Fourth Gospel. And it describes a situation that is very human and very familiar – the experience of bereavement. The hard part comes in making sense for today of what Peter does in the story. How do we approach that?

Well, like Revelation and like John, Acts has its big picture. It shows how the friends of Jesus receive the Holy Spirit and how the message about Jesus spreads out from Jerusalem across the Mediterranean to Rome. That message, as Paul shares it with people in Athens in Acts 17, has to do with Jesus and the Resurrection. In other words, the testimony of the first Christians is that God's loving and renewing purpose for the world is embodied in and made effective through Jesus Christ. And God's purpose comes to its climax in the events of the first Easter. Through the Cross and the Resurrection, God's forgiving, healing, transforming love is released into the world in a new way. The Resurrection of Jesus is the logical outcome of Jesus' Person, life and work. And it's a foretaste, a curtain-raiser, for God's new creation. And the Book of Acts offers some more curtain-raisers – glimpses of what things will be like when God's purpose is fully realised. These glimpses include the community of the Early Church, crossing the fault-line which divided Jews and Gentiles. They include generous sharing of resources, to help the needy and to balance out inequalities. And they include the healing of those who are sick in body or in mind. This story of Dorcas or Tabitha is one such glimpse, underlining that in Christ God has defeated and overcome death itself.

I don't expect to be told to sit up after I've died. But I do expect to continue to share in Resurrection life – as Dorcas did, before and after this incident, and as she does still. Because Resurrection life isn't life after death. It is, rather, life with God now, in the present; a life that death cannot destroy. This story, then, encourages us to hope for the future, but

also to live in the present as people who have died with Christ and been raised with him to new life.

Our readings today have been very challenging, haven't they! And so are the big questions behind them – questions about coping with mortality and with real uncertainties and fears in an anxious and unstable world. The message coming through the readings is that God is sovereign in his universe, and that we can trust in God's purposes of love and life, even in hard times. We are called to look out for glimpses of God in our world, and to celebrate them. And we are called to live in love and hope. By so doing we bear witness to our faith and we offer hope to others. May we so do. Amen.