

Scripture Reading For Nov 25th 2018

Revelation 1:4b-8 (NIV)

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, ⁶ and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

⁷ “Look, he is coming with the clouds,” and “every eye will see him, even those who pierced him”; and all peoples on earth “will mourn because of him.” So shall it be! Amen.

⁸ “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

John 18:33-37

³³ Pilate then went back inside the palace, summoned Jesus and asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?”

³⁴ “Is that your own idea,” Jesus asked, “or did others talk to you about me?”

³⁵ “Am I a Jew?” Pilate replied. “Your own people and chief priests handed you over to me. What is it you have done?”

³⁶ Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jewish leaders. But now my kingdom is from another place.”

³⁷ “You are a king, then!” said Pilate.

Jesus answered, “You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.”

Sermon: Things Are Not What They Seem!

On Christ the King Sunday, this text from Revelation places the Lordship of Christ front and center. Its rich, hope-filled message addresses three interwoven themes: The Almighty God who is Lord of history, the significance of Christ and his Church, and the culmination of God's purposes for creation. The writer of Revelation, someone called John, is exiled on the Island of Patmos¹ and writing to encourage the Churches in present-day Turkey in their time of trial.² There is a subversive element³ to this book, evident also in our brief text today, because its proclamation indicates that with God there is *always* more! There is *more* transformation to come than the Earth has yet seen, *more* power and authority than that claimed by earthly rulers, and *more* dignity of God's people than earthly rulers recognise. Things are *not* what they seem!

John begins his letter with the greeting of "grace and peace"⁴ but such a blessing was not from himself but, more boldly, from "him who is, and who was, and who is to come." This is the first of a series of triplets and the word order is curious: we speak of past, present, and future.⁵ And the Jewish Rabbis and those Greeks who worshiped Zeus also spoke of God with reference to this standard linear view of history. John adapts that sequence to emphasize the God who reigns *now*, even though our circumstances in the world may suggest otherwise. But there is more: the reference is *not* to "him who is, who was, and who *will be*" but to "who is *to come*." God is not only the origin of the world but also its future. This reflects John's firm hope of a culmination to history with God's presence coming in a bold and distinctive way, and John's prophetic vision continues to unveil that reality.

The "grace and peace" also comes from the mysterious seven-fold Spirit.⁶ The number seven is used more than 50 times in Revelation and this is not accidental but represents divine wholeness. In this situation, "grace and peace" comes from the perfect divine presence, rather than the third person of the Trinity – as that theological understanding of God came later. Finally, "grace and peace" comes from Jesus Christ. Taken together, we have here the makings of an early trinitarian formula for blessing!

John's second triplet describes *who Jesus is* in his description of Christ as "the *faithful witness*, the *firstborn of the dead*, and the *ruler of the kings of the earth*."⁷ These three titles for Jesus are ones he

¹ Rev 1:9.

² Recall too the sermon from last week, where Jesus encouraged his disciples to beware, stay alert, and endure to the end. Note: the number 7 (i.e., "7 churches") is likely symbolic of all the churches in Asia.

³ Part of its subversive nature is because John withholds praise for lesser lord's and rulers!

⁴ Rev 1:4. The introduction to a typical Greek letter would consist of a single word, "greetings," and in Jewish letters the word would be "*shalom*" – peace. The Greek word for "greetings" (*chairein*) is similar to the Greek word for "grace" (*charis*) and early Christian letters often replaced "greetings" with "grace" and added the Jewish "*shalom*" – hence, "grace and peace to you." (Paul's formula for "grace and peace" would be followed by "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Note: John's authority is not one of office (e.g., an apostle) but of role (e.g., prophet, ambassador).

⁵ See also Heb 13:8 ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever") and Isa 44:6–7.

⁶ See also Rev 3:1; 4:5; 5:6. Eugene Boring regards them as seven angelic beings; see Ps 104:4; Heb 1:7, 14. Joseph Mangina sees a strong connection with Zech 4, and, possibly, with the seven qualities in Isa 11:2 – 3 (LXX).

⁷ Rev 1:5.

never used to describe himself and therefore show how the early church was continuing to develop its understanding the significance of Jesus after his death and resurrection.⁸ These three titles of Jesus answer the pertinent question, “Who is he for us?” The faithful witness is not only the revealer from heaven but also the one who died. Remember that the Greek word for “witness” is *martyr* and so both the faithful obedience of the Messiah and his death were evident to John’s suffering readers. In the next breath Jesus is proclaimed as the “firstborn of the dead” and the hope of the resurrection is affirmed. That was more than an event in the past, it marked the looked-for event of the general resurrection of the dead. And, finally, the ascended Jesus is now “the ruler of the kings of the earth.” The phrase “ruler of Kings on Earth” attributes to Jesus the title claimed by Roman Caesars, whose claim to sovereignty John wants his readers to see is a false caricature of the real Lordship of Christ. Things are *not* what they seem! This is *who* Jesus is - and who he is *for us*!

In the conventional Greek style of letters, the initial greeting was usually followed by a statement of thanksgiving and so here we find a doxology - a statement of praise. Interestingly, a doxology would normally be directed to God or to a ruler; here it is directed to Christ. John’s third triplet, then, describes in worshipful tones *what Jesus has done for us*. Jesus *loves* us – note the present tense – and he has *freed* us - past tense – from our sins by his death. Christ’s love for us is *always* present, but his work on our behalf on the cross is in the past, though its effects continue perpetually. And more than that, Jesus has *made* us into a kingdom and priests to serve God forever. This is a statement of our identity as citizens of the kingdom of God, and our elevation as priests with access God’s presence in worship and our role as intermediaries to the world.⁹ Both confer status and dignity which many of John’s persecuted readership lacked. This *what Jesus has done for us*; this is *who* we are, says John, things are *not* what they seem! This doxology ends with an “Amen” in Rev 1:6. This is where we all respond with a resounding “Yes! That is indeed the case” to what John has just proclaimed! We are not, therefore, mere passive spectators but *participants* in John’s vision!

John’s fourth triplet is based on prophecies from Daniel¹⁰ and Zechariah:¹¹ “Look, *he is coming* with the clouds,” and “*every eye will see him . . .*”, and *all the peoples of the earth will mourn* because of him” – *even* the Romans who killed him [and who are persecuting you].¹² This is an indicator of the contents of the rest of the book of Revelation. It is a reminder that what is presently hidden will be revealed to everyone. The *person* and *work* of Christ, *who* he is and *what* he has done for us, will be made increasingly plain, and even his enemies will lament in repentance for there will be a “healing of the nations.”¹³ That is how powerful the love of God is!

⁸ These titles were not arbitrarily created by John, but adapted by him from Scripture - see, for example, Ps 89:27, 36–37.

⁹ John Calvin emphasised Jesus as Prophet, Priest and king – and Christians throughout the world share in Christ’s ongoing ministry. As a *prophetic* community, the Church mediates the word of God made known in Jesus to the world. As a *priestly* community, the Church mediates to the world God’s reconciliation of the world in Jesus the Messiah. As a *royal* community, the Church represents and signifies the rule of God is already present in the world.

¹⁰ Dan 7:13.

¹¹ Zech 12:10.

¹² This is echoed in Matt 24:30.

¹³ Rev 22:2.

The climax of the sequence is when we hear the word of God himself speaking through the mouth of the prophet, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”¹⁴ Genuine, heartfelt worship of God is the dangerous means to encounter the living God. God again reveals himself as “I am,” as he did to Moses at the burning bush.¹⁵ It is this same God who embraces all of creation and who is the Lord of history, the beginning and end – Alpha and Omega, the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. The Almighty “One who is to come” signals that the God who was at work in Jesus while he lived on earth has *still* more transforming work still to be accomplished. Things are *not* what they seem!

John is *not* in a state of denial. He knows the tension between “already” and “not yet” in Christian existence. The book of Revelation and the Christian faith not only looks forwards to the “not yet” but backwards to the “already” in the coming of Christ. Despite all of the present suffering for the sake of God’s kingdom, the Messiah has, in fact, *come*. Despite all appearances, the royal, priestly community *already* exists and represents the reign of God in this world, even though God’s kingdom is not yet *fully* realised. We live between the “already” and “not yet,” knowing enough of “not yet” to long for it to come, but confident that the “already” of Christ’s coming into the world means that history is forever changed. Both are important, as else we only have half a Gospel. Things are *not* what they seem!

Do we today believe John’s bold acclamation? Are we living as people *liberated* from bondage, aware of Christ’s *continual love* for us, and confident that Jesus is already the true *ruler* of the kings of the earth? It is the last element of that triplet that is the focus on “Christ the King” Sunday. I confess, it can be often hard to see that when we look at the world around us; John knew that too. But one reason is because we assume a king who comes in *power*, not in *love*. Then as now, Jesus is not a tyrant, he is a lover whose love is so potent that death will not defeat it. Pontius Pilate was also confused by that in our gospel reading. Christ’s kingdom is *for this world* but not *of this world*, in that it will not be realised by a usual show of brute force. We have to therefore hold on in faith that the risen *Christ is indeed king*, and all the others are mere pretenders who will one day be exposed as emperors with no clothes. That will take place when the curtain between our domain and God’s is drawn back, then every eye shall see him and the true Lord of History is revealed for all to see.

This image is very hard for many to accept today because we live in a world dominated by “what you see is what you get.” Our enlightened and scientific age leaves little room for a belief in the “One who is, who was, and who is to come.” That is the choice we make in committing ourselves to the Jesus story, accepting by faith that things are *not* what they seem! Let us work, in partnership with the divine Spirit, in making the reality of Christ’s kingship visible and hastening that day when the “One who is to come” appears. Let us follow in Christ’s footsteps as *faithful* witnesses to a needy world, *fearlessly* opposing all evil powers that seek to usurp the place of God, and *confident* of that ultimate vindication of Christ’s kingship that is definitely coming.

“Grace and Peace” to you from Christ the King. Amen.

¹⁴ Rev 1:8.

¹⁵ See Exod 3:14. The God of the Exodus remains active history and the story of God’s renewal of the cosmos is not over yet!