

REVELATION 1:9-20

(Readings: Isaiah 6:1-13; Revelation 1:1-20)

The Divine Letter Writer

Dearly loved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ...

Think about when you receive a personally addressed letter in your mail box.

You quickly glance at the style of writing and who it's from.

Ah, it's someone you know!

And then already you can almost guess what's mostly written inside.

True isn't it?

When we know who the writer is don't we often know what will be in the letter?

And the better we know the author the more we know about what's inside.

Then you would recognise things about it just by the style of writing on the envelope.

You know if it was written in a hurry or very carefully.

And simply by getting it you know they're thinking of you!

This is what our text this afternoon tells us about the seven letters to the churches in the following two chapters.

For here we see the unique features of this letter writer.

Traits which we'll recognise again in those seven letters.

But already we know who those letters are from, don't we?

The verses 4 till 8 in chapter 1, with its greeting, blessing, expectation, and the divine declaration, are absolutely clear about who's writing this.

This is the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Ah, you say, but that was also the opening words of this book!

Indeed, they were, but we are more sure now whose words these are.

And we will be surer still after we have considered the first three verses of the text to our sermon.

For, congregation, the verses 9 till 11 tell us, THIS IS QUITE CLEARLY CHRIST'S REVELATION.

You see, while we know the apostle John is the one who physically wrote these words, we also know they were not his own words.

THIS IS QUITE CLEARLY CHRIST'S REVELATION.

Now, verse 9 does open with a bit of personal detail. Very briefly John describes himself as our "brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus."

But this is far from anything that draws us to John in particular.

In fact, speaking of suffering and kingdom and patient endurance points us to the Lord.

Mind you, it does seem that it's the suffering side of things rather than the Kingdom which John has at this time.

He was in exile on that island.

He had been effectively cut off from the wider church because of the gospel.

The authorities had put him in exile there, because they were trying to wipe out the Church.

So don't think this was some kind of spiritual retreat in idyllic surrounds.

Being sent to Patmos was like being sent to Siberia.

Its mountains and mines were used to depress you - not inspire you!

But that doesn't stop the Lord.

Through His faithful servant there He reveals His will still.

Michael Wilcock says that "though John was physically 'in Patmos', on this particular Lord's day he was also 'in the Spirit', and as for Jacob long before, the stony wilderness of exile proved for him the very gate of heaven.

"The voice spoke: the saints turned: the Mediterranean island scene faded behind him, and before him opened the vision of another reality altogether."

But before we turn to that incredible scene in the middle of our text, we must note two other things from these opening verses.

The first of these is that the Lord's Day is specified.

This is a reference to the day consecrated to the Lord.

This is the term for the Christian Sabbath in the second century.

This is happening on Sunday.

Now, we naturally connect this day with the day of the Lord's resurrection.

This was the day He conquered death and sin and the devil.

But in the context of the time John is in, it is relevant to note that the Lord's Day, as the Christians called it, was in direct contrast to the 'Emperor's day.'

The 'Emperor's day' was celebrated monthly - and even weekly.

It was a day which deified the Roman Emperor and was taken over from an Egyptian holy day.

Originally, the Egyptians had celebrated it on the day their Pharaoh acceded to the throne.

So it was once a year.

But over time, it became a distinct religious phenomena.

That very much suited the Emperors.

But in the light of that growing paganism the Christian Sabbath began to stand out more and more also.

And so, at the beginning of a book which is very much about the great battle between the powers of good and bad, it shouldn't surprise us that the Sunday is mentioned this way.

For it was the day Christ Jesus rose in victor over the powers of death and sin and Satan.

The second aspect in these opening verses is the voice like that of a trumpet.

The trumpet has a strong spiritual symbolism.

In the Old Testament it was used in times of national celebrations or to sound the alarm.

But that was the trumpet which was made of a ram's horn.

This is known as the *shophar*.

There was another type of trumpet, though.

That was a trumpet made of beaten silver.

And that was the trumpet for exclusively sacred matters.

It called the people together for one of the religious festivals in Numbers 29.

It declared the commencement of the year of jubilee in Leviticus 25.

This is the trumpet referred to here.

And while in verse 10 it is not the sound of an actual trumpet but "a loud voice like a trumpet" this is the sound like the one John hears.

You can imagine how much that added to this scene.

Not only was John in the Spirit but he was hearing The Word!

And that Word said, in verse 11, "Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea."

Again, a definite allusion to Christ.

But, how, you ask?

And what difference does it make just as we're about to see the overwhelming appearance by Christ?

Well, THIS IS QUITE CLEARLY CHRIST'S REVELATION.

And the seven churches here are who that revelation's for.

Why seven churches?

Ah, a good question!

And the answer doesn't only make up the next two chapters - it's at the heart of the whole book of Revelation!

Because seven is the key number.

Constantly it is re-occurring throughout the book.

In fact, the great theme of this book is the number 7 versus number 6.

You remember 666 don't you?

It's the number of the beast in Revelation 13 verse 18.

It represents the devil because it symbolises all which falls short of God's glory.

6 is not quite 7.

And so again we meet the theme of the great war which the book of Revelation is so much about.

But then comes the most glorious scene.
For now, in the verses 12 till 16, we have a picture quite unlike any other!

Because, congregation, THIS IS MOST DEFINITELY CHRIST'S MANIFESTATION.

Our second aspect.

Well, you think about it.
Is there a description quite like this found elsewhere in Scripture?

A description as clear and as detailed about the Son of God?

Not quite, is there?
For while there are passages which do deal with aspects of Christ there's nothing quite like this which covers it so gloriously.

It helps us here to note the culture and time this was written.

For this is the first century A.D..
And this comes out of a distinctly Jewish background.

We mustn't forget that the Lord used the personality and background of the writers.

They were no robots in His hands.

So, considering what we read in the verses 12 till 16, where else do we find such language?

Ah, it occurs in a number of prophetic books doesn't it?

We can think especially of the book of Daniel.

And when we think about that type of literature, there's also the apocryphal books which come to mind.

This reflects their use of symbolism.

And there's a touch of Ezekiel as well!

So let's make our way through these vivid descriptions.
Let's properly understand them.

Doing that we come to the seven golden lamp-stands in verse 12.

And what do these seven lamp-stands immediately remind us of?

Isn't it the seven-branched lamp-stand in the Holy Place of the Temple?

These lamps refer to the seven churches, as verse 20 confirms.

But we drew the connection straight-away, didn't we?

Philippians 2 speaks of the same.

In the verses 15 and 16 there we're told Christians are those who shine like lights in the world because they hold the word of life.

And doesn't Christ call us the light of the world, because He is the light of the world?

We also see that each of these lamp-stands has its own energy supply.

They are not candles which run out.

They are oil lamps which are continuously supplied.

And so Christ's Church has His Spirit.

Then verse 13 speaks of "someone like the son of man."

That's a distinct title.

But it's not unknown to us.

For wasn't it Daniel 7 verse 13 which said the same?

That reference and this reference strongly imply that this man is not ordinary man.

In fact, this man is a super-man.

And that can only mean He is none other than the Messiah Himself!

The fact that He's found in amongst the lamp-stands shows that He can be no less than Christ Jesus Himself!

He is the 'Light of the World', as John 8:12 says.

This is affirmed by both the function and the character of this special person.

For what He does is described by the last words of verse 13.

There we read that He is "dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest."

Notice that this robe flows all the way to the ground.

That means this person has the right to govern and to judge.

It is a picture of the central Authority in all Church life.

He has the sole right to pronounce verdict and sentence on all the service the Church does.

The golden sash around his chest is called a girdle in earlier versions.

It is what holds his attire together.

And by being mentioned here, there should be no doubt there is some symbolism to this.

It is something, though, many commentators don't touch upon.

But a few do help provide helpful clues.

Because, notice, they say, where it is positioned.

It's not around the waist which elsewhere in Scripture points to activity and power.

That's where the belt in the armour is found in Ephesians 6.

Here, though, it is higher.

It is around the chest.

So this is around the heart.

This symbolises love.

Christ is the Judge but He is so because of His love.

There is a passage in Isaiah chapter 22 which sheds light on this.

It says there in verse 20, "In that day I will summon my servant, Eliakim son of Hilkiah.

"I will clothe him with your robe and fasten your sash around him and hand your authority over to him.

"He will be a father to those who live in Jerusalem and to the house of Judah."

From seeing Christ's function, we next note, in the verses 14 till 16, His character.

I mean, being described in verse 14 as having head and hair as white as wool, as white as snow, is a direct allusion to purity.

In Daniel 7 verse 9 this belongs to the Ancient of Days, who is God Almighty.

Then in saying His "eyes were like blazing fire" there's the suggestion of a burning penetration.

Here's the One who sees you through and through.

Of course He can write letters to the churches because He knows them inside out!

With the feet "like bronze glowing in a furnace" in verse 15 we find another connection to Old Testament prophecy.

For wasn't that what Daniel 2 verse 33 describes as part of Nebuchadnezzar's dream regarding the greatest of the mighty empires of this world?

This is all powerfully connecting with John's readership.

This was what they knew so well.

And the imagery hasn't finished yet.

His is "the voice like the sound of rushing waters."

Well, John would have known of particularly noisy waters with the Aegean Sea roaring about Patmos.

Because this is a constant sound.

And it's an overwhelming sound.

And then we come back to the number seven again.

Verse 16 speaks of the seven stars in Christ's right hand.

Now, the right hand is the position of power.

So these stars represent His power.

And the sharp-edged sword is His authority.

That's His command.

From His voice which spoke in creation in the verse before, this is the Word which is His special revelation.

Doesn't Hebrews 4 verse 12 tell us, "For the word of God is living and active.

"Sharper than any doubled-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."

Then, to top it all off, verse 16 concludes, "His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

Well, if there is one thing we were told to do as children is to never look directly into the sun.

Even when we had those special times of eclipses we had to use those devices that allowed us to see it without looking straight into it.

And as adults we very much know the same.

So, if this Son of Man is as bright as the sun in the sky how glorious He must be!

Don't we recall here the transfiguration of Matthew 17?

There verse 2 says that Jesus was transfigured before Peter and James and John.

It says "his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light."

No wonder John falls prostrate in verse 17!
He's totally blown away!
But most of all He is completely humbled.
For, congregation, we have come now to the third part
of this text.
THIS IS NOW SIMPLY CHRIST'S DIRECTION.

You see, John is ready for service.
He is now the vessel, the instrument, through
which the Lord can declare His Word to the churches.

Notice that Christ places his right hand on John in
verse 17.
He commissions John through telling him who it is
sending Him.

Because He is no ordinary king.
He is much more than even the mightiest emperors this
world has thrown up.
He is "the First and the Last."
He is the Living One.
Because He did die once, remember.
He was crucified on the cross for our sins.
But He's alive for ever and ever!

Because of Christ's victory over sin He holds "the keys
of death and Hades."
Hades is another word for hell.
That was the place we were heading for.
Our sin condemned us to it.
But Christ conquered it.

And then there are the actual words of John's
commissioning in verses 19 and 20.
He will be the messenger.
He will declare the inspired Word of the Lord
in this book of Revelation.

This is what verse 19 specifies.
When he speaks of "what you have seen" it's
describing the vision John has just received.
And what a picture that was!
It is the perfect Word to begin with!

The next phrase, "what is now," refers to the existing
state of the churches.
This will be what John is about to write to the
seven churches.
And that will not be anything separate to
this opening vision.

For we will see how those letters are part of the bigger picture in Revelation.

Then the expression "what will take place later" are those visions found in the rest of this book.

That's certainly not meant to imply all that he writes then is for the distant future.

You'll find in that reoccurring pattern of seven specific references to what was happening then.

After all, what help could it otherwise be to those hearing this then?

And those chapters also will always bring us back to Christ Jesus.

His function and His character will come through!

In fact, what we have in verse 20 sums it all up.

For there the number seven is definitely predominant.

The symbolism of the stars and the golden lamp-stands is explained.

But here we can be just as mystified as before.

For while the seven lamp-stands are clear as being these seven churches in Revelations 2 and 3, what are the stars?

Because saying they are the angels of the seven churches is all well and good but who do those angels represent?

Could they be specific angelic beings assigned to each church?

Or perhaps they're ministers, or other officials in the churches, as many commentators suggest?

Neither of these possibilities is supported elsewhere in Revelation, or in Scripture for that matter.

But if we take angels for what they are - ministering spirits - then at least we know its divine help for the churches.

So while those seven churches may be apart from each other on this earth - and so may be isolated and even destroyed - on the heavenly level the Church is united and indestructible.

While lamp-stands are scattered across the earth, because these seven churches represent all churches, the stars are held together in Christ's hand.

Isn't this the ultimate comfort, dear believer?

It's all in His hands - is there a better place for it to be?

And so whatever may happen to God's people, He will keep them.

They may not always live in times of freedom and peace.

But the time in which they live is in His time.

In this sense, all of history is part of Church history.

Because isn't all of history **His** story?

Amen.

PRAYER:

Let's pray...

O Kings of kings & Lord of lords,

We, too, with John, fall prostrate before You.

We, too, are humbled in Your presence.

And we, too, O precious Saviour, are ready to sacrifice ourselves just like You.

May Your Spirit so bless us in Your service.

In Your ruling Name alone, we pray, Amen.