

“...to the churches”

Reflection: Nov 24, 2024 Rev'd Ian Brown

Revelation 1: 4 – 9, John 18: 33 - 37

I think we all know there are too many problems in our world today. Whether it's Gaza or Sudan, Ukraine or Lebanon, there is much to make us anxious. In the same part of the world having so much trouble now, John writes a pastoral letter to the churches of Asia Minor. That's the Turkey, Syria area, where both the writer and the readers are facing tough times. John writes from prison on the Greek isle of Patmos. He writes a letter of encouragement to followers of Jesus who were facing savage persecution from Rome and who had their share of troubles from within as well. His writing does get fairly colourful and there are some who won't go near these texts because of the misuses associated with them, but I think there's still much good to be gained here for us.

John writes to Christians throughout the area. He writes because they needed guidance in dealing with the threatening circumstances that were beyond their control. In John's day Jesus followers were an endangered minority. Too many overwhelming problems, they were brutally persecuted and to say they needed reassurance would be a massive understating of their reality.

Today, the church calendar says we celebrate Christ as King, and there's a line or two from John's gospel with Pilate interrogating Jesus to help us think about what it means for Jesus to be King. It's still a good question, even if we don't like the idea of the office of king at all.

You may have missed it – and that's absolutely OK, but we've just had 'our' monarch flit through on another costly visit. There were media occasions at important places I'm sure. Charles and Camilla don't fit many notions we have of royalty, but we need to be honest - Jesus fits even less of them.

How is the Jesus we've met in the pages of the gospels in any way kingly? He associates with the poor and the sinners. He breaks religious laws. Then we might also wonder why we read these up beat words from Revelation with Jesus trial before Pilate? “My kingdom is not of this world,” Jesus says. So today is a good day for reflecting on who Jesus is for us, ... and what might Jesus, or some of his messengers be saying to the churches – here and now? As Pilate asked Jesus, ‘What is truth?’

A while ago, there was a man named Patrick, a Celt and something of a missionary who liked the idea of the kingdom of God and making it more real in our world. He said this;

‘The Kingdom of God is greater than all report, better than all praise of it, more manifold than every conceivable glory. The Kingdom of God is so full of light, peace, charity, wisdom, glory, honesty, sweetness, loving-kindness and every unspeakable and unutterable good, that it can neither be described nor envisioned by the mind. The citizens of heaven are the just and the angels, whose king is Almighty God.’

He took this lofty message of an alternate truth to Ireland in the 4th century. That was an often brutal world with powerful kings and Patrick had a good deal of success in sharing this vision of a better truth.

This letter of John - the - Seer that we know as the book of Revelation, emerges from a suffering church. The fledgling churches around the end of the first century faced a hostile world. They faced an antagonistic Roman Empire, persecution and internal splits, heresy and apathy. An overwhelming, hopeless situation - and the writer, their pastor is writing from exile on the prison island of Patmos. That might help explain the weird imagery he goes on with later. We might expect a sad and bitter outpouring of emotion. But instead of anger or a misery tale of the blues, the letter begins with a hymn of praise; there are these exuberant notes of joy and praise to encourage and reassure.

Hear some of it again;

“Grace and peace from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and

the ruler of the kings of the earth. Alpha and Omega, to him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

John in exile, John facing persecution and trouble himself, and the same for his flock, should be realistic. Instead, no, he writes poetry to express the bigger picture of God’s great action in the world of sending Christ, the son of God to open God’s kingdom to all. And the one who died abandoned and without help, is the one whose spirit is their present help. It’s glowing praise and rock solid faith in the face of overwhelming trouble.

Paul did the same when he was in prison. John and Charles Wesley did the same more recently, when, in the face of alcoholism and the ravages of the industrial revolution for the poor and with child labour the scourge of the land. They revived the spirits of the people with hymns and meetings full of praise – some are still the favourite hymns of many; “O for a thousand tongues to sing, Hark the herald angels sing” It’s a good pattern! Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela followed the same pattern in the remarkable transformation in South Africa.

The positive stream of Christian response to overwhelming evil has always been to confront it with confident praise of the power of God, - like we do each week, singing hymns and giving thanks. We meet problems; sad and real, yes, but with confidence in God and with hope in a bigger picture.

To the churches in trouble, at risk, not sure of their future in Asia Minor in the first century or here in the twenty-first; to the churches; HOPE! – the hope of grace and peace. We hear the text today, not just because it includes the term king, but because it helps uncover something important about the nature of God. This is God we see in the person of Jesus, who is king in a sense, but in a very different way to normal. The Roman governor Pilate has to ask him, ‘are you

king of the Jews?’ King, yes, but in a way not recognizable to the powers we are accustomed to. Jesus often spoke of the reign of God being at hand, yet he doesn’t raise a finger to make it come by decree or with force, as kings would normally do.

The sort of kingliness that Jesus embodied was not easily grasped; it went against the grain of what people were used to. Jesus is even more different to the head of state, chief of army, rich palace dweller of his or any age.

The whole book of Revelation is a study in the exercise of this upside-down power that Jesus lived by. A bold and subversive faith in the face of overwhelming worldly power. It’s confident of a positive outcome, even if the outcome is not seen here and now. It’s the pattern of a king who shows that greatness is lowliness and compassion, the last is first and loving matters most.

This is the pattern of Jesus ministry and sometimes even of the church’s story - and I’m sure it’s the pattern of our future and the true hope of all those who feel overwhelmed. This is a pattern of kingliness worth celebrating because it’s good news for those without the power of the worlds’ leaders. May it become more so for us and our world. Amen.