

Come Up Here! – Heaven's Open Door

Revelation 4:1-11

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The two readings (Ezekiel 1:1-11; Revelation 4:1-11) are a bit weird. I chose the first one because it's so similar to the second one - it goes back to about 600 BC, and Ezekiel (who was in Babylon at the time) had that vision. And then (probably around 100 AD or a bit before) John had the same kind of vision. And we need to explore what that all means, because it's very strange.

Diane and I were on the top of a mountain called Fóia in Portugal. It's the highest mountain in the Algarve. I have enjoyed climbing mountains all of my life. It is a wonderful thing to get to climb, to go through the exercise, have that sense of achievement of arriving at the top of a mountain and then getting a sense of perspective, of the views, of the sense of wilderness and glory of nature. Even if you go to the top of Kelsen Roundhill and you can look across to BA2, you can enjoy that sense of wonder that there is because you can see so far.

You also have people queueing up to get to the top of Mt. Everest. They want to get there because that is the highest point. They want to get a kind of sense of perspective. Even more than the effect of viewing a lovely view from the top of a mountain, is the view that astronauts get when they see the earth. And I mean it does have a psychological effect, being away from this amazing planet and they look back at it and they see what a small place, a speck, it is.

Both Ezekiel and Revelation are apocalyptic books. And the word apocalyptic has got two meanings. The first meaning is what it was originally meant to be, which is the "unveiling" - the disclosure of something that's hidden. And these days, of course, we use the word apocalyptic for things, like earthquakes or droughts or hurricanes, an apocalyptic event. But it doesn't really mean that. And certainly, in the Bible, the word apocalyptic means revealing something that is hidden.

John is in a position where he's on the Isle of Patmos. He's in prison. He's probably working as a kind of slave in a quarry because of his faith. And on the Lord's Day, here he is receiving something. He says, "I was in the Spirit", which means probably he was in quiet, meditative prayer.

He saw a throne, and on the throne was something like as to jasper and carnelian. He saw 24 elders around the throne. He saw 4 creatures around the throne. And he saw 7 lamps in front of the throne. He saw a sea of glass in front of the throne. It's an extraordinary thing to have seen.

But certainly, although it means pretty well nothing to us, (because it is very strange, isn't it) to the people who originally read John's letter, this revelation, it would have meant something. because they were familiar with these images. They were familiar with Isaiah who said:

Isaiah 6:1-3

(NIVUK) ¹ In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. ² Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: with two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. ³ And they were calling to one another: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

Text Then they would have been familiar with Daniel, who said:

Daniel 7:13-14

(NIVUK) ¹³ 'In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. ¹⁴ He was given authority, glory and sovereign power;

And they would have been familiar with Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 1:4-5

(NIVUK) ⁴ I looked, and I saw a violent storm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The centre of the fire looked like glowing metal, ⁵ and in the fire was what looked like four living creatures. In appearance their form was human,

And so, John sees the same thing as Ezekiel. His original readers of that book would have understood exactly the link between that and the Old Testament experiences. And our job this morning is to try to unwrap it and understand what it's trying to say, and interpret it.

Of course, the throne represents **authority**. The most familiar throne that we know anything about, of course, is the throne that King Charles III was crowned on, (which is, in fact, the oldest piece of furniture in Britain that's still in use for its original purpose). It was made for the ceremonial coronation of Edward I in the around the year 1300 and it represents authority. The colours, cornelian and jasper, represent **magnificence** and **beauty** - the beauty of the person on the throne. The elders represent possibly the twelve patriarchs perhaps the twelve apostles, although John was watching it and he would have been one himself. So, I find that quite difficult to understand. It might just be that 24 is an important number. They all have crowns on them representing their authority or their entitlement.

And then there's the creatures. They have an ox, an eagle, a man, and a lion, all representing something of the highest order of creation. And the seven lamps, of course, represent the Jewish menorah, which is the sense of the constant presence of God in the temple, and also everywhere. The sea of glass represents a separate, of the holiness of the one who's on the throne.

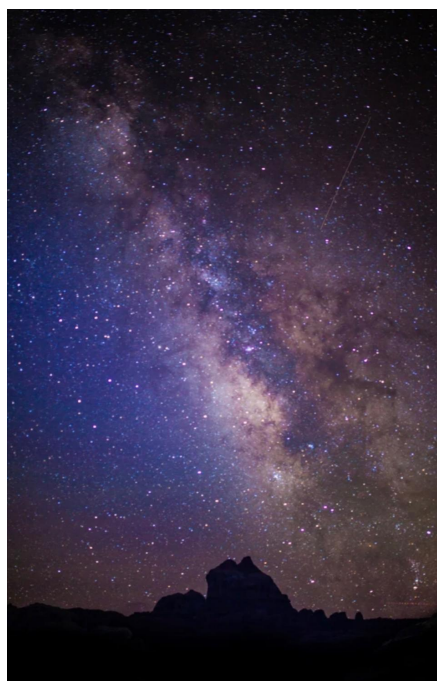
Revelation 1:9-11

(NIVUK) ⁹ Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour and thanks to him who sits on the throne and who lives for ever and ever, ¹⁰ the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives for ever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say: ¹¹ 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

Paul Langham writes in his book about Revelation that the words "you are worthy" are taken from the liturgy of the emperor worship of ancient Rome. So, what Christians were doing was saying "Christ, you are worthy" and saying that's very different from "Caesar, you are worthy."

So, if we're having trouble understanding what John saw, how might we convey some kind of sense of understanding from our perspective in the 21st century?

Here is a picture of the Milky Way:



It's wonderful to be in such a dark place that you can see the Milky Way above you. And in one tiny corner of that picture, (don't ask me where because I'm not an astro-physicist), there is a smudge in one corner, which is the Andromeda Galaxy. The Andromeda Galaxy is made up of a trillion stars. It is 200,000 light years across. It takes 200,000 years for the light to go from one end of this galaxy to the other end of the galaxy. And light does travel quite quickly. 4.9 billion miles away from our Milky Way. And they are due to converge somewhere around 5 billion year's time. This, I think, gives some idea for us of the glory of God. Because we believe don't we that God in Christ created the whole blinking lot. It's incredible.

So as the book continues, we're going to read later about disasters, judgment, beasts and battles. But the first thing that John sees, chapter 4, is who is in charge. The person on that throne. He sees the big picture., the perspective from the top of the mountain. Who has the ultimate victory? Who is the king of the universe? Not a king in a royal robe, but a slain lamb, which is another awkward, difficult image. of course, that is referring to Jesus. So he is the one on the throne.

The one who was obedient to death. Even death on a cross. The perfect lamb.

I mean we have to go back to the Old Testament. In the temple, a lamb was slain to represent the punishment and the forgiveness that is available. And so, a perfect lamb represents, Jesus the perfect lamb on the cross. As John the Baptist put it: this is the lamb of God, come to take away the sins of the world.

John 1:29

(NIVUK) 29 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'

Paul talks about the same thing. He says:

Philippians 2:9-11

(NIVUK) 9 Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It's Jesus, not the powerful, not the Roman emperor. Not the Trumps, the Putins or the Xi Jinping's who are, from the perspective of heaven, little people - just as little as everyone else.

This is a revelation of how things really are. The New Testament is full of this truth.

I'm just going to quote something from Colossians:

Colossians 1:15-20

(NIVUK) ¹⁵ The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. ¹⁶ For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸ And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. ¹⁹ For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

So, what kind of God is on the throne? He has the marks of nails on his hands. Not a golden crown on his head, but a crown of thorns. He's the Jesus of the Gospels, who associates with us, broken, fallen people; who washes our feet; who throws his arms around us to welcome us back home; forgives us even as nails are being hammered into his hands and his feet. At the present time, it's the strong leaders who dominate. We have been talking, it's been mentioned, of the threat of war, the threat of climate disaster, the threat of the possibility of AI ending humanity. But at the end of this strange book, we get a big picture of our ultimate destination, because the first image was the throne room. The last image is this – read this carefully:

Revelation 21:1-4

(NIVUK) ¹ And then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, look, God's dwelling place is now among the people and he will dwell with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has happened.

It's a promise that at the end of it all there is going to be a new heaven a renewed heaven and earth and so we can have a quiet confidence. In the words of Julian of Norwich, "All will be well, and all manner of things will be well." And when we worship in a very small way, we're joining with the elders and the creatures in the throne room that John saw.

Revelation 4:8,11; 5:12

(NIVUK) 4⁸ "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty," who was, and is, and is to come.'

4¹¹ 'You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.'

5¹² 'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!'



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