

Reflection - Panel 6 – The Two Witnesses - Revelation Chapter 11

Rev Patrick Stonehewer – 22 September 2024 – Victoria Methodist Church

9 'Pray then in this way:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.

10 Your kingdom come.

Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

11 Give us this day our daily bread.

12 And forgive us our debts,

as we also have forgiven our debtors.

13 And do not bring us to the time of trial,

but rescue us from the evil one.

Words of the Lord's Prayer as written Matthew's Gospel

Perhaps not familiar in their translation, nor in their ending,

- for many traditions finish with words of praise and affirmation

- for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours now and for ever. Amen.

Reading them directly from Scripture leaves us hanging on a sombre note – one which may well resonates with us as we look around at the world today with a realistic eye

So as we look and encounter this image

– with its monochrome background predominantly - greys / blues / blacks and whites

- we might well be drawn to the red seven-headed snake-like Dragon

- a perfect embodiment of evil

How might this bring us hope ?

First thing

When so much of Revelation is descriptive – defining and specifying what John's vision is about

The tone of voice of the passage is quite different from much of the surrounding material.

- instead of the big-picture scenes of terrifying horsemen, man-eating locusts and all the rest, we seem to have a short story.

So what's it about ?

At one level it's clear - John is told to measure the temple.

Then two 'witnesses' emerge, doing great and strange deeds before being killed, lying unburied, and then being raised to new life and exalted to heaven.

But how does it fit with the rest of the book – **how does it take John's vision forward?**

But guided by Jacqui's stunning image, let's take what I see as the following plot:

First: right at the top of the panel

Briefly, in the image

- *measuring line is shown as a row of black and white squares*

- *under an image of the temple itself – complete with the Ark of the Covenant – which travelled with God's people Israel – through the wilderness and into captivity signifying the presence of God with them at all times*

This 'measuring of the temple,'

- echoes the prophetic action of the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 40), measuring his visionary temple

- similarly repeats the actions the prophet - Zechariah – who set out (Zechariah ch2 v1) '*To measure Jerusalem, to find out how wide and how long it is.*'

Both of them marking out – and taking the utmost care in doing so

- signifying the importance that this was a place where where God was going to come to dwell

Alongside this great exercise in surveying

- we're we're told that it's not just the building
- (Revelation c11 v1) '*...those who worship there*' are equally subject to the tape measure

In one sense that really no surprise, because by the time John was writing of his great vision in Revelation

- the early period of the Christian movement
- the followers of Jesus had come to see themselves as the true temple, the place where God now lived in the presence of and through the power of the Holy Spirit

Today's epistle highlights that (1 Corinthians ch 3 v 16f) - '*Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? 17 [...] For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.*

John's marking out of this human temple - this community - is a way of signalling God's solemn intention to honour and bless these people so they may be protected against ultimate harm.

- harm seen as coming from the 'outer court' - where those seen as being outside God's chosen people will trample it for 42 months or 1260 days

- otherwise three and a half years - symbolically half of the 'seven' which stands for completeness

But what is the task and role of these - God's - people?

Throughout the book of Revelation, there are plenty of references to other parts of God's story

- but the focus is on Jesus - and on the call of God's people is to bear faithful witness to Jesus

- even though it will mean understanding and encountering suffering, and even death itself

And in this chapter - expressed so well in this image - particularly in the two central blocks of it

- God's people are represented by the two witnesses – who will encounter the darkness of the world – encounter death – but find new life

So let's look, and hopefully discover something

Who are the two witnesses?

Views are mixed, including:

a) some believe they represent Moses - the giver of the law, and Elijah - the man of prophecy

Moses - the great leader of God's people - who stood up to Pharaoh – the pagan king of Egypt - and demonstrated God's power by the plagues (echoed in Revelation chapters 8 & 9).

Elijah – the great prophet - who in turn stood up to Ahab - the paganizing / secularising king of Israel – and thereby demonstrated God's power by successfully praying for a drought and then by calling down fire from heaven.

Moses and Elijah together - echoing the common expectation that these two would return before the end of the age [Malachi ch4 v5. John ch6 v14]

b) others believe that they represent Peter and Paul (early leaders of the Christian movement)

c) or that they represent the two faithful churches from the opening chapters of Revelation

d) or that symbolically they are the two witnesses needed by law to establish a legal case. In Jacqui's own reflections on this – she talks of liking this idea - what God has established is not a whim but based on a testified argument.

Whatever the right answer

– I like the thought that God has had witnesses through time

- so the two witnesses represent all who have stood up for God

– or indeed will do

So what do they look like – and what will happen to them?

Jacqui's image reveals that the witnesses wear sackcloth

- not only do they speak of the need for repentance and humility
- they are repentant - they live what they preach
- a sign of mourning for the darkness of the world and the evil that it carries

But yet, against that background

- these witnesses are portrayed as lampstands against a backdrop of olive trees
- highlighting the need for God's people to be light in the world – bringing the oil of healing

But called to do those, they will encounter the darkness and evil of the world

The dragon

- with its three heads facing down – clearly relating back to the story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden – interrupting the place of light and of healing
- the four others facing up – bringing death upon the witnesses

So what of that death ?

Returning to the text - we haven't met this 'monster' as such

- nor discovered the great city
- but in the chapters which follow John makes all this clear

And we learn that the Beast is the might of pagan empire

- embodied by the Roman Empire, the 'city' is Rome itself
- together – the public face of the entire Roman empire.

And the point which John is determined that we will grasp

- is that the God-given and God-protected vocation to bear faithful and prophetic witness through light and healing
- will not mean being spared from encountering the evils and darkness of the world

Indeed it is through encounter with them

- that those encounters will be the ultimate prophetic sign through which the world will be brought to glorify God.

How will this happen?

In the image In the higher of the two squares we see the dragon and its serpent-like heads

- taking the witnesses to death – and a careful look will see the two figures at the side hanging by a noose
- again for three and a half days – death and evil – will celebrate a victory over the God's witnesses.

But suddenly God will act in a new way

- we see the witnesses being lifted from death – wrapped up/taken by the cloud
- the place where God was encountered time and again in Hebrew Scripture/Old Testament

Recalling - Daniel (ch 7) – where we read of God's people coming on a cloud to heaven

Recalling - Ezekiel (ch 37) – where God's breath comes into dead corpses – into dry bones

John's new, re-imagined vision will will come to pass – a miraculous transformation will come into reality...

The witnesses, church after its martyrdom will complete the prophetic witness.

- the world, looking on, will be converted and transformed

The witness of the church, in other words, can and will succeed even in the face of adversity.

We should not mistake the powerful impact of this (earthquake)

When God judged Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis (ch 18.32), he might have spared it if ten righteous persons were found there

- now, in the text, only one-tenth of the wicked city is to fall, nine-tenths the great majority are to be rescued .

So the **seventh** trumpet is blown - making things perfect

Terrors may have come to pass

- but in John's prophesy of symbolic action (measuring the temple

- and in the story or parable of these two witnesses

The kingdom of God, is to become a reality on earth as in heaven.

A vision is emerging – to rescue us from evil

- even as we encounter and grieve over the rebellion and corruption of the world

- but determined and able to rescue and restore it

- inspired by the faithful action of prophetic witnesses through the ages

- but now entrusted to us – today's witnesses to the transforming power of God

– overcoming evil - bringing hope – announcing glorious celebration

Amen

Sources:

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