

**An Outrageous Vision**  
**Revelation 7:9-17**  
**May 19, 2019**

The poet, Annie Dillard, asks us: *Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke?* When she says this she is talking about worship. She suggests that when we come to church we ought to be wearing crash helmets; ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares and they should lash us to the pews. Why? Because the God of Isaiah whose presence shook the temple, and the God of Jesus whose power raised him out of the grave, this God we come to worship may just wake up and remind us that we need to change.

I'm usually a fairly rational sort of person and, like most of us 21<sup>st</sup> century educated folks, not very patient with bazaar ideas. Yet at the same time I can happily lose myself in science fiction films where I can suspend my rational brain and be open to the paranormal, to the mysteries of the universe, and to huge leaps in logic that would ordinarily be unacceptable during those times when my feet are firmly planted on earth. But what do we do when we are dropped into John's vision of the throne room full of millions of worshippers dressed in white robes, angels and four living creatures, all of whom worship the lamb seated on the throne. Does not such an idea push my intellectual tolerance to the limit? Or is my way out to treat this, like science fiction, as merely an imaginative idea that has no place in my feet on the ground reality? Or is it the future of the universe?

It's interesting to me, however, that in Western society, along side our pride in rational thought and the scientific basis of knowledge, we show a widespread openness to the spiritual. The popularity of science fiction films and novels, the quirky belief in the paranormal, the widespread expression of our desire for spirituality in songs, movies, novels: these tell me that we are conflicted about the certainty science and logic alleges to provide for modern folk. But also I never cease to be amazed at our capacity of believe the most bazaar nonsense.

I remember one occasion when I watched a woman take her drained tea cup over to the reader who proceeded to launch into a profound explanation of what these few black leaves augured for this woman's future. She and her friend, who sat waiting to follow suit, were obviously committed believers in the reader's abilities to read the future, but also deeply anxious to know who they are, where life is taking them, and what their choices will be. People are hungry for spiritual authenticity, and yet, to my mind, hopelessly confused and gullible to any sort of charlatan out there. People, even 21<sup>st</sup> century, sophisticated, educated, Western folk, are not as unreceptive to the spiritual world of John's throne room vision as we might imagine.

John's vision is certainly vivid and even outrageous. There is no doubt that this last book of the New Testament is a challenging read. It is full of highly charged, colourful word pictures that would make a modern reader's head spin. To be dropped into the middle of John's vision might be analogous for a 21<sup>st</sup> century person being dropped into the middle of an episode of the Twilight Zone.

Let me just say a brief word of caution. This book employs a highly imaginative style of writing, dramatic figures, grotesque symbols, and apocalyptic language in order to communicate a message of hope to these first century Christians. It is written to the seven churches in Asia Minor, a territory where Paul had established churches in the 50s. It is thought that this was written in the mid 90s, a time of great persecution by Rome on their struggling communities. So this letter is written to give hope to those Christian churches that are being persecuted, killed, and threatened. Against the surrounding Roman culture and political demands they feel isolated, small and vulnerable. The author draws on the Old Testament prophets, like Ezekiel, to provide a vision of a sovereign God who remains in control of all that is happening in their lives.

This letter is not a blueprint of what the future holds for the human race. The letter has an address and a date! It is addressed to these specific Christian churches at the end of the first century. It seeks to encourage them. It is their situation that is in the writers mind as he wrote it. But naturally, as part of the canon of Scripture, preserved by the Spirit for all future generations of Christians, it is a word for us

also. What is that word for us today? How are we to interpret this vision of John for our time? What is God saying to us?

John describes a scene in which a great multitude, who are robbed in white and too big to count, from every nation on earth, stand before a heavenly throne on which sits the Lamb. This is how John describes the scene:

*They cried out in a loud voice, saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!" And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen" (Revelation 7:10-12)*

John gives us a vision of the church triumphant. John is pointing them to the ultimate reality that lies behind the veil of time and space. Such a reality is what they need to hold on to in the face of the persecution and threat they face from Rome. And this reality is true. And at the heart of this future realm is a lamb that stands in the place of authority at the very centre of the worship area. This lamb is the ascended Christ who now fills the universe. Christ fills the real world of the future that the people of God will occupy. He will continue to be a shepherd for us, one who pleases us with the waters of life and who provides spiritual guidance and love for his followers. John says:

*"the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of the water of life, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

I don't know about you, but I need to be connected to this Christ who has ascended far above our physical universe in order to live my life with feet securely on the ground. I need a shepherd to help me find life amid this sometimes dry, parched materialistic existence that we have created for ourselves.

I also need the feet on the ground connection to the living history of God's people one finds in the bible. Bruce Feiler in his book, **Walking the Bible**, reminds us of just how connected the biblical story is to our feet on the ground reality. He came to realize from visiting the

ancient biblical sites that this book is not a body of abstract theology, but rather “a living, breathing entity...”

That was certainly brought home to me on our recent tour of Israel. Standing on the same ground, seeing the actual hills and trees and waters that provide the framework for the history of Israel and Jesus, is a powerful reminder that our faith has roots in this place. Who would have imagined that Nazareth is located in such a hilly area? That Capernaum really does exist on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. These are the villages and towns where our faith took root. Israel and Jesus actually walked over these hills, amid the heat of the summer and cool of winter. And south of Jerusalem lies the desert wilderness of Judea, with the Dead Sea that collects the waters of the Jordan River. This is the place, amid this desert place that John the Baptist invited Israel to be baptized and get ready for the Messiah. Our faith, as I was constantly reminded on this visit, is rooted in the land. It's not abstract; it's grounded in the earthly reality of hills, valleys, rivers, lakes and wilderness.

One of the ways, therefore, that we can live comfortably with this strange juxtaposition of heaven and earth, is to connect with the biblical story. Too often we are disconnected from its living history. The stories of Abraham, Joseph, Miriam, David, Esther, Isaiah, John, Jesus, Paul are the stories through which God enables me to be connected to a living religious history. This is how I keep my feet on the ground. Without such grounding we are open to all sorts of spiritual confusion.

With the sort of connection to the living history of the bible and to my church's life today, I believe we have a balanced and rich source of spiritual guidance for our complex material lives today. I can't think of any other way to travel through this short, strange life of mine than hand in hand with this shepherd whose very being is drawing everything in the universe into him. Mysterious, yes! Mind expanding, yes! Faith demanding, yes! Any more spiritually challenging than tea leaves in a cup or any one of a hundred and one road maps to happiness and spiritual nirvana offered today, most certainly not!

**Amen**