

The Book of Revelation

The Revelation to John (also sometimes called the Apocalypse) is a call to Christians to remain faithful in the face of the disasters that they saw happening all around them.

A powerful quote

"Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (Revelation 21.1-4).

The Revelation to John

This is the only writing in the New Testament of its kind, widespread in first-century Judaism, and named apocalyptic. Such writings are normally attributed to great figures of the past and reassure those undergoing persecution that their sufferings will soon be rewarded. Characteristically, these writings move easily between earth and heaven, and employ colourful biblical imagery, animal and number symbolism.

The purpose of Revelation is to reassure Christians under persecution that Christ will gloriously triumph over the evil pressures of Roman imperial rule, and especially of the idolatrous Roman imperial cult. The evil empire of the whore of Babylon will crumble and be superseded by the heavenly Jerusalem, the pure bride of Christ, where those who remain faithful will share the triumph of Christ and God. Revelation, however, transcends its original context in the struggle against Roman idolatry, and any other historical context. It is not to be read as pointing exclusively to any set of historical circumstances. It must be read also as a confident assertion of the triumph of a persevering Christianity over the transitory allurements and power of evil.

Suggested reading

Revelation 21:1-22:17: this chapter treats of the state of heaven and the church after the Last Judgment; that after this, through the New Heaven, the New Church will exist on the earth, which will worship the Lord alone.

Tricky bits

This book is weird and mysterious and therefore very difficult to understand; but, all the same it is fascinating.

Who wrote this book?

The book of Revelation states in 1:1 that it contains the revelation of Jesus Christ which God made known by sending his angel to his servant John.

Church tradition has identified John as John son of Zebedee, one of the 12 apostles. It is worth noting, however, that John never makes this claim in the book and so could be, as some suggest, an early Christian prophet who was also called John (then, as now, John was a common name).

He is often thought to be the beloved disciple of John's Gospel. If he was, then when Jesus was on the cross, he handed over care for his mother to him. Christian tradition states that he took her to live in Ephesus, where he lived to a ripe old age (around 100). If the author is a different John, then we know much less about him. He was a prophet in the early church and spent some time living on Patmos, possibly as a result of having been exiled, where he received his vision.

Liturgical notes

Since the two keynotes of the book are the triumph of Christ through his Passion and the triumph of the Church through persecution, the Church uses the book especially in Eastertide. It is read on Sundays of Eastertide (Year C) as a meditation on Christ's victory. It is read semi-continuously on weekdays of the last two weeks of the year (Year II) as a preparation of the annual reminder of the final Coming of Christ. The key vision of Christ as the Lord of the Church (Revelation 1:5-8) is read both at the Chrism Mass and on the Feast of Christ the King. The picture of the saints in triumph is read for All Saints (Revelation 7:2-14), while the re-assuring vision of the new heaven and the new earth is suggested for Masses of the Dead.

How is it structured?

- 1:1-3:22** the letters to the seven churches
- 4:1-7:17** a vision of the heavenly throne and the opening of seven seals
- 8:1-11:19** the angels blow seven trumpets
- 12:1-15:8** the victory over the dragon and the beast
- 16:1-19:10** the vision of seven plagues and the fall of Babylon
- 19:11-22:21** a vision of the new Jerusalem

God speaks to us

In all the challenges that face the global church – especially in times of adversity, internal squabbles, difficult cases of church discipline, or afflicted consciences due to sin, we remember that we are under the Lordship of the one who shed his blood for us. When we are ridiculed, maligned, insulted, or excluded by the world because of our loyalty to Christ, we remember that we are guaranteed that we will one day share in the resplendent glory of God himself.