

REVELATION 5:1-10 ST JAMES'; 14.1.18; 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

Imagine standing on the top of a high mountain on a clear day, and admiring the view. As you look, you can see other mountain peaks. It might seem as if you could take a running jump and land just below the top . . . but of course, they're much further away than that! If you look downwards, you can just about make out the valley down below, with a river running along it. The lower slopes of the mountain are covered with trees. Higher up, there are grassy slopes and rocky crags. If you turn to look down the valley, you can see still other mountains, and maybe a lake in the distance . . . there's so much to take in that you could stand there all day, just looking at the view!

How would you begin to describe such a view for someone who'd never seen a mountain, let alone been to the top and gazed at the view?

As John tries to describe all he hears and sees *in the Spirit on the Lord's day* (Revelation 1:10, NRSV), his job's even more difficult than describing the view from the top of a mountain to someone who's lived in a thick jungle all their life. And as we read it, it can be just as difficult to make sense of what John describes. The result is that few people really try to get to grips with Revelation, and many Christians find it impossible to say why it doesn't mean that the Pope is the antichrist, or that there will only be 144,000 people in heaven.

Today, we're going to look at just a few verses from Revelation. We don't have time to look at them in great detail, and we need to remember that this is just one small part of the vast panorama which the Lord opened up to John and which John takes 22 chapters to describe.

WORSHIP IN HEAVEN

In chapter 5, continues describing his vision of worship in heaven which he began in chapter 4. At the beginning of chapter 4, the first thing he sees is *a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it* (4:2). Round this central throne there are *twenty-four other thrones* on which are seated *twenty-four elders* . . . (4:4). Also surrounding the central throne are *four living creatures* (4:5).

Heaven is far from being a quiet place! The four living creatures *never stop* praising God (4:8)! And the 24 elders are constantly falling down, and throwing down their crowns, before the one who sits on the throne, and praising him in the words of 4:11.

At the beginning of chapter 5, John adjusts his viewpoint and becomes aware of another participant in the drama. This character is first described by one of the 24 elders: *See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David* . . . (v 5). Confusingly, when John looks, he doesn't see a lion, but *a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne* . . . *He had seven horns and seven eyes* . . . (v 6).

As if the scene isn't already noisy and confusing enough, this lamb takes a scroll from *the right hand of him who sat on the throne* (v 7),

and immediately the frenzy of praise increases, as the four living creatures and 24 elders, who each now have a harp, start singing a new song (vv 8,9). If we continued to the end of the chapter, we'd also find millions of angels (v 11), and then *every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea*, all joining in! This isn't polite Anglican worship, uttered by people who are so hesitant about singing and so worried about sounding too exuberant, that we can hardly hear each other. The worship in heaven is deafening, as millions and millions are singing enthusiastically *in a loud voice* (vv 12,13).

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

It's not necessarily obvious who the various figures are in John's vision of heaven. Once again, we need to look back at chapter 4, to see how many of these figures are described.

First, the *one who sits on the throne* is worshipped as *the Lord God Almighty* (4:8), and as *our Lord and God*, the creator of *all things* (4:11). So we're left in no doubt about the identity of the figure at the centre of the scene.

The identity of the *twenty-four elders who are dressed in white and had crowns of gold on their heads* (4:4) isn't quite so clear. 24 isn't a number which has any significance anywhere else in Scripture. But the number twelve is very significant. Later, in chapter 21, John describes a vision of the new Jerusalem, which has twelve gates bearing the names of the twelve tribes Israel, and twelve foundation stones bearing the names of the twelve apostles of Lamb. Together, these 24 names represent those on whom the people of God is founded, in the OT and

the NT. So the 24 elders here must represent the whole people of God, both before and since Jesus.

Then there are *four living creatures . . . covered with eyes, in front and behind* (4:6). Ezekiel had a very similar vision, and he calls these creatures Cherubim. They're awesome creatures, who are visible signs of God's presence. Given that there are four of them, a number which points to the four points of the compass, or the four winds (north, south, east and west), the *four living creatures* could represent God's world, throbbing with his ceaseless activity.

But the central figure in the drama of chapter 5 is of course the one described as *the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David* (v 5) . . . *the Lamb, looking as if it had been slain*, and which has *seven horns and seven eyes* (v 6). This figure is the one who is *worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals* (v 9).

For anyone who's at all familiar with the Bible, it's clear that this figure is Jesus Christ. We're very used to the picture of Jesus as a sacrificial lamb. We understand that Jesus' death on the cross means that people *from every tribe and language and people and nation* are able to become God's people, *a kingdom and priests to serve our God* (vv 9-10). We know that Jesus *triumphed* (v 5) by dying for us.

We're not so used to thinking of Jesus as a lion! That's not surprising, as this is the only place in the Bible where he's pictured as a lion. But a lion is occasionally used as a symbol of the tribe of Judah

(Genesis 49:9; Ezekiel 19:2-6), and it seems that the lion was a symbol of the Messiah in C1 Judaism.

The lamb in John's vision looked *as if it had been slain* (v 6), but is clearly very much alive. It has *seven horns and seven eyes* (v 6). With all this symbolism, John seems to be saying that Jesus Christ, of the tribe of Judah and the line of David, is supremely powerful and all-knowing, and that he's won his victory by his sacrificial death.¹

CONCLUSION

John's vision of heaven shows us the whole of creation bowing down and worshipping the Lord Jesus Christ. In this particular passage, he's worshipped for dying as a sacrifice and so buying for God people from *every tribe and language and people and nation*, and making them *a kingdom and priests to serve our God*, who will rule on earth (vv 9-10). Brothers and sisters, we are among those people! Jesus Christ died so that we could become members of God's people! Spiritually, we're already amongst the millions of creatures worshipping at the heavenly throne. For now, that reality is difficult for us to understand or to grasp – it's in the far distance of our field of vision. But the time will come when our perspective shifts, and that reality moves into the foreground. For now, let's thank the Lord for the glimpses of heaven which he's given us through John's Revelation, and do all we can to prepare ourselves for an eternity of joyful and noisy worship of our mighty, awesome, wonderful Saviour and Lord, Jesus Christ.

¹ Leon Morris, Revelation, (Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Leicester, IVP, 1969), p 97