

Revelation is a very strange book. We might as well get its name right to begin with – no ‘s’ on the end; just one revelation. It’s so strange that there was much debate as to whether it should be included in the Bible at all. Even now, many people who are quite comfortable writing and preaching about the rest of the Bible get cold feet when it comes to Revelation – and that includes me.

The old name for the book was the Apocalypse. Back in the Middle Ages the Apocalypse was quite often commissioned as a stand-alone book, written by a scribe on parchment and given a long series of extraordinary illustrations: angels and conflagrations, battles, multi-headed, multi-winged beasts, earthquakes, eruptions, pestilence and drownings, and then on the last few pages the glories of the Heavenly City and its redeemed inhabitants. Almost invariably there would be the figure of an old man standing at the side of each picture; this was the author of the book. He was traditionally thought to be St John the Evangelist, and he was shown looking at the story as it unfolded. It was his revelation. Scholars now debate whether St John himself wrote the book, or another John, or someone who simply used the name to add authenticity. It doesn’t much matter. Whoever he was, he followed in the tradition of Ezekiel and Daniel, and he knew both of those books very well. This is tremendously dramatic writing; it really is a series of visions, and it feels as though the author is struggling to express what he has seen in words.

What he sees first, as the visions unfold, is that although there are groups of Christians – the ‘churches’ – across the Near East, they are already falling away from following Jesus’s teaching. None of them has been truly faithful. Evil is alive in the world and it is becoming more widespread and corrupting more people every day. No-one is worthy to take the word of God and read and interpret it. But then the Lamb steps forward and takes the scroll. He is named in Old Testament language as the Lion of Judah, the Root of David. He alone can do this, because he ‘was slaughtered, and by [his] blood he ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; [he has] made them to be a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.’ This is Jesus, taken like a lamb to the slaughter (said the prophet Isaiah), Lamb of God and Redeemer of the world. Because of his sacrifice, evil will be overcome and God’s kingdom established on earth. It will be a relentless and terrible struggle – and much of the rest of the Apocalypse is a detailed description – but love, justice and mercy will ultimately prevail.

It is thought that the Apocalypse was written to comfort and inspire Christians who were threatened by one of the early persecutions, possibly carried out by Nero or Domitian before the end of the first century. Christians were being tortured and killed; the more strongly they held to their beliefs the more likely they were to suffer a horrible death. But they would be saved – or sealed, as the book describes – and would take their places in the Heavenly City with the angels and saints in God’s presence. So is this a strange reading for a Sunday in Epiphany season? No, because the word ‘Epiphany’ itself means ‘revelation’ – a showing, a realisation, a sudden understanding of something that had been hidden. In these visions John sees and understands the full glory of God and the power of Jesus’s sacrifice, so strong that it will overcome every kind of evil. John wants his fellow-Christians to understand this as well, and to cling on to the salvation they have been promised despite the appalling circumstances in which they find themselves.

There has always been a powerful temptation to interpret Revelation as prophecy which foretells the future. But prophecy isn’t divinely-inspired fortune-telling. Prophecy is both

warning and hope – a message, often in highly symbolic language, which warns both about what God will do if his people turn away from him, and offers comfort and courage for those who are faithful. But from almost as soon as the book was written, people have been pointing to wars and natural disasters as evidence that the end of the world is here, or almost here, and the second coming is just around the corner. You don't have to go far on the internet today to find detailed arguments showing that the earthquakes and eruptions, wars and famines, the ever-increasing flow of refugees, the events of the last few years in the United States and the global pandemic are, this time, incontrovertible proof of the imminent end of the world.

Well, they might be right. I doubt it – and I could be horribly wrong. Whatever – as young people say these days (or possibly last year – language moves on) – we are to be steadfast and faithful, maintaining our loyalty to Christ and our worship of God, no matter what the world may throw at us. We are to be like Nathaniel, the Jew in whom there was no deceit, no untruth, no hypocrisy. The King James Bible says 'in whom there is no guile' – no cunning, no trickery, no double-dealing. Our calling is to be honest, open and faithful in whatever tasks and roles we undertake; in whatever station of life we find ourselves and however hard we are challenged. Then as faithful disciples, we too will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending, and we will sing with them the words of this morning's psalm: 'I will exalt you, O God my King, and bless your name for ever and ever: every day will I bless you, and praise your name for ever and ever.'