**13th June 2021**

**Call to worship**



Jesus says: Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. **18**I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever

Let us come to worship God and renew our vision of God’s amazing world.

**A prayer of approach**

Creator God,
we bring to you all that is growing within us:
**for you to bless and nurture.**
We bring our prayers for the spread of your kingdom:
**for you to bless and nurture.**
We bring the initiatives for justice multiplying among nations:
**for you to bless and nurture.**
We bring the hopes and dreams, tiny and big,
of all your children around the world:
**for you to bless and nurture.**
In Jesus’ name.**Amen.**





**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

God of all,
you do not force growth but nurture it.
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**
You do not start big but start small.
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**
You do not sow greedily but graciously.
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**
You do not hurry the harvest but hallow it.
**Forgive us when we want too much too soon.**
Forgive us, and accept the work of our hands,
in Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

Living God,
from a mustard seed to a tree, from I to we,
in you we grow. **Amen**.
In the mystery of the unseen, from brown field to green,
in you we grow. **Amen**.
By faith and not by sight, by day and by night,
in you we grow. **Amen**.
Forgiven and freed, through word and deed,
in you we grow. **Amen**.
As we sow and reap, as we laugh and weep,
in you we grow. **Amen**.
May your kingdom come, Father, Spirit, Son,
as in you we grow. **Amen**.

**Revelation 2.1-7**

Over this summer I will be looking at the Book of Revelation during these sermon slots. During our recent Day of Prayer at Pentecost I used the reflections from the URC daily devotions on the letters to the seven churches in the Book of revelation – contained in chapters 2-3. They were originally written to ask the question ‘what is the Spirit saying to the church?’ It seemed timely to be asking the same question now.

With all that we have been through over the last year or so, many people have used apocalyptic language. Many have been seeing the pandemic as God’s judgement and the Book of Revelation has many lurid and vivid images of plagues, death, destruction, wrath, and judgement. It is not for the faint hearted. Throughout history many people have ‘made hay’ with it. Jehovah’s witnesses, amongst others, have used it to predict the end times and literally put the fear of God into people. D H Lawrence the author said that when we read Revelation, we feel at once there are meanings behind meanings. With its symbolic numbers and colours, angelic and demonic beings and its dualistic language of conflict between good and evil and gruesome language of plagues, warfare and bloodshed its place in the New Testament was sometimes questioned. For example, Martin Luther, who started the Reformation, believed Revelation didn’t have the same status and authority as the gospels and Paul’s letters.

Over the centuries Revelation has been interpreted from a wide variety of approaches ranging from literal readings of the book to predictive prophecies, to readings that recognize in it’s utopian language the promises of hope in the midst of contemporary situations of suffering and oppression.

If you read it historically, you refer to events that were happening to the early church during the first century and the severe persecutions under Emperors Nero or Domitian. Others read it for clues about the future. Others read it symbolically neither as a window on the past or the prediction of the future but as a work that speaks to readers every time and place to offer them a vision of a world transformed and where evil is overthrown by the victory of Jesus.

The world we live in today is no less complex and dangerous than the world of the late first century when this book was written so let’s explore what it may say to us and the church as we attempt to endure and be faithful witnesses to God’s love in a world of plagues, violence, injustice, hatred and suspicion.

First of all, Revelation begins with a vision. If you aint got a vision you don’t know where you are going or what you are about.

There is controversy at the moment about whether the England football team should continue to take the knee at the Euros. Since the killing of George Floyd, the practice of taking the knee has been a symbol of making a gesture against racism, discrimination and injustice. Premier League teams have started their matches by both teams taking the knee, bending on to one knee before the start of the game. Some supporters have recently been booing the England team for continuing this tradition. Its not clear whether those boos are a reaction to the campaign or, as some are articulating, that the gesture has now either become politicized or lost its effect. Others are claiming that you shouldn’t mix sport with politics and its time to move on and get back to the sport.

As a preacher who often gets criticized with mixing religion and politics, I have a great deal of sympathy with the footballers wanting to make a symbolic stand against injustice. It speaks to me that you cannot compartmentalize aspects of life – this is just sport, this is just economics – we inevitably are more complex beings than that and created to have values, morals, a sense of justice and a desire for freedom.

I find it remarkable and hopeful that these young men are prepared to stand up (by kneeling) to injustice and have a vision for a fairer world.

Revelation starts with a vision – but it is not a vision of certain values, or human rights. It starts with a vision of Jesus. In chapter one John is on the island of Patmos off the present day Turkish coast, and scholars have debated who this John is: one of the apostles, or one who knew the apostles? John gets a vision of Jesus standing before him and telling him to write down what he tells him.

Jesus says: *Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.****18****I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death.*

Throughout history many people have had different visions of the world and how we should live in it. Only 70 plus years ago the Nazis were trying to impose their version of reality on the world of a superior race and the eradication of those who they felt were inferior or detrimental to society.

The values of a secular society cannot be inferred or deduced from a materialistic universe. If you look at nature you see a survival of the fittest to use Darwin’s phrase. It’s a power issue. If we believe we are a decaying piece of matter in a decaying universe and nothing more significant than that, how does it follow that we should live a life of love towards others and that each person should be treated equally and has rights not granted by the state and that could be appealed to against the state?

That’s why Christians start with a vision not of values, or whatever is currently fashionable, but we start with the vision of Christ.

For most people Christ has become a vague mythical figure, but nothing historical. He is someone your gran had a sentimental Holman hunt painting off by her bedside. Not cool now. For others Christ is a comforting figure to who they can have an intimate personal relationship -almost as though Jesus is my boyfriend. The vision of Christ at the start of Revelation maybe comforting but also mind blowing and awesome. Someone you are less likely to snuggle up to and more likely to fall at his feet as though you were dead.

Jesus proclaims himself to be ‘The first and the last, the beginning and the end’ -the one who is ultimate reality, who by his life, death and resurrection reveals to us the heart of God, the passion of God, the values of God, the God who by definition is ultimate reality. You can dream up whatever values you want and live whatever life you want. Sometimes that will clash against the conformity of your culture and society, but at the end of the day Christians believe that Jesus Christ is the first and the last, the living One who holds the keys of life and death.

I hope we would believe that racism is not acceptable, that discrimination is not acceptable, that we must struggle against injustice - because that is the vision of God, we see in Christ – not because we want to play at culture wars and be seen as woke or not. We want to be against those things because Jesus was against those things and Jesus is ultimate reality.

If a church loses sight of who Jesus is and why he matters, then we are lost – drifting like many in society.

Which is why in the first letter to the churches to which the Book of Revelation was written, to the church in Ephesus, the Lord says this is what I hold against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first.

The seven letters to the churches kick off with the one for Ephesus. That is no surprise as Ephesus was the dominant city and its stunning remains are a highlight of any tour of Western Turkey. There is however no church there today, which adds poignancy to John’s concern to avoid complacency.

The church featured much to praise. It was sound on doctrine, good at choosing leaders wisely, persistent, and positive. But they had lost their love.

What does it mean to lose your first love?

Here it seems to mean about what people actually do. ‘Repent’ says Jesus, ‘and do the things you did at first’. Love in the early Christian sense is something you do, giving hospitality and practical help to those in need, particularly to other Christians who are poor, sick, or hungry. That was the chief mark of the early church. No other ethnic group had ever behaved like this. ‘Love’ of this kind reflecting, they would have said, their vision of God, the love they had seen in Jesus.

John Ellis writes: *‘This probably means they were no longer seeing the practical work that needs to happen in the community to show they mean what they preach. If the church did not look after the poor nobody else was likely to. But it may mean that in church life they were going through the motions without the real enthusiasm that once made them skip along with their risen Lord.*

*Either way the church was in danger of losing its heart. Perhaps we recall wistfully a time when waking up on Sunday morning was a delight because we would soon be in church enjoying a balance of embrace and challenge, sensing a forward momentum in the Kingdom’s cause. Then an inspirational leader left; someone became too powerful; we were hit by a pandemic; or a safeguarding issue. It just didn’t feel the same. If we like the vivid imagery of Revelation: the Devil had lobbed in a grenade.’*

As we start to come back, as we start to get through this pandemic, although who knows whether Freedom Day will be delayed, we all wonder how it will affect our lives and our common life together? Will people be prepared to volunteer and work for the church. It is easy to let this slip. It is easy to settle into a vaguely comfortable existence which puts our own needs first and sometimes last as well. The Ephesian church was challenged to wake up and remember how things used to be, to repent and get back on track to show love for Christ.

Sometimes we need to wait – a few more chapters or a few more years – before the distressing struggles in barren times make much sense. Only grasping God’s new heaven and new earth will prevent the low points of church life being an insoluble puzzle.  Certainly, if our vision is of the church, we will be disappointed – because the church is fallible and weak. We constantly need to go back to the vision of Jesus to inspire, challenge and comfort us.

The church in Ephesus seemed to be rightly concerned for the truth of the gospel, they hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, whoever they are and whatever their innovative strange new ideas and practices were. But in their critical discernment of truth, it seems they have forgotten the very heart of that gospel is love.

Jesus calls them to conquer. The main challenge that these young churches face was the threat of pagan persecution. Indeed, these seven letters seem to be written as part of the Lord’s preparation of these churches for worse to come. They are to conquer, not by fighting back but by following Jesus himself who won the victory through his own patient loving suffering. Some in these churches will suffer. Some will die. All must bear the faith patiently with Jesus and conquer.

The Tree of life is a cross reference to the wonderful garden in the temple of Artemis in Ephesus that was a sacred shrine and a focal point for asylum. If criminals came within a certain distance of it, they would be free of capture and punishment. It is no accident that the book of Revelation finishes with the promise that God too has a paradise, a beautiful garden with the tree of life at its heart. It is no refuge for unrepentant criminals but is the place where the repentant and those who conquer will have the right to eat from the tree of life and so obtain life of a sort which God always intended for humanity and God’s creation – a restoration of Eden. Hold that vision before you and conquer with faith and hope and love.

*From URC Daily devotions* [*https://devotions.urc.org.uk/*](https://devotions.urc.org.uk/)

*Tom Wright Revelation for Everyone, SPCK, 2011*
**Prayers of intercession**

Risen Lord Jesus

The First and the Last. The Living One; The one who was dead, and now is alive for ever and ever,

Grant us faith and hope in you.

If we are weary and discouraged – help us see again a vision of you who was dead but is now alive and rekindle in us hope for the future.

If we are fearful and anxious for the future – help us to trust in you, the living one to lead us into new life and to know the security of faith – that you hold the keys even of death – help us not to be afraid but to take courage – you are close.

As you appeared to John in Revelation so reveal yourself to us we pray, through prayer, your word, and in the events and encounters with friends and strangers. Renew our vision of who you are and your purposes for our world. Help us recover our first love.

Thank you for those who show us what your Church could be like
Give us discernment to see where corruption creeps in
Forgive us when corruption creeps in through us
Help us to conquer what needs to be conquered
So that your light will shine brightly through us
Like a light from a golden lampstand.

God of the rich and the poor, of the powerful and the vulnerable,
we pray for the leaders of the G7 nations meeting in Cornwall,
for the people they govern,
for the people of other nations they can support,
and for the world they can protect through their decisions. Give them a clear vision of a future world, based on compassion for all and a desire for equality and inclusivity.

We give thanks for pledges to deal with taxing tech companies and commitment to girls education and supporting the developing world in vaccinations. We pray for concerted action to tackle the climate crisis and to smooth international co-operation especially between Britain and Europe.

We pray for those in sport,
for those they inspire,
for the enjoyment they bring,
especially all the nations taking part in the Football Euros,
for those preparing for and hoping that the Olympic Games will take place,
for all those at grass roots level struggling to keep their clubs going.

May sport unify and bring people together in fun and shared emotions. Prepare us for the inevitable heartbreak of watching England lose. At least Wales and Scotland know they haven’t got a chance and are just there for the fun of it.

Like the churches in Revelation help us all to find the resources of endurance and resilience, to remain faithful to your vision of a better fairer world, to keep on loving, and keep before us the love of Christ, first and last,

In his name we ask these prayers

Amen

**A sending out prayer**

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord