# The Living One

Series: The Lamb Wins - Revelation
Date: 4 October 2026, 17th Sunday after Trinity
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: Daniel 7:1-14; Revelation 1

In the young adults Bible study we've had some of the older saints at St George's come and share a bit of their journey of faith. This week we had Anne visit. She told us that her first day at Collegiate when she was 5 was St Michael's day. Michael is the archangel and head of God's army of angels. Anne said that at the St Michael's day service she heard the reading from Revelation 12:

> 7 Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back.

She was very excited about this war in heaven and went home and told her 3 year old sister Jenny. That night Jenny woke everyone in the house after having a bad dream about the war in heaven!

Today we're starting a new series on Revelation and I feel like Anne and Jenny's reactions illustrate the two main ways people approach this book. On the one hand they can find it terrifically exciting, and may even get a little obsessed with it and what it might be saying, especially about current world politics and the immediate future. On the other, people can find Revelation very strange and terribly confusing and find it best simply to ignore it.

Revelation is one of the strangest and most difficult books of the Bible to read. It is jam packed with vivid word pictures that can be hard to understand. The great Reformation theologian Martin Luther famously didn't think it should be part of the Bible, although he later reversed his position.

Revelation is however universally accepted by the Church as part of God's written Word. And the book has a powerful message for people through the ages, namely that no matter how bad things get in this world, and how much it looks like evil is winning, actually Jesus is on the throne of history. And he will triumph over evil and bring in restored creation where we will be with God forever. That victory won't be through military might, but in fact it has already been won through his suffering love on the cross. And so we only need to trust him, be faithful to him and persevere no matter what comes because that hope is secure. It's why I've called this series, The Lamb Wins.

I've not studied Revelation in depth, so I'm really excited to try to make sense of Revelation with you. Today we're going to look at chapter 1 and the clues it gives on how to interpret the book, and then we'll put these to work in reading the first vision.

## What kind of book is Revelation?

We won't be able to understand Revelation if we don't pay attention to the kind of literature it is. Fortunately the book tells us with literally the first word. Read with me verse 1:

> The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place.

That word "revelation" in Greek is ***apocalypse***. Now, when we hear the word apocalypse we think about the end of the world in cataclysmic events, think your classic disaster movie. But that's not what the word apocalypse means in Greek. The word means "unveiling", or, "revelation", hence the title of the book in English. When the word is used in the Bible it means the unveiling of a heavenly perspective on earthly realities. Apocalyptic is a genre of writing that several books of the Bible use, like our first reading from Daniel. It invites readers to see the world from God's perspective. To step behind the veil of history and to see what is really going on. We usually see the world through the lens of the culture and politics of our particular time and location. The book of Revelation is going to open our eyes to God's reality and this will reframe our experience of the present. This vision of the world comes directly from God, and is given to Jesus who in turn showed his servant who has written it down for us.

If we keep reading we get our second clue on how to interpret Revelation.

> He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ²who testifies to everything he saw – that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

The phrase "he made it known", is a translation of the Greek verb *semaino.* The noun of this word is *semeion,* which means "sign" or "**symbol**". So the King James version translates this as "signifies it". But this word tells us what we can expect to find as we read the book - lots of highly symbolic language! Revelation has the most vivid word pictures in the Bible. Having a go drawing them could be a fun way to listen to each sermon in this series!

The question is, how are we to understand this symbolic language? The first thing to say is ***symbolically not literally!*** The most common mistake that people make when interpreting Revelation is to assume it's talking about the future, and to say that the symbolic language points to, usually, current geo-political events.

I used to work in a Christian bookstore and I remember seeing on the shelf a book called *Babylon Rising*, which was all about how Sadam Hussein was rebuilding Babylon in fulfilment of the prophecies in Revelation. Except that I noticed this book on this discount shelf because it was after the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and Sadam's execution.

Before we see the symbolic language pointing to the future, we have to remember that Revelation is the last book of the Bible. It draws on images from every single other book of the Bible, and especially the Old Testament. I counted over 40 references or allusions to the Old Testament in chapter 1 and I'm sure I'm missing some. The key to understanding the symbols is to use the rest of the Bible to interpret them.

We get a third clue on how to read Revelation in verse 3.

> Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.

Revelation is also a book of **prophecy**. The author John sees himself as the climax of the whole prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. He draws on all the Old Testament prophets but he reinterprets them in light of their fulfilment in the victory of the Messiah Jesus.

We can see this in verse 1 when he says that God has given him this vision, "**to show him what must soon take place.**" This is an adaptation of a quote from Daniel chapter 2. In Daniel 2 the prophet Daniel interprets a dream by Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon. There a rock smashes a giant statue and fills the whole earth. And Daniel says, this rock is a kingdom from God that will replace all other kingdoms and endure forever. Daniel said that "God has shown the king what will take place in the future."[1] John picks up this phrase and says, "it's soon!" In fact, when he says in verse 3, "the time is near", he is quoting Jesus himself, who says, "The time has come, the kingdom of God has come near!"[2]

So Revelation is prophecy, but it draws on and interprets all the prophecy of the Old Testament, which it sees fulfilled in Jesus, who has come, and who will come again. It's from God, but it is also an extraordinary literary masterpiece carefully crafted by John. It is prophecy in the two ways the Bible uses the word, both ***foretelling*** the future, but also, and perhaps more importantly, ***foretelling*** God's word for the present.

And this brings us to the third genre that helps us interpret Revelation. Read with me verse 4: "John, To the seven churches in the province of Asia:"

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[1] Daniel 2.45
[2] Mark 1.15

Revelation is a **letter** from John to seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, what we would now call western Turkey. These are named in verse 11: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.
In chapters 2 and 3 we read John speaking specifically to the situation of each of the churches to whom he was writing. This tells us that like all the other New Testament letters, this book was written to a specific audience in their time and place. That it was regarded by the early church as divinely inspired and authoritative for all Christians means it speaks to Christians in every age. But it also means that John did not have Napoleon, or Hitler, or the Soviet Union, or AI in mind when he wrote down what he saw, just to name some of the things people have said Revelation was about.

Revelation is a letter, using the apocalyptic prophecy to show the churches in Asia minor in the late 1st century and Christians in every age the reality that Jesus is on the throne of history.

**Who wrote Revelation?**
Ok, let's just briefly touch on who wrote Revelation. He names himself as John in verse 1, the servant of Christ. In verse 9 he says he is," your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus", and he "was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus."
Patmos is just off the coast of Ephesus, and John had been exiled there because of his faith in Christ. He clearly knew the churches in Asia well. As their brother and companion he sees the suffering, kingdom and patient endurance all bound up in each other. Irenaeus, writing in about 180 said that his teacher Polycarp who was martyred in 156 was taught by the apostle John, Jesus' beloved disciple, who he says wrote the Gospel, the letters of John and Revelation. John wrote Revelation at the end of his life around AD 90.

Ok, so we've looked at those interpretive keys to Revelation, let's look at how the symbols and the Old Testament references work as we read verses 4-20.

In verses 4-5 John gives a **Trinitarian greeting**.

> Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, [5] and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

This description of God the Father as the **one who is, who was and who is to come** alludes to God's revelation to Moses in the burning bush as "I am who I am". This speaks of God's eternity and self existence. He is not dependent upon anything outside himself. He is the

beginning and the end of all things. This description is repeated in verse 8, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, who is, who was, and who is to come, the Almighty." "Who is to come", speaks not only about God's eternal future existence, but that his future is coming to the world in judgement and salvation. The world's future is bound up in God's coming.

The seven spirits is a symbolic reference to the **Holy Spirit**. Here we see one of Revelation's favourite numbers: Seven. This is an obvious reference to the 7 days of creation and the number 7 represents fullness or completeness. The 7 churches then as well as being 7 actual churches are also symbolic of the Church universal. The seven spirits also alludes to Zechariah 4 where the prophet has a vision of the temple with 7 lamps, which the angel tells him represent the Spirit. So we read in Zechariah 4.6: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty."

Jesus is obviously named. The titles "faithful witness", "firstborn", and "ruler of the kings of the earth", are all taken from Psalm 89.27 and 37. We're then brought to the foot of the cross:

> To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, [6] and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

A kingdom and priests - that's a reference to Exodus 19.6. It's who ancient Israel were called to be, and it is who Jesus has made the Church to be, so that we fulfil Israel's vocation.

Verse 7 quotes Daniel 7.13 and Zechariah 12.10.

> Look, he is coming with the clouds,'
> and 'every eye will see him,
> even those who pierced him';
> and all peoples on earth 'will mourn because of him.'
> So shall it be! Amen.

Daniel sees one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds and being given authority, power and sovereign power over all nations forever. It's Jesus' favourite title for himself. The quote from Zechariah reminds us that this eternal king is the one whose broken body hung on the cross, pierced by a Roman spear. He will be seen, not just by Israel as in Zechariah, but now by all peoples. It's a blend of Jesus' first coming, and his second coming in glory.

Ok, let's have a look at John's vision.

> [12] I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, [13] and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his

> chest. [14] The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were
> like blazing fire. [15] His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was
> like the sound of rushing waters. [16] In his right hand he held seven stars, and coming
> out of his mouth was a sharp, double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining
> in all its brilliance.

Here again we're back in Daniel 7 with one like a son of man. But now he looks like the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 with his white hair.[3] The feet of glowing bronze is like Ezekiel's vision of the one on the heavenly throne[4], and his voice, like the sound of rushing waters, is like the voice of the Almighty in Ezekiel.[5] The double-edged sword coming out of his mouth recalls Isaiah 11.4 and 49.2, where "he will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth" and "he made my mouth like a sharpened sword".

When John sees this overwhelming figure he falls at his feet as though dead. And with tender care the figure places his hand on John and 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 and Hades.

The one who he has seen is none other than the Lord Jesus, who died but now lives forever. John sees him in his glory, what he had only glimpsed so many years before at the transfiguration.

And like the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel before him, Jesus now commissions John for his task.

> [19] 'Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.

What you have seen refers to the visions that John will see. What is now and what will take place later refers to the content of John's visions. Again it's a reference to Daniel 2 and that vision of the coming kingdom of God that is fulfilled in Jesus as the Messiah. The end has begun. It began in the coming of Jesus, in his death and resurrection, but it will only be complete when he returns in glory to judge the living and the dead. So Revelation is the unveiling of world history from the time of Jesus' death to his return.

And in the final verse of the chapter, Jesus tells us how we are to interpret at least some of the symbolic language.

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[3] Daniel 7.9
[4] Ezekiel 1.27
[5] Ezekiel 1.24, 43.2

> [20] The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

You might recall from Exodus that the high priest tended the lampstand with 7 lamps in the Holy Place. In this vision, Jesus shows himself as a high priest tending the lamps in the temple, but the lamps are churches, and from Zechariah we know that these lamps are empowered by the Spirit. And here Jesus says each church has an angel representing it before his throne.

What an extraordinary picture. If Revelation is meant to give a heavenly perspective on earthly realities, what an amazing picture of the Church, of our church. We look pretty weak and frail and ordinary as this motley crew of people meet together to worship on the Lord's Day. What is God's perspective? The Living One, who has freed us from our sins by his blood, who has conquered death, whose kingdom fills the earth, shining in all the brilliance of his glory, he walks among us. He has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve God. And he has given each church and angel to help us. And when we meet to worship, we join with the angels in heaven in giving praise to our risen King, even now. Amen.