

Christ is the Lord who rules from heaven
Revelation 4-5

When the COVID pandemic hit, some said 2020 is the year God forgot. Since then, the world seems to have only gotten worse.

In the railway line of history, did God hop off the train at 2019?

Many are anxious to give us the impression they can explain the world and its affairs. The ABC, the BBC, CNN; The Sydney Morning Herald, The Guardian, and The Australian; are all well staffed with commentators who offer analyses and evaluations of every aspect of life.

Yet, sometimes it's hard to make sense of this world.

The world is arguably experiencing more instability, volatility and chaos than it has for a long time.

We seem to be living through a unique, era-defining period. Many of our old certainties have gone. The COVID pandemic has been unsettling. It's had the potential to be the worst pandemic ever;

Fortunately, in our corner of the world the scale so far has fallen short of the original predictions. But, never before have we experienced the lockdown of cities; even the lockdown of entire countries; the banning of travel; the shutdown of all, but essential services. On news broadcasts, we've seen empty shelves in supermarkets, empty sports stadiums, and empty churches. Jobs and businesses have been at risk.

And fear has stalked the world, the likes of which we haven't seen for many, many decades. Many people have felt an increased sense of vulnerability.

We were all used to a fairly stable world. But now that appears to have crumbled away. People fear for their health, fear for their families, fear for their food supplies, fear for their jobs, and fear for their economic security amongst other things.

But, it hasn't just been the pandemic, has it!?

A number of epic crises have compounded together.

War has broken out in Europe for the first time since World War II.

Russia's had no regard for innocent civilian life. We've seen barbaric atrocities. Likewise, China is also acting more aggressively than ever before.

And this has triggered a number of global supply problems; Global energy shortages; increasing inflation; increased cost of living pressures; And the risk of a cyclical economic recession or depression.

In most Western nations political polarisation and fragmentation has also become more intense, with no clear end in sight. Waves of protests against racial injustice; and calls for action on climate change and revolutionary social change are strong, but with little consensus on the way forward.

There's been a growing tribalism that reveals a culture in which there's a vacated centre; and a loss of social trust that appears to be undermining all the institutions that've held our society together.

And so, the fear, and pessimism and anxiety that our world is experiencing now isn't likely to be dispelled anytime soon.

It's no wonder, in a world of chaos and trouble; in a world with so much evil, death and suffering, that many of us are left feeling exhausted; many of us are left feeling tired and weary. Some of us might even feel like giving up.

It's in times like these we need reassurance that God's in control; and that He hasn't forgotten us.

In the railway line of history, did God hop off the train back in 2019? Has God forgotten us?

Well, today we turn to Revelation chapters 4 and 5. They're two incredible chapters of the Bible. They make two points. And their purpose is to reassure us God is in control.

You see, the original recipients of the book of Revelation were also facing dire circumstances. They also found their lot in life very perplexing. Yet, the writer, the Apostle John, wanted them to see the chaos of life in its proper context; the context of heaven.

Now, imagine you're walking along a beach when you notice a girl swimming not far from shore; and then, in horror, you see a shark approaching her. You shout for help, but no one listens. The other people

around you see what's happening but seem completely unconcerned. So, you run towards the lifesavers tower to get help; but there you see a big, black chair with one word written on the back of it; in capital letters; DIRECTOR. A man sits on it with a big cigar and a loud voice, shouting instructions through a megaphone. You heave a sigh of relief; you've stumbled across a film set. The director has everything under control.

Now, that's the effect of the vision in Revelation chapters 4 and 5.

The Apostle John shares with us his vision behind the scenes into heaven itself.

Read with me, chapter 4, verse 1.

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet [that's Jesus' voice] said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this."

And what John saw in heaven teaches us that whatever the circumstances in life; whatever the appearances; no matter how dire; no matter how desperate; God is in control.

Which brings us to our first point.

In Revelation chapter 4 we see that God rules over the universe from heaven.

You see there is a throne in heaven and it's not empty.

Read with me verses 2.

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

In his vision, John's given a revelation; an insight; into what's actually happening at the very centre of the universe.

The dominating picture is of a throne with someone on it.

This throne is picture language; it's a symbol of the sovereignty, majesty and kingly rule of God.

Now, there's a widespread conviction in our culture today that there's nothing at the centre of the universe.

In fact, this represents a problem for some scientists if everything happens by random chance.

Stephen Hawking, in his famous book, *A Brief History of Time*, asks, “*Why should the universe go to all the bother of existing?*”

But, it’s not blind forces that control our destiny. We’re not victims of fate or chance or luck.

The point in Revelation 4 is that behind the scenes of everything that exists and happens in this world is the throne of God.

Often Christians get bogged down trying to work out every little detail of every image in Revelation, **but then miss the big point.**

The focus in this vision in chapter 4 is on God. **God is ruling the universe from heaven.**

Now, that's good news; reassuring news for us in a world of chaos.

Let me illustrate.

I like to fry an egg with the lid off. I need to be able to see the egg. But, there are better cooks than me, like my wife, who don't need to see the egg.

By faith, based on evidence from past events, she knows the egg will cook. She rests assured that all will be well.

Now, in the same way, for the Christian believer, there's no apparent sight of the throne of God. The sky seems closed off; and yet it's not closed off

for us. By faith, based on evidence from past events, we know about God and his rule.

The evidence of past events, Christ's death, resurrection and ascension are enough.

We've also seen the worldwide church grow over 2000 years, despite chaos and troubles in every generation.

By faith, we can see God working his purposes out. We can see God is ruling.

And so, like cooking an egg, we can be assured all will be well. Because God's rule is eternal, every other power; every other throne can be shaken; but never that of God. His throne is permanent and secure. His rule is eternal. God will be worshipped by his church and the whole creation for eternity; forever.

Read with me from verse 9.

*Whenever the living creatures give glory, honour, and thanks to him on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever, the twenty-four elders fall down before him who sits on the throne and worship him who lives forever and ever. They lay their crowns before the throne and say,
"You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being."*

The picture in these verses is of endless praise. Now, endless worship is only possible because God's rule is eternal. So, even though, God's people must endure many trials on this earth, no trial is unbearable when we see our hardships in their proper context; the context of heaven; no trial is unbearable when we have the assurance this world isn't out of control, but is under the control of the One who sits on the throne in heaven.

In fact, the trials of life don't mean the throne is empty; that no one's in charge. Instead, these trials are part of the 'Movie Director's' plan (metaphorically speaking).

Which brings us to our second point.

We see in Revelation chapter 5 that Christ shares God's rule over the universe from heaven.

We can be reassured God is control. He does have a plan for this world.

In our passage, this is symbolised by the scroll in his hand.

Read with me chapter 5, verse 1.

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals.

But, what is God's plan for the world written on this scroll? Does history have a plot? Does the suffering of God's people have any meaning or purpose? What is the future of the church?

And who can make sense of our existence and destiny?

Can any of the wisest men who've ever lived? Plato? Socrates? Albert Einstein? Can they explain life to us?

Unfortunately, no!

Read with me from verse 2,

And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?”

But, no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.

I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.

Now, it's nearly 2000 years since the book of Revelation was written. In that time the church has spread across the world. It is now the largest religion in the world.

So, it can be hard for us to appreciate the Apostle John's anxiety that caused him to weep loudly when no one could open the scroll and reveal God's plan for the future.

But imagine your country is fighting in WWII. Imagine Hitler's armies have invaded your land. Each morning when you turn on the radio, one anxious question would flood your mind. Who is winning the war? You'd be anxious about the future of your nation. Will you survive the war on the winning team?

For the Apostle John and the original recipients of the book of Revelation, that's how they felt.

The Roman Empire was breathing down their necks. They felt like they were on the losing side. So, they were anxious about the future of God's people, the church.

But, the good news is there is one person who can reveal God's plan; there is one person who can give us hope for the future in the midst of hardship and suffering now.

Read with me verse 5.

Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

So, who is this great Lion? It was a Lion who'd been slain, like a Lamb. Well, it's Jesus of course!

Read with me verse 6.

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne.

But notice also, we're given a picture of Christ sharing God's rule over the universe from heaven.

The Lamb was standing at the centre of the throne.

And so, as the One who shares God's rule, Christ alone is qualified to reveal God's plan and make sense of our world.

Look how Jesus takes the scroll from God the Father.

Read with me verse 7.

He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne.

Now, not every answer to every one of our questions about life is given.

But, what is revealed is the Cross of Christ is the key to understanding the history of the world, including the chaos!

The Cross of Christ is the key!

Read with me verses 9 and 10.

*And they [God's people] sang a new song,
Saying,
“You are worthy to take the scroll and open its seals, because you were slain ...”*

The Cross is the key because it unlocks God's eternal plans for world history.

The Cross gives true significance to our existence;

Now, how is the Cross the key to history and understanding life?

Well, the Cross reveals the victory of the One on the Throne in heaven.

Christ has defeated evil.

Sure, not all of God's enemies acknowledge this yet. But, God is not sitting in heaven biting his nails, wondering what's going to happen to his chosen people.

He's in absolute control on his throne.

The future of God's people is bright despite present setbacks; because the triumph of the church is tied to the triumph of Christ;

Keep reading verse from verse 9

you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God persons from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth.

That's the future of the church!

What God is doing against the backdrop of the chaos in world history is to call a people who will rule the world with Christ.

That's why we must always preach Christ and his Cross. People despair in our postmodern culture. They think life is meaninglessness. Life has no objective truth, no destiny, no purpose. And so when they see the evil and suffering in the world, they become anxious, they despair. Because what hope is there for the future? They have no certainty of anything.

Now, too many pulpits are full of nothing but motivational speakers, and sermons full of stories of larger-than-life individuals meant to inspire us.

But, what are those individuals compared to the King of Kings; the Lord of all; Jesus Christ is the truly victorious one.

And through his victory on the Cross, we too are victors.

Evil and suffering are not the end of the story.

One day God's people will rule the world with Christ.

So, we must never stop preaching the Cross. Only the Cross makes sense of our lives. Only the Cross makes sense of our chaotic world.

So, our big question was

Has God forgotten us? In the railway line of history, did God hop off the train back in 2019?

The answer is no. Christ shares God's eternal rule over the universe from heaven, so victory over evil and suffering is guaranteed.

So, we must never allow ourselves to interpret what's going on around us in the world, the perplexing circumstances, to be interpreted solely in terms of the social or political realities of the world. There's more to reality than appearances. The world isn't spinning out of control.

At the centre of the world isn't an impersonal chemical reaction, or chance, or randomness. The future isn't anonymous. The future isn't empty.

The future isn't meaningless. Nor is the world under the control of a virus.

I learnt at med school that corona means crown.

But, there's a higher crown, a crown worn by One who shares God's throne in heaven.

So, the future is bright! At the centre of everything is a throne, and on that throne sits a Sovereign God who rules the world, who is in control.

And so, we're called to ultimately trust in nothing other than Christ on his throne.

And we can trust that He's controlling things to a good end because we're placing ourselves into the care of the One who was slain for us.

So, don't grow weary; don't grow tired; don't give up.

But, keep the faith; keep trusting in God and his perfect rule.

We don't know every detail about what the future holds; but we know who holds the future.

And we're on his victorious side.