

Revelation chapter 1

So, there we were, just Liz and myself and 4998 of our closest friends in the main tent at the Keswick Convention.

“Look,” said Liz, “Over there! It’s him, Oh, what was his name? You know married to thingummy. Oh, you know – he did the prayers at our wedding!”

“Oh, yes, I know who you mean, yes - Whatsit! Where?”

And I followed where Liz was pointing and there sure enough was What’shisname, the husband of Thingummy who did indeed lead the prayers at our wedding.

Now, in all fairness our wedding was 15 years ago, but it didn’t take us long to recall their names; Chris and Christine and although Chris was a little greyer (and who am I to comment on that?) it was definitely them. It was wonderful after all that time to go over and say hello and reintroduce ourselves to each other, catch up and make the commitment to meet up again.

And Revelation 1 marks a wonderful reunion too, but it is totally different. We encounter John, the “disciple whom Jesus loved” now in his 90’s seemingly living out his days exiled to the prison island of Patmos off the coast of modern day Turkey.

It is probably about 50 years since John saw the risen Lord Jesus and a lot has happened in that time, the Church has grown, flourished but also faced increased and intense persecution. John himself tells us that the reason he is on Patmos is “because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” in other words, John is there because of his refusal to stop telling people about Jesus, he is (as he tells the recipients of this letter) there “brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.”

And it is here that John has a dream, more than a dream a God inspired vision whilst he is full of the Holy Spirit as real as our reality and in it he is reunited with Jesus in all his glory and splendour and majesty.

Now, I have to confess that I had a quick search online for pictures of Jesus as described in Revelation 1 and none of them were particularly helpful – most of them look like some sort of country and western singer who has mastered the art of levitation, so you will have to use your imagination.

The reality is that when John turns around to see who the owner of the loud voice speaking to him is he finds himself face to face with Jesus but there is no jolly handshake or backslap, no informal blokey hug, John realises in whose presence he is; the risen Lord Jesus and he tells us that he fell at Jesus' feet as if he were dead.

I wonder how we think we will react when we meet Jesus? I suspect that we think we will react differently to how we will. We have some wonderful privileges; Paul tells us in Romans 8:15 that we can call God "Abba", which has the intimate meaning of "Daddy" and the writer of Hebrews says that we can even "approach the throne of grace with confidence" (Heb 10:25) whilst Paul adds that we can "approach God with freedom and confidence" (Ephesians 3:12).

But I would argue that there is a world of difference between confidence and swagger, or arrogance, or even over familiarity. We might think that we will stroll into God's presence, but when the moment comes I suspect that our attitude will be very different and John, the closest of Jesus' friends sets us the example.

You see, one of the wonderful things that you get by going to the Keswick Convention, as opposed to any other Christian conference or convention in this country that I can think of, is that you are surrounded by the mountains and lakes of Cumbria.

There is nothing like watching the sunlight glint of Buttermere, or set behind Catbells, or seeing the clouds catch on the peak of Blencathra before they settle in for the night. God's creation is truly breathtaking, truly awesome, truly amazing. But what we need to remember is that it is only the creation, not the creator.

When we come face to face with the creator himself the creation will look paltry by comparison, don't you think?

That's what John struggles so admirably to describe in the Jesus he sees, the Jesus whose presence causes him to fall at his friend and Saviour's feet as if he were dead. John says he saw,

"...someone like a son of man, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

It's no wonder human pictures look weak or weird, they just don't have the depth or ability to portray what John tries to squeeze into a few words. The reality is that Jesus is God and God is bigger than we can imagine.

Now that amazing reality is not reserved for the Apostle John, or even just Christians.

John tells us (because it is revealed to him in his vision and Jesus himself told us that it would happen) that everyone will see Jesus in all his glory. John gives us a hint of that at the beginning of his letter when he writes in verse 7,

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

Now, why on earth will people mourn when they see Jesus in all his glory? Well, we go back to the events of a week before last. For a week the streets of some of our cities were filled with rioters, mugging, looting, attacking and burning.

Now, why didn't it happen last week too? A sudden attack of conscience? A realisation that it just wasn't right? No, I think that it had a large amount to do with the change in police tactics, the increase in police numbers, the realisation that city centre CCTV was pretty good and the news that about 3000 people had been arrested on charges relating to the riots and stiff sentences were being handed out by the courts almost immediately.

People's hearts weren't changed, just the out-working of their hearts because they suddenly began to fear the consequences of their actions. Prior to that it had looked as though they would get away with their crimes but suddenly everything changed and when it looked as though they might get caught they stopped acting in a lawless manner.

So, Revelation 1 tells us that on the day when Jesus returns in glory the world will be going about its business, careless of the consequences, as the Psalmist puts it more than once, “the fool says in his heart “there is no God”” (Psalm 14:1 & 53:1) that has always been the attitude and sadly it will be until the day when Jesus comes in glory.

But then on that day the fool who has denied God's existence and just and righteous authority will have incontrovertible evidence before him; every eye will see him, no one will be able to deny the sovereignty, the holiness and the authority of Jesus. On that day our chickens will come home to roost.

There have been many who thought that they got away with it. They went into our city centres and plundered their goods. They went home with smart phones, HDTV's, trendy clothing and a 101 other things, but this last week as they slept in their beds their doors were broken down by the police and they were called to account.

That is how it will be, but on a greater and global scale – everyone responsible for the piercing of Jesus – everyone responsible for his death – and that is everyone on the face of this planet, everyone will mourn, everyone will be filled with grief for what they have done to the glorious son of God.

Suddenly sin will lose its appeal, rebellion against God will be revealed for what it is; pointless, empty, unfulfilling. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted" (Matt 5:4) but this is the moment of judgement when comfort will no longer be an option. Harsh? Would justice be served if unrepentant rioters were allowed to go free from the dock because judges were supposed to be nice people?

No, this mourning on the Day of the Lord for sin is not repentance, it is guilt for having been caught in the act and remember sin is nothing less than ignoring God in our hearts and lives.

But there will be those for whom the coming of Jesus in glory is not all bad news - look at the contrast, look at how Jesus responds to John.

In the eyes of the world John is a criminal, he's certainly been thrown into a criminal environment; a prison island, he's been locked up for his subversive and radical preaching; remember he is on Patmos because of "the word of God and the testimony of Jesus". John has been doing the uncool thing, the hard thing, the unpopular thing; being a follower of Jesus and he has paid the price.

The rest of the world has mocked, sidelined and actively persecuted him along with his brothers and sisters in Christ. Remember that in verse 9 John describes himself to the recipients of the letter as, "your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus."

John has mourned for his sin, he has repented and trusted in Jesus death and resurrection to pay for them and he endeavoured to live a life full of God's Holy Spirit; a life marked by his love of God, his love for his brothers and sisters in Christ and his love for those who needed to hear the Good News of Jesus. John has suffered for his faith, but he has patiently endured it all because he knew that he was now a citizen of the Kingdom of God because of Jesus' forgiveness.

And so, when John comes face to face with the risen Christ he still falls to the ground because Jesus is still glorious and amazing to him, but what does Jesus do? It is beautiful and tender. The mighty and majestic creator of the universe in all his holy splendour stoops down and in verse 17 we read he placed his right hand on John and says, "Do not be afraid."

Isn't that lovely? Isn't that precious? That is what allows us to have confidence before God and to call him our Daddy, the reassurance that in his presence we need not be afraid.

And Jesus tells us why in verse 17 and 18; he is God, the first and the last, the alpha and the omega, the A and the Z the beginning and the end.

He is the Living One who was dead. He was nailed to the cross, he died for John's sin and your sin and my sin and the sins of the rioters and of everyone. If we will mourn our sins now, if we will repent, if we will hand ourselves in to God and cast ourselves upon his grace and mercy now we will find forgiveness and hope and a future, how?

Because Jesus holds the keys to death and hell, he has conquered death and has authority over it and he is the Lord over Hell too, not Satan, it is Jesus who knows who will be with him forever in God's Kingdom and Jesus who knows who will be in hell for ever because they have at heart remain rebels and rioters against the Almighty.

One day every eye will see Jesus just like John did and every knee will bow just like John's did. Every heart will mourn, but some will mourn for sins forgiven and some will mourn that they have simply been caught.

When that great and terrible, joyful and glorious day comes what will be revealed in our hearts?

I know that I have much to do in my life to even be more like John, to love and serve and lead like him, what about you? But sinner that I am I know that I have been forgiven by Jesus, do you? Not through anything I have done, but through everything he has done and it breaks my heart that he had to die on the cross because of my rebellious nature, are you mourning for your sin too?

I hope so, because if that is the cause of our mourning; if we take our sin seriously, our repentance seriously, God's forgiveness through Christ alone seriously, his amazing love and grace seriously and if we take our service of God seriously then as, one day, we kneel before the Son of God we can be confident that he will stoop down to us and lovingly place his hand on us and say those words which will then allow us to run into the precious arms our Abba YHWH, Daddy God, because Jesus will say to us, "Do not be afraid."