

Good morning everybody! My name is John Mills and I am a retired university lecturer living in Tampere and since 2001 a Lay Reader in the Anglican Church in Finland, currently serving in the ICCK in Tampere. Thank you for the opportunity to share with you this morning.

In fact my connection with this congregation is much older. I first came to Finland in 1977 and married my Finnish girlfriend Maija-Leena in 1978. We lived in Kerava for nine years and had two children and during that time regularly attended the Anglican Church services which were then held in the Chapel on the Cathedral steps. Then in 1987 the whole family left Finland to work with the Church Mission Society in theological training in Sierra Leone in West Africa. During that time the Chaplaincy was one of our supporting churches and we kept in close touch and visited when we were on leave. In 1996 we returned to Finland to live in Kuopio. In 2016 I retired from my teaching work in Kuopio to live in Tampere, where my son still lives.

Of the four Biblical texts we just heard, I wonder what you were expecting me to preach on today. Usually here in Finland the preacher bases their sermon on the Gospel text and of course there are often very good reasons for doing this. But I think there are also very good reasons for sometimes choosing one of the other texts. After all as Anglicans we believe the whole of the Bible is the Word of God and there are 62 other books in the Bible besides the Gospels and 23 other books in the New Testament. In my theological studies I specialised in the Old Testament, and last autumn in Tampere, for example, I preached on the Psalm text. But today I want to focus on the other New Testament text, from the book of Revelation. This is perhaps one of the least read or studied or preached on books of the New Testament.

What do we know about this obscure book? Well, it says at the start that it was written by someone called John, God's servant and a Christian who had suffered persecution. This was probably not John the Apostle, who was behind the Gospel and the Epistles, but someone else. John was a common name then too! He was known to the Christians in the area called Asia Minor, modern Turkey, and was living on the island of Patmos, possibly in exile there for his Christian witness. In any case the style of the language and the ideas in the book are completely different from the other writings linked to the Apostle John. The date is also not certain but according to Bishop Irenaeus, who lived 100 years later, it was written around 96 AD.

The book consists mainly of a series of visions, in some ways similar to books like Daniel in the Old Testament. The descriptions of these visions show a detailed knowledge of the Old Testament, which of course John and his readers would know very well as it was their Bible. We should remember that at this time, organised collecting of the gospels and letters into what we call the New Testament was still going on. Besides many of the early Christians were also Jews.

What about our text today? The first point that becomes clear is that this is a vision of heaven, which John is granted or invited to see. Personally I have never had such a vision, but if I were to have one it would not be because I deserved it or even sought it, but because God decided to grant me the vision and invite me to see it. John describes himself as being "in the Spirit" when he receives this vision. In other words he is perhaps praying and experiencing the love of God when he is granted this special spiritual experience, a vision of heaven.

So what does he see? First he sees a throne and then he sees "one seated on the throne". This must be a roundabout way to refer to God. He then goes on to try to describe the splendour and majesty of God in terms of precious stones, as very often in this book. He uses three: jasper, cornelian and emerald. All of them are different colours and very precious stones used in the ancient world, and today as well, to show the importance of a ruler. So John is trying to give his readers and us a sense of God's majestic kingship, on the throne, and his rule over all.

Next he sees around the throne 24 elders. Who are they? And why are there 24? There are different views about this. But personally I think the 24 represents the 12 patriarchs of Israel from whom the 12 tribes are descended, the 12 sons of Jacob, plus the 12 apostles of the NT. In other words these 24 elders probably represent to John and his readers the whole people of God.

So far this vision or picture is rather static, But then it becomes more dynamic!

**(v5) "Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God"**

The flashes of lightning and peals of thunder remind us of the way the people of Israel received the 10 commandments from Moses coming down from the mountain top. But what are the "seven spirits of God"? In fact this is a way used in the book of Isaiah as well to refer to the one we call the Spirit of God, or the Holy Spirit. Seven is a holy number throughout the Bible.

How are you doing? We need to remember John is using human language to describe heavenly things that are completely beyond his and our own comprehension. So next he says **(v6) "and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal."** Something like? This is one of the most mysterious comparisons and there are many different interpretations.

The last actors in this vision are even more amazing. They are four living creatures:

**(vv6-7) "Around the throne, and on each side of the throne, are four living creatures, full of eyes in front and behind: the first living creature like a lion, the second living creature like an ox, the third living creature with a face like a human face, and the fourth living creature like a flying eagle."**

Whatever does this mean? Well in spite of all the "eyes", it seems fairly clear that these living creatures altogether represent the whole of creation. One is like a lion, the king of wild animals,

another is like an ox, the king of domestic animals, the third has a face like a human face, representing us, and the fourth is like a flying eagle, the king of the air. So as well as the people of God, represented by the 24 elders, we also have in this snapshot of heaven the representatives of the whole of creation.

And what are they doing? In fact the living creatures are, amazingly enough, singing, and it is, in fact, a very familiar song, beginning (v8) **"Holy, holy, holy,"** a song which has been sung from the earliest days of the church, and one form of which we will ourselves sing later in this service. Then the 24 elders join in and as well as singing they fall before the throne, and also **"cast their crowns before the throne"** just as in Charles Wesley's famous hymn, Love Divine.

So what we have in this chapter is a vision of heaven ultimately not so far removed from our own services, in a way, in which we try to give glory and honour to Almighty God who was and is and is to come, singing in our hymns and liturgy songs like **(v.11) "You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."**

But there is one problem. Where is Jesus in all this? Unfortunately we haven't got the time to read the next chapter, chapter 5, in which John's vision is renewed and expanded to include Jesus, the Lamb of God who was slain. I really hope some of you will read that chapter as well, if not the whole of this remarkable book. But to finish I will quote from the last few verses of the next chapter, chapter 5

**(v11-14) "Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:**

**"Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise!"**

**Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:**

**"To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever!" The four living creatures said, "Amen," and the elders fell down and worshipped".**

May we all take this opportunity today to really worship our God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen