

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Further Notes on Revelation

Monday January 5th: Revelation 15: Host Toyin, Lead Miranda: Short introduction to “final” cycle of disasters. There is a lot of injustice in the world, and, particularly if we or our nearest and dearest have been on the receiving end of injustice, we want it sorted. But if we recognise that we also have, even if only occasionally, done injustice, we may have a more balanced view of the Final Judgement. And then it is easy to identify “bad” people; but quite hard to identify “only bad/never good” people. You read the full history of some of the “bad” people, and maybe think “Well, maybe in their circumstances I would have done a bit of what they did”. It would be much simpler if black and white were the whole truth and nothing but the truth...

The victory song reminds us of the Moses/Miriam victory song after the crossing of the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds and [God] defeating the Egyptians. The tent of witness also goes back to the Moses story: the visible sign of God’s presence that the Israelites carried with them during the Exodus journey (after the revelation of the Law on the mountain).

The song echoes the psalms. Whether Old Testament references were carefully looked up or just part of the faith inheritance of John we don’t know. I suspect the latter. People were better at memorising in those days. (Politicians don’t need to keep looking at their manifestos: they know them by heart?)

Angels dressed as priests.

Some of the concepts merit discussion: wrath of God, Divine penalties, Justice, Salvation, For ever and ever, and Glory. Why “sea of glass”?

Wishful thinking, or ultimate reality??

Monday January 12th: Revelation 17: Host Toyin, Lead Oliver: Mainly Babylon/ Rome and its Empire. Names written in the Book of Life – does this mean pre-destination?

Sexual immorality (however defined) is never good; but there is a big difference between the Emperor’s wife choosing to work in a brothel and the child slave working in a brothel. Not least in Rome but in all times and places, a lot of sexual immorality was rich and powerful people exploiting poor and vulnerable people.

From some aspects, Empire (Roman or any other) was a good thing, and better than anarchy. No Roman Empire, and maybe Paul’s missionary journeys would have been impossible. But Roman writers themselves were brave enough to condemn Rome excesses: from drinking powdered pearl and peacock feather throat tickling to make yourself sick and enable more gluttony, to the worst excesses of brutal slavery. (One guess is that the Empire had 60 million slaves.) One Roman described Rome as an open sewer.

Rome did stand on 7 hills. The numbers of rulers can just about be tied in with named rulers (emperors plus subordinate/collaborating kings), but are probably symbolic. Power corrupts, and great power corrupts most? Any examples from history of people in power

not being corrupted? Maybe Julius Nyerere, Nelson Mandela, William of Orange, Gandhi? Bill Gates? Pope Francis?

Monday January 26th: Revelation 18: Host David, Lead Brian: The fall of Rome gets 3 whole chapters. Cities tended to be seen as civilised and civilising in John's day, and the wilderness in between them a bit scary. People were in charge in the cities! The poetic bits of this chapter (e.g. 9-24) show what was being lost – the good as well as the bad. There are echoes of what Solomon brought to Jerusalem in what flooded into Rome. My favourite example of money arrogance in the face of real poverty is the story a few years ago of the gowned Cambridge student burning a £20 note in the face of a homeless man. If you want to hear the real horrors of Roman self indulgence: peacocks brains and nightingales tongues for supper.

What is extravagance? Some weddings? Some cars? If you can afford it, does that mean you are OK doing it? Can a church be so showy as to be extravagant, or are heated altar rails OK because it is a God thing?

The sting is in the tail of the list of imports: exploited humans... no doubt including modern slavery.

Live simply, so that others can simply live?

Monday February 2nd: Revelation 19: Host David, Lead Peta: The marriage of the Lamb. Marriage of heaven and earth, Marriage might seem an odd way of describing our relationship with God; but in the Old Testament Israel is God's bride. Love is at the heart of marriage. Banquet symbolism is also found in the Old Testament. Indeed, John relies so heavily on the Old Testament that it is worth pointing out that while Revelation can seem odd to us, anyone familiar with the Old Testament reading the Book of Revelation would probably feel very much at home.

The angel messenger, not for the last time, has to remind John to worship God, not angels. The man on the white horse is of course Jesus, who puts an end to the monster and the false prophet. The military stuff is modelled on Roman Emperor triumphs, and is in stark contrast to the Jesus naked and unarmed on the cross. Charles I, Napoleon, George II, were little men who had themselves painted on horse-back to add the grandeur they physically lacked. Jesus didn't need all that; and it is interesting that in John's account of the victory over violence Jesus doesn't use His army or His weapons! Messianic expectations varied, and the real Jesus did not match some of the Jewish expectations of the Messiah. Unlike some of His contemporaries, Jesus saw the enemy as the forces of evil – not the Roman Empire.

Surprisingly, this is the one place in the Bible where "Alleluia" (Praise God) appears.

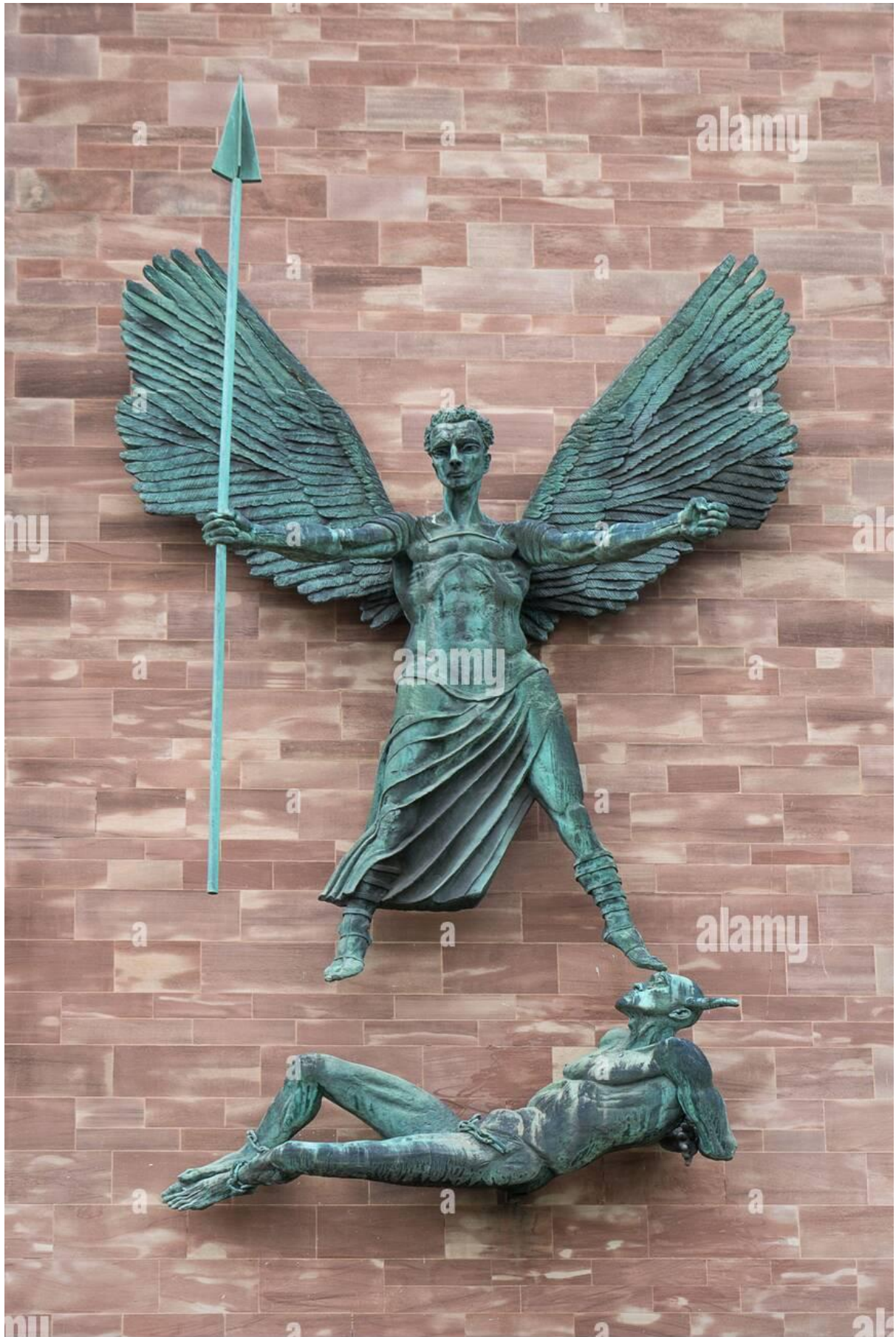
If you have not read C S Lewis's "Last Battle" If you had to draw a picture of Jesus, how would you portray Him? How do you feel about being married to God? PS never get bogged down in the detail of Revelation. It is not meant to be read that way.



Monday February 9th: Revelation 20: Host David, Lead David: A 1000 year wait! This is one of those unexpected Non-endings in Revelation. It seems all over, and then..... \the odd concept of “the first resurrection” This is the only Bible mention of the millennium, and is probably more about God continuing to give us chances than about an historical numbers. If the end is “inevitable”, there would be no point in all these pauses and re-starts. Worth again remembering that judgment and salvation are not straightforward: yes we are saved by grace but our response to that grace matters. Paul’s way of looking at things, and John’s way of looking at things are not irreconcilable. Hang on to the great and the small being together in front of God’s throne.

Ezekiel had drawn pictures much like those of John: including Gog (the nation) and Magog (the ruler).

Reflect on John Donne’s “And death shall be no more”. Heaven is all life!



Above: The Coventry Cathedral Michael and the Devil

Monday February 16th: Revelation 21: Host Andy, Lead Oliver: Everyone (including everyone who has been to a funeral) knows something about this chapter. New heaven and new earth. No sea (the source of chaos). Wipe away every tear – how good is that! All things new: new means transformed? Have you ever had life-changing experiences? – maybe marriage, or having a child? Note that not going to heaven, perhaps more heaven and earth united. It is quite difficult to picture what the transformed life is like; and maybe that is reflected in the “ruling with God” theme: if heaven needs rulers, that seems to imply things could still go wrong, and rulers are needed to prevent this.

Note no Temple. In the full presence of God, we don’t need a special place to remind us of God! Not sure why the City has gates if they are never shut, but the never shut concept appeals. The picture of the New Jerusalem owes a lot to Ezekiel 40-48. If you take the measurements seriously, the City is roughly the size of the Roman Empire. Its cube shape reflects the Holy of Holies. William Barclay makes the telling point that what makes a church is the presence of Christ.

You can get something new out of this chapter every time you read it. What is your favourite passage? One of the missable points is that Genesis has the Tree of Life as out of reach. Revelation has the Tree of Life accessible to all.

Hang on to the essential reality that all this grand stuff does not detract for one moment from the fundamental importance of our minute by minute partnership with God: best use of the here and now is part and parcel of the transformed future. We have A CRUCIAL ROLE IN BUILDING THE KINGDOM. Hence all the confusion between Kingdom come and Kingdom here. It is a work in progress: our work and God’s work.

Monday February 23rd: Revelation 22: Host Andy, Lead Evan: A new Eden. But again remember we can transform the moment, even if we don’t think we can transform the future. I love “the healing of the nations”: we have got used in earlier parts of Revelation to the idea that the nations and their rulers are the problem (and doomed). But here the nations and their rulers are bringing their gifts into the City. Come = Do. Jesus is very clearly God. Not much is said about the Spirit, but John is very much as Trinitarian rather than a Binarian!

Hang on to All is Grace. But ass hearers of the Word we need to go on to be Doers of the Word. We have our marching orders. Revelation is a Letter, not a dream or a forecast. Read, mark, learn and inwardly digest.....AND DO!

What do you take away from this study?