

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 14: Some Notes

You will recognise at least one passage from funeral services: “Blessed are those who die in the Lord” This is meant to comfort the mourners, though the mourners might sometimes wonder whether this is an accurate description of the one they are mourning. John has in mind martyrs, but, perhaps even more. Those who stick with their faith in times and places where this wasn’t a popular thing to do. Many Christians, then and now, are under enormous pressure to give up or at least compromise. But it is worth reflecting yet again on the fact that “heaven” is in the gift of Christ, not based on any human marking system... and Christ is remarkably inclusive!

The 144,000 is one of those special numbers, and perhaps the most disputed. It is a nice round number, but do note that it is a “first fruits” number, not a final total. AND, it really is implausible that “heaven” is reserved for adult male celibates. (On that basis, Peter, Mary of Nazareth, Mary Magdalene, wouldn’t make the grade.) Soldiers ready for battle were supposed not to have sex, and sacrificial animals were supposed to be without blemish, so maybe this helps to explain the picture language. (P.S. if admission to “heaven” depended on being spotless, Peter and Mary Magdalene wouldn’t make the grade – nor the Penitent Thief. No, indeed ANYONE, if Paul is right that we have all sinned and fallen short.)

A lot about music, so if you are looking to “heaven” for music and cricket, at least the music is guaranteed. I think it was the poet Shelley who said “Only those who have felt the pain can sing the song”. That is worth thinking about.

What the Old Testament prophets had written about the real Babylon, John wrote about Rome... and not only John. Others drew the same parallel. Don’t overlook the bit about lots of folk having drunk from the Roman cup. Rome offered a lot: just as the Irish were supposed to think of London as paved with gold. Sin is quite attractive. If it wasn’t, sin would not be problem! (The invitation to crawl down a sewer over broken glass would not attract many volunteers!)

Branding comes up again – both branding as a sign of membership on the good side and branding as a sign of membership of the bad side. In those days, branding (much more painful than a tattoo) was commonly imposed on slaves and captured enemies etc by masters, and volunteered for as a membership sign by members of armies, religions, etc.

The Message Version has a wonderful phrase “passionately patient” to describe those faithful to Jesus. It also offers the memorable sentence “None of what they’ve done is wasted: God blesses for it all in the end”. (Some of you may have read J R Tolkien’s “Leaf by Niggle” – which is about a man who dedicates himself to painting the perfect leaf”. Think of any devoted ministry which will never make the history books, but gets good notices from God.)

There seem to be two harvests: the (corn) harvest of the righteous and the (wine) harvest of the wicked. The vast lake of blood is a bit off-putting! So is the thought of the saved folk really enjoying the eternal suffering of the un-saved folk. It doesn't quite gel with Jesus dying for the good and the bad alike (and for that vast majority who are a bit of both). We can only say that when we hear on radio someone whose nearest and dearest has been tortured to death asking for the death penalty, we kinda sympathise – even if we admire hugely those who manage to forgive.

The Message heading to Chapter 14 is “A Perfect Offering”. BCP lovers will recognise (I quote from memory) “A full, perfect and sufficient offering, oblation and satisfaction”. (Shout if I am wrong.) This was what Jesus offered. We can only do our humble best: the widow's mite.