

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 20

This chapter feels a bit like one of those sermons which has reached a fairly satisfactory conclusion, and then goes on in an unexpected direction – just as you were looking for the next hymn. Everything more or less sorted, and then a thousand year respite period (which proves to be only temporary (though it lasts about ten generations) and only after that the final battle and final solution. If you want to take the chapter literally, when did/does/will the thousand years start? Are we in it or awaiting it? If you are a literalist, and pragmatic, why on earth not dispose of the devil finally rather than locking him up for a long time (hardly likely to improve his temper or change his mind) and then “letting him out” – almost with the implication that he had to let out? (Who said!)

There is a long and tangled and perhaps essentially pointless history here – with theologians arguing the toss over the centuries. There are good Biblical reasons for not taking the 1,000 years literally: this period is commonly used in the Bible to mean a long time (rather than 365,000 or rather less days. While for some Bible writers there was just a beginning and an end and a new beginning, for others there was a Messianic period during which the Jews (rather than the Greeks, Romans, Persians, Assyrians or Babylonians) were the top dogs , and then the end and (maybe) new beginning. Quite a lot of Christians signed up to this idea of a golden age, though with the (currently persecuted) Christians as top dogs: the martyrs and confessors getting their day in the sun, backed up by Jesus. After some generations of this, there needed to be a testing period to make sure that the good folk (including all those converted to goodness) were really up to scratch and would stay loyal in hard times as well as good. The thinkers were well aware that after centuries of grapes and olives and barley and sheep, etc, etc, being there in abundance, people might just be inclined to forget about God rather than thanking Him for His goodness. (Some of the millennium forecasts were of one grape producing several bottles of wine!)

In ordinary human terms, the message that it has got good, but it isn't all over, makes a great deal of sense. The person who has had a cigarette, or alcohol, or drug addiction, or who has struggled with mental health issues, or even the person who has tempting vice of a less clinical sort, knows that constant vigilance is necessary. The “former” alcoholic will, very wisely, say “I am still an alcoholic. I'm just not drinking.” One rather insensitive men's group programme organiser invited someone from Alcoholics Anonymous to give a talk in a pub, and join the men for a drink afterwards.

If you are running a country, running a church, running a business, running a family, running your own life, it really is very silly indeed to fall into the (Jesus' parable) trap of thinking “That's all sorted, now I can relax!” Believe in the devil, or believe in the dark side of human nature, the bad can return. My father was engineer in a factory, and discovered the workers had taken off the safety devices because there had been no accidents for some time, and the devices were an inconvenience. Ever had to nag anyone else, or yourself, to keep up the defences?

The end of Chapter 20, which is about THE END, raises interesting questions. There are two books which help God to settle our future beyond the present life. Now, if you want to believe that behaviour is everything, God needs only the book of deeds. If, on the other hand, you believe in pre-destination, God needs only the book of life – if your name hasn't been written in that, it really doesn't matter what you have said, done, failed to do. We can't base a whole theology of salvation on the references to two books. But those references do seem to give some support to the belief that who we are, what we do or fail to do, and God's infinite love shown especially in Jesus, speak for our time in this world and the next. In the reformed heaven and earth, there is room enough for billions.

The hymn book attributes only two hymns to Chapter 20, but they are 742 and 240: Ye choirs of New Jerusalem, and Guide me, O thou great Redeemer.

Millennium people, in their various guises and sects, do have a keen, and commendable, sense of urgency about preaching the Gospel and about personal reformation. They tend to be less committed to changing society (since society ain't going to be around much longer). I suggest that Christians ought also to have a collective and individual enthusiasm for changing society. God has given us society as well as personality and neighbours... and therefore a range of responsibilities. A Lot of National Trust places that we visit during the Summer represent the vision and effort invested in things that the visionary and investor was not going to live to see. The best of politics and of faith is/are much the same.

