

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 2: Some Notes

This second chapter is a reminder that we are reading a letter (though rather a long letter), with messages for Christian communities in general, and specific messages for seven named Christian communities. Picture a circular letter taken physically from Patmos round the crescent of churches with which John had special links. The four towns/communities named in Chapter 2 – Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira – had particular features, such as a Roman Government HQ, one or more “pagan” temples and particular cults, a special trade, or a powerful group or individual, which provided a context for the local Christians to fit into (or not). But there was a lot of common ground: 1) the Christian community didn’t have its own building, and the dominant buildings were hostile places inasmuch as they represented the (divine) Emperor or some other “deity” or they were auditoria for pagan goings on; 2) the local Jewish community often did have its own building, and a tolerated special status, but Jewish Christians were not necessarily welcome/included; 3) local life, e.g trade associations and civic occasions were closely linked with pagan worship and Emperor worship; 4) sexual morality was kinda lax.

Some of you may have read Rupert Brooke’s scurrilous poem about the various villages around Cambridge, or John Betjeman’s equally colourful portrayal of places he didn’t like (“Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough!”). I’m afraid I can’t readily buy into attempts to sum up Croydon, or Shirley, or Shrublands.... or St George’s.. in a few well-chosen words. And I beg leave to doubt whether John does justice to Ephesus, etc. Remember that each of these “churches” was probably very socially mixed, and probably lacked even the formalities that St George’s has in terms of physical and other structures. Ephesus is thought to have had a population of about 250, 000 at this time. Did the Christians in Ephesus stand out more than the Christians of [40] denominations stand out in Croydon in 2018? Did they differ from each other as much as Croydon Christians differ from each other?

Two very different, indeed opposite, points need to be made in trying to learn for here and now from what happened there and then. First, on the whole, we don’t suffer for our faith as Revelation Christians suffered for their faith – though that is true of the UK. It very definitely isn’t true for very many Christians in many other countries. Second (and again I’m talking about the UK, and indeed about most and not all UK Christians), we are very broad-minded about faith. No way would we call folk who don’t see Jesus as we see him “The synagogue of satan”!

So, picking up headings from John’s criticism and praise for “his” churches: *Are we as enthusiastic as we ought to be? Has our (active) love grown cold? Are we too ready to sign up to new fads, or not open enough to new truth? Are we ready to speak up for our faith, or tongue-tied? Are we recognisably Jesus people – recognisable by Jesus? Are we too ready to compromise, fit it, let bad behaviour go uncriticised, laugh at the dirty joke, condone the shady deal? How do we keep going when the going gets tough? See how these Christians love one another...but selectively?*

P.S. The heresies faced by some of the churches are a matter of guesswork. They might include ideas about secret knowledge shared only among the chosen few. They might include the notion that what you did with your body didn't matter too much as long as you kept your mind pure. The rewards for the churches are probably just examples of the riches of Christ – though a vision of bronze for people who manufactured bronze sort of fits.

A Truth Note

You may remember that Briefing Note 1 in the parish briefing note series touches on “truth” in the Bible. This issue of fiction, phantasy, myth, fairy story, etc, came up at our last session, and might be worth a brief reflection. You can look up the dictionary definitions of the various terms we use to describe something that might not necessarily be literally true. The problem is not the strict definition, but the way we actually use these terms. We might say “myth” to mean a lie or a picturesque but effective way of describing a fundamental truth. Some people get jumpy about the idea that anything in the Bible might not be literally true – aware that you can start by arguing that the fish could not have swallowed Jonah, and finish by arguing that Jesus couldn't have Risen. (The argument that the Resurrection was really just the disciples feeling better about things.)

However, and not least in reading the Book of Revelation, it does make a great deal of sense to recognise that writers about holy things can quite justifiably use picture language without themselves believing that this is a photograph of reality or expecting the reader to take it as a photo. The Good Samaritan is a marvellous teaching story, even if no Samaritan ever helped a wounded Jew. The story of the Garden of Eden speaks volumes about our relationship with God, even if there never was such a place. The battle between Good and Evil is very real, whether or not you take seriously dragons and beasts and angels with swords. To quote one of the favourite illustrations, the injunction to be like Doves is not an invitation to coo melodiously from the church roof and lay eggs.