

## Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 5: Some Notes

You get the impression that John sides with those who hold that everyone can sing and should sing: no separated out choir here. Everyone is singing –humans, beasts and angels. I think it is safe to assume that in this comprehensive heavenly choir nobody is signing out of tune, or leaving the high notes (or the low notes) to someone else. (It would be interesting to know whether they are singing in unison (all singing the same notes) or in harmony (SATB or maybe an infinite variety of parts). Personally, I like the thought that heaven is where there is infinite variety, all united and all valued, so each and every person is doing their own things, but it all fits together,

If you haven't already got used to understanding Revelation as a picture story, which is spoilt not enhanced by taking everything literally, this is a good chapter to encourage you in that directions. If you take Chapter 5 literally, you have a lion that is also a lamb, and that can handle paperwork, and that is very dead and very much alive. Then you have beasts getting into positions that only fit humans can manage; and vast multitudes prostrating themselves at regular intervals with energetic enthusiasm that not even a teenage keep fit class could sustain. I can picture John saying to the dedicated literalist: "For heaven's sake get real, and enter into the spirit of the thing. If I mention the Dawn Chorus to indicate spontaneous joy, are you going to collect twigs, lay eggs and eat worms?!"

Just to help with the picture language references that meant more to the first readers/listeners than they mean to us: Papyrus scrolls were long rolls (probably about 15 feet for Revelation), often written 90° on just one side, but for economy on both sides; and, for special documents such as wills, sealed with 7 seals. (The magic number 7 again.) This particular scroll vision is borrowed from Ezekiel Chapter 2. The scroll seems to represent God's master plan – and you might want to spend a bit of time thinking about the relationship between God having a master plan, and us having free will. (A universe of puppets would be pointless; a universe in which we take all the decisions would be even more scary than the real universe!) John weeps both because it seems that he isn't going to get the insight he had been promised, and because it seems that God's plan is going to be thwarted.

The Lion of Judah goes back to Jacob's blessing on his children (Genesis 49). The Root of David comes from (Isaiah 11) the Messianic prophecy.; The Lamb is used to describe Jesus 29 times in Revelation, and is a common descriptor in both the Old and the New Testament, e.g. John the Baptist in John 1 and Jeremiah (Chapter 11). Remember that in John's Gospel Jesus dies while the Passover lambs are being slaughtered. Pause here for breath. The Atonement can't be captured in a few glib words. But some thoughts might be worth keeping in mind. The Passover lamb hadn't got any choice in the matter. Isaac, nearly sacrificed by Abraham, hadn't got much choice... and, if you recall the play, it seems Abraham and his much loved wife parted company at this time and maybe for this reason... Jesus did choose. Why and with what consequences?

“There is a green hill” captures something of this. (There are 35 hymns in our hymn book related to this one chapter, and it might be worth glancing at the list.) Aslan in the Narnia series captures something of it. Whatever you do, don’t swallow that blasphemous “The wrath of God was satisfied” nonsense. Better to linger with the mystery that sin divides us from God with a barrier that only God’s sacrificial love can destroy. If you have another way of thinking about the Lamb, do share it.

There are quite a lot of “exclusive” messages in both Old and New Testaments; and Christians in their separate Churches, and as a One Church, have been quite good at counting themselves in and everyone else out. (I love the story of a newcomer to heaven being shown round, and having pointed out to him a rather miserable looking soul sitting in splendid isolation: Peter explains “He thinks he’s the only one here”. C S Lewis readers will recognise something similar in a number of CSL books, including *the Last Battle*”. So, treasure the song here: EVERY NATION, EVERY PEOPLE, EVERY LANGUAGE, EVERY TRIBE. It doesn’t get any more inclusive than that.

Your favourite bit of Chapter 5?