

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: revelation Chapter 8: Some Notes

Silence is powerful. Revelation is in many ways a very noisy book, but this chapter begins with half an hour of silence. It is worth pausing ourselves to ask how we personally handle and feel about silence. When we are alone, do we savour silence or drown it with radio, TV or... ? If there is silence in church, do we think someone has forgotten something; do we focus on whatever theme has been suggested or go blank or wander back to current pre-occupation? Ever been on a Silent Retreat, or experienced silence as part of a Retreat? Interested in the Advent Quiet Day that Hilary will be leading for CTIS? Is constructive silence easier in company or when alone? The musicians will have views on silencer in music, including the famous Cage silence. I'm told that one of the most savoured silences is when friends or partners can just relax with each other - not needing to talk.

There is a Jewish tradition that the music in heaven stops from time to time for prayer to be heard. Maybe something of this is implied here.

There are a number of Old Testament sources for the narrative in Chapter 8 Exodus, Deuteronomy, Ezekiel, Isaiah, etc, and maybe Baruch (The Apocrypha) (the eagle, not angel, messenger). Wormwood is often used in the Bible to describe the bitterness of judgement. (See also C S Lewis.) The Seven Archangels (God's close attendants) are Raphael, Raguel, Michael, Sariel, Gabriel and Remiel. (Remember that for the next pub quiz!) Do you think of angels as part of divine reality, or just as something invented because the early writers were used to rulers having messengers and attendants to carry out their orders, and couldn't picture God doing everything Himself?

Once again, there is good evidence in this Chapter that you can't simply take the Book of Revelation as word for word literally true (and are not meant to read it that way). We know from the Aral Sea example that there can be areas of ecological disaster which are relatively self-contained; but John knew, as we know, that one third of all these areas of ecology with everything else remaining intact just isn't possible; and there is no suggestion that those affected by the one third disasters were more wicked than the other two thirds. (If the Medway turned to blood and the Thames didn't, it could hardly be because Medway Valley dwellers are all wicked and Thames Valley dwellers are all virtuous. The point John is making is that human evil brings gradual deterioration in the natural world. We know that scientifically as well as instinctively.

The trumpet sounding is a popular Bible way of heralding God dramatically intervening – in the New Testament as well as the Old. I don't think Biblical trumpets looked much like today's trumpets?

We may not all share John's enthusiasm for incense. But it is, however unhealthy, a familiar way of thinking about prayers going up to God. The more interesting point is the part played by prayer in the God scheme of things. We probably won't have time to talk

about this as well as all the other topics; but it is at the very core of Christian thinking that prayer really does make a difference, and isn't just puny humans kidding themselves that they can influence a God who has already decided everything without any regard to our wishes.

A lot here in a little space.

I don't know why the text has now decided to do insets.