

Monday Evening Bible | Reading Group: Revelation Chapter 16: Some Notes

Try to imagine a court, with a policeman reading his notes on the violent events that have taken place. “First, he knifed them, then he shot them, then he gassed them, then he set fire to them, then he drowned them, then when they attacked him in retaliations, he killed them in battle”. The judge would intervene wearily to object that since they all died as a result of the first intervention, there was nobody left alive to suffer from all the further interventions, still less to rise up in battle. Now, you might argue that Job had lots of painful boils, and still survived, so universal bolts would challenge the Health care systems, but might not kill everyone. But once all the water supplies are turned to blood.....? Another (also superficial) way of looking at this third rerun of the Egyptian plagues, is to say that if God had finally decided that there was nobody else worth saving, why didn't God just stop them all breathing – rather than mess up the whole of Creation by a long series of (un)natural disasters?

I think there are some good explanations; but first let's look at some of the detail. Why the fixation in Revelation on the drying up of rivers? First, probably because John and his audience knew that this was how the real Babylon fell. The invading (Persian) army diverted the river (the Euphrates) that flowed to protect and water Babylon, and marched in through the new gap in the defences. Second, drying up of rivers was very much part of Jewish history – e.g. the Red Sea/Sea of Reeds and the Jordan. God, who in Genesis, created rivers could just as readily destroy them. Then the weird three frogs? Frogs came into the Egyptian plagues story (in vastly larger quantities); but frogs were notorious for making an awful noise. So, like the false prophet beast, the false prophet frogs are about the anti-Christian gospel being shouted loud enough to persuade people. (“Science has disproved Christianity!” – no, it hasn't, but a lot of folk will tell you that it has.)

And the bit about being caught without your clothes on? It's a very close parallel to the elderly lady who confided to my mother that she always likes to have clean underwear because she might be taken to hospital after a road traffic accident. If you don't want your “Time to come” when you are in the middle of doing something you shouldn't be doing, then don't do it! If you want to get some good deeds in before your time comes (like making it up with an ex-friend), then do it now! Very practical and down-to-earth advice.. alongside the weird bits.

Now back to the seven angels ending the world in slow motion. Pause for a moment, and speculate on how you think the present world is likely to end (next year, or in a million years time). One, I think John is saying that God wants to save even those who have firmly signed up with the “opposition” (the forces of evil): note the repeated statement that even then they didn't repent and try to make a new start. Two, In emphasising that the natural world gets punished along with human kind, John is making a very valid and very modern point that corruption, exploitation, selfishness, commercialisation, social injustice, etc, etc, do hit the natural world. John would have been intrigued by the Blue Planet series, but not

surprised. Genesis onwards is saying we need right relationship with God, right relationship with each other, right relationship with ourselves, right relationship with the natural world.

John was too old and wise to think that Little Jimmy and Wee Betty could of themselves, even with God on their side, change the face of the Roman Empire. But he was, I suspect, entirely persuaded that (a) if every Jimmy and Betty adopted the attitude of “Don’t blame me, I can’t do anything!”, it would all get much worse; and (b) if every Betty and Jimmy did what they could do, it would make a difference. It was, at least in part, the persistence of a few individuals, standing out against the majority, that got slavery abolished, got women the vote, changed sanitation and health-care for the better, secured equal access to education, etc, etc. Even if you don’t think you can change things, never be afraid to ask “Why?” when you see something that you think is wrong.

