

## Revelation 11 : 1 - 14

The Revelation to John, sometimes called The Apocalypse; a book that is often neglected; a book over parts of which, even learned scholars disagree; a book which is sometimes difficult to read, not least because parts of it contain a difficult message.

We are not told who it is that gave the reed, or rod, to John, but it was obviously divine authority that was behind it. Ezekiel had visions and in chapter 40 of the Book of Ezekiel, we read of him having visions of God where he was taken to Israel and set on a very high mountain. On the side of the mountain were, quote, "some buildings which looked like a city."

He was taken to the city and saw a man with a measuring rod. The man told Ezekiel to, "look with your eyes and hear with your ears and pay attention to everything I am going to show you, for that is why you have been brought here." The man goes on, "Tell the house of Israel everything you see."

The description of the measuring and the description of the Temple go on for three chapters and Ezekiel hears a voice coming from inside the Temple. The voice says, "Son of man, this is the place of my throne and the place for the soles of my feet. This is where I will live among the Israelites for ever."

And now we have John measuring the temple or, rather the sanctuary, signified by the Greek word "naos", the altar and the worshippers. Measuring may be for either destruction or preservation. In the Second Book of Samuel we read of David, after defeating the Moabites, measuring the Moabites in order to decide which of them should be killed.

John had done as he was told, just watching and listening, when he became aware of "him who sat on the throne" holding a scroll which was sealed with seven seals. He watched and he listened as, one by one, the scrolls were opened, but now he was to act; he was to use the reed to measure.

In Revelation chapter seven and Revelation chapter 11, verse 19, we have references to a sanctuary in Heaven but, in this passage, perhaps the sanctuary mentioned is an earthly one. This thought is supported by the fact that the last standpoint mentioned of John was on earth and the courtyard of this sanctuary is to be trodden by Gentiles.

If a material building was in mind, the Temple in Jerusalem is most probable, but scholars such as Rev Canon Leon Morris, former Principal of Ridley College in Melbourne, think that it is more likely that John is referring to the Church, as described in 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 3 : 16), where Paul says, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?"; in 2 Corinthians (2 Cor 6 : 16) "What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God."

and in Ephesians (Eph 2 : 19 – 22) "Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."

The altar is the most important part of the equipment of the Temple and it is a reminder of the sacrificial nature of Christian worship. It is not clear in our passage how the worshippers are to be counted, or

measured as the older translations of the Bible state, but maybe not in the way that David measured the Moabites.

Perhaps the more modern translations give a better sense of what is meant. Whatever phrase is used, the apparent meaning is that what is measured at God's command is under the direct control and care of God and this is reflected in Revelation chapter 7, verse 3, "Do not harm the land or sea or the trees until we put a seal on the foreheads of the servants of our God."

Please do not take this to mean that none of us will perish. A few years ago I undertook the Footsteps discipleship course run by the Central Baptist Association and Regents College, Oxford and when the course leader asked each of us on the course to say what Christianity is not, my contribution was, "an insurance policy". Christianity is not an insurance policy.

There were martyrs in the early church, such as Stephen when he was arrested and taken to the Sanhedrin. When asked if the charges against him were true, he responded with a Spirit-filled sermon, going through the history of the Israelites, how prophets had been mistreated and how the Sanhedrin were resisting the Holy Spirit. For this, he was stoned. There were martyrs then, there have been martyrs since and there will be martyrs until the Second Coming.

In the Temple of Jerusalem, the outer courts might be used by Gentiles, the inner courts only by Israelites. At Pentecost "ordinary" people were filled by the Holy Spirit. The old order of High Priests was replaced by the priesthood of all believers, which is why I am able to stand here today. The Church, the true Israel, is the sanctuary in the vision. The First Letter to the Thessalonians ( 1 Thessalonians 4 : 5) mentions "the heathen who do not know God,". No longer is the world divided into Jew and Gentile, it is now divided into Christians and non-Christians.

John seems to be using 'the temple', the court which is without, or outside, the temple and the holy city as symbols of the Church under different aspects. The Gentiles had been given some power over, at least some of, the Church. Notice is given that the Gentiles will trample the city for 42 months, ie 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years.

In the Book of Isaiah we are reminded of how the people of Israel constantly wandered from the ways of God, of how the land of Israel was often taken over by other nations, a situation captured in chapter 63 (63:18) "For a little while your people possessed your holy place, but now our enemies have trampled down your sanctuary."

In Luke 21 (verse 24) we also read of Jesus talking about how Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles. Even though the Gentiles are permitted to oppress the church, they are not allowed to destroy it; there is a limit as to the extent to which they can inflict damage. The oppression will come to an end.

What is happening in the world today? Does everyone, in every nation, recognise God as Creator? Does everyone recognise Jesus as his or her personal Saviour? We all want war to cease; most want to see an end to poverty, to disease, to pain, but what a strange way some people have of trying to achieve these aims. Or am I being too generous?

Are some people content as long as they themselves do not suffer from poverty, from disease, from pain; do they have little thought for others? Have you noticed that the time given to the two witnesses for them to prophecy, 1260 days, is about 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years, the same length of time that the Gentiles will do their trampling?

The identity of the two witnesses is not known, though some suspect them to be Moses and Elijah, who are mentioned in the last few verses of the Book of Malachi, ie the last few verses of the Old Testament, and who appeared on the mountain on which Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and John. There are other

suggestions as to their identity but, whoever they are, it is likely that they are directly associated with the Church.

And why two witnesses? Possibly because two witnesses were required to testify in a trial; possibly it is a reference to the two faithful churches (Smyrna and Philadelphia) mentioned in chapters 2 and 3 of Revelation, referencing the section of the Church which has its martyrs.

The clothing of the witnesses is sackcloth, an indication of mourning. They are, after all, prophesying doom. Many would suggest that, in the Church in the UK, we are too comfortable in our lives and would ask if we, through living Christian lives, are making others feeling uncomfortable, as should be the case. Is the Church in this country conforming to the standards of society around us or is it conforming to the standards of God?

Jesus said, (John 17 : 14 – 19), “<sup>14</sup>I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. <sup>15</sup>My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. <sup>16</sup>They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. <sup>17</sup>Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. <sup>18</sup>As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. <sup>19</sup>For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.”

I have read that, “A comfortable, easy-minded church has no power to stir the world either to salvation or to opposition”. Food for thought.

John describes the witnesses in two ways; firstly as the two olive trees. Zechariah (4:2-6) described, in a visit from an angel, seeing “<sup>2</sup>a gold lampstand with a bowl at the top and seven lights on it, with seven channels to the lights. <sup>3</sup>Also there are two olive trees by it”. He asked the angel what they are and the angel replied, “<sup>6</sup>This is the word of the L<sup>rd</sup> to Zerubbabel: ‘Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,’ says the L<sup>rd</sup> Almighty.” And this is a message which is appropriate for John’s situation.

I think that we sometimes forget that it does not matter how mighty is a person, an organisation or a country; it does not matter how powerful they are, the L<sup>rd</sup> is mightier; the L<sup>rd</sup> is more powerful and we can often achieve more if we rely on His Spirit rather than on our own devices.

Zechariah’s olive trees are described as, “these are the two who are anointed to serve the Lord of all the earth”. “The Lord of all the earth.”; that is, the Lord of everything that exists; the Lord of you and me.

Look at the protection which God gives to these two messengers. During the time in which they are giving their message, no-one can harm them and woe betide anyone who tries to harm them. Do not forget that the Book of Revelation is filled with imagery and scholars believe that, when it says that, “<sup>5</sup>If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies” that the fire is to be taken figuratively. The aim of the witnesses is not to destroy people; it is to spread the message. It is to bring eternal life. The witnesses do have powers. One of these powers is to prevent rain, just as Elijah had that power. (1 Kings 17:1 and James 5:17).

They can turn water into blood, a power which was mentioned with regard to the second angel who was present when the seventh seal was opened in chapter 8 and a power used by Aaron on one of the occasions when he and Moses confronted Pharaoh. A third power is to smite the earth with “every plague as often as they will”.

We have power, so why can we not do the sort of things that we read of the disciples doing, mentioned in the Gospel of Luke chapter 9, “<sup>6</sup> preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.” Possibly for the same reason that, on one occasion, a group of the disciples failed to heal a boy who had been brought to them by the boy’s father. When the disciples asked Jesus why they could not drive out the evil spirit, He replied. “<sup>29</sup> ... “This kind can come out only by prayer.” So often we are too busy to pray., but the imagery used by John expresses the truth that the resources available to God’s servants today are just as great as the resources available to Moses and Elijah.

The power of the witnesses does not go on for ever; it is limited. When their testimony is finished they are no longer invulnerable. Note that the Greek used indicates that they have said all that they set out to say. They conclude their testimony; nothing cuts it short. Their task has been accomplished and once this has happened, they are vulnerable, very vulnerable.

They are attacked by the beast; not “a beast”, but by “the beast”, the beast that comes up from the Abyss , an evil being who is prominent throughout the second part of the Book of Revelation. The abyss is the place of incarceration of Satan, a place inhabited by beings that are hostile to God. The fact that the beast comes out of the Abyss, the bottomless pit, indicates his connection with the forces of evil.

The RSV translation does not simply say that the beast attacks the witnesses, it says that it will “wage war” (v7) with them, so it looks upon them, not as individuals, but as a host. I would suggest that this is a reflection of the power of their message, every word they utter striking what the beast stands for like a barbed arrow. Every time we demonstrate the love of God by our words or actions, it hurts Satan.

In this war, the beast seems to be victorious, for the witnesses are killed, just as Stephen was killed by the Sanhedrin following his sermon, just as Christ was killed because of His message. John brings to our attention the tremendous opposition faced by the people of God throughout the centuries and which still happens in today’s so-called civilised world. There is so much persecution of Christians in countries such as China, Egypt, India, Nigeria, Pakistan, Russia.....

When Christ’s martyrs have completed their task, they are removed from the scene. This is still happening today in several countries. People who make a stand for their rights, who proclaim the gospel, are often arrested and are sometimes never heard of again or, one night, they simply disappear.

Although in verse 8 it says, their “bodies”, the word used in the original text was actually “body”, which would probably indicate a close unity between the two. And where do their bodies lie? On a street figuratively called Sodom and Egypt, two places whose names are linked with oppression and wickedness. Genesis chapter 13 v 13 tells us, “<sup>13</sup> Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the L .”

The result of the actions of these men was that, along with Gomorrah “the L rained down burning sulphur” on the city. Except for Lot and his family, other than his wife, who disobeyed the instruction not to look back, the cities and all who lived in them were destroyed.

Egypt was a mighty country, powerful and successful, due in no small part to the work of Joseph and the Israelites who lived there for decades, but first, one Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites and, when he died, his successor was equally as oppressive so, despite its might, it too felt the judgement of God.

Where did this awful event, this killing of the witnesses take place? We are told “in the great city”, but do not forget

that Revelation is a book of symbolism and it is likely that the “great city” does not refer to a particular city, but to civilised man in organised community. As I said earlier, it is not just in one place that Christians are persecuted. Just as the love of God is found in every place, so Satan is hard at work to try and ensure that as many people as possible fail to accept Jesus as their Saviour, fail to recognise that he paid the price for sin and that all who accept Him into their hearts, into their lives, will have eternal life.

After their death the witnesses were further dishonoured, for Jewish requirements were that bodies should be washed thoroughly and guarded or watched from the moment of death until burial; that they should be buried in a tachrichim (takh-REE-khim), ie a simple white shroud and that the burial should take place within 24 hours of the death, but the bodies of these witnesses were left lying on the street for three and a half days.

Why were the people so antagonistic towards the witnesses, now described in the text as prophets? They were antagonistic because the prophets had tormented them during the days of their witness. The Gospel, the Word of God, can be a comfort to those in need, but it can be a thorn in the flesh to those who do not believe, to those who oppose the preaching of the Word.

Some leaders of nations appear to be worried that, if the gospel is preached in their countries, whether it be by word or by deed, then people will give their lives to Christ, that they themselves will lose power and influence and this mind-set filters down to the ordinary man-in-the-street.

A few years ago, I met someone who had changed his religion; he had become a Christian, something that did not go down well with some members of the faith to which he had formerly belonged. He had fled his country because of a fear of what might happen to him and to his family. He had declined to join in the worship of his old faith and it was made clear to him that, either he conformed to the rituals of that religion or there would be repercussions.

Physical violence towards his family and the rape of female members of his family were a real possibility, so he came to England, where most people would not realise that he was a convert.

In his book “The Apocalypse Today”, Thomas F Torrance wonders, “why does the Church of Jesus Christ today sit so easy to her surroundings? Why do Christian people live such comfortable and such undisturbed lives in this evil and disturbed world? Surely”, he says, “it is because we are not true to the Word of God”. A little harsh, I feel, though certainly a challenge. Christians in China tend to attend, either a state-accepted Church, a Church with restrictions imposed by the state, or an underground Church and I am certainly not going to criticise those in the former group.

In the Old Testament we read that, often, God allowed the country of Israel to be conquered, for the Israelites to be taken into exile; of how, after a period of time, He would select a new leader and the Israelites would become dominant again. In the same way, He was not going to leave His witnesses, His prophets lying on the street and God is not going to abandon those who stand up to anyone who opposes His Church, who oppose His gospel. God breathed new life into the witnesses. We are told that, “a breath of life from God entered them”. They heard a voice, an instruction to “Come up here” and they were taken up to heaven in a cloud. All that those who had been terrified when the witnesses came to life could do was to look on.

If they had been terrified when the witnesses came back to life, then they should have been more so now, realising that it was they who had been defeated, when they realised that they had opposed God, their creator and giver of life.

The taking up to Heaven in a cloud echoes the First Letter to the Thessalonians, in which we read of the Second Coming of Christ. (1 Thessalonians 4 : 16,17) “<sup>16</sup> For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

<sup>17</sup> After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.” “we will be with the Lord forever.” Amen to that.

Well might the people be terrified, for the ascension into Heaven was followed a short time later by an earthquake, resulting in a tenth of the city collapsing and the death of 7000 people. Those left alive continued to be terrified, but at least they gave glory to God. I repeat that faith in God is not an insurance policy which necessarily results in an easy life, but God will reward those that are faithful.

The Church suffers persecution, it suffers oppression but, in the end, in God’s time, God’s Church will prevail, for God is all-powerful and, as it says in the King James version of the Gospel of John, chapter 3, verse 16, “<sup>16</sup> For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Amen