

ECF 8th January 2012 Letters from the Exalted Christ

What do you think of our church? If you had to write a report about how we are doing, what would you say? What would you be positive about? What would you be critical of? What would want to be our focus?

It would be an interesting question. But I wonder how accurate it would be. Often what we would write would to some extent reflect how we were feeling at the time. When we are doing well it is easy to overlook problems. When we're struggling personally it is difficult to see anything but the problems.

But what if Jesus wrote that report? What if he wrote a letter to our church, to tell us what we were doing well and what we need to change? Would that be a letter worth listening to? Do you think it would be an easy read?

It may be a strange thought, but this is what 7 churches experienced near the end of the first century AD. They received a letter from Jesus and at times it was a difficult read. Yes, he encouraged them for doing some things well, but he also challenged them about what needed to change and warned them of serious consequences if they didn't! Over the next couple of months we're going to study these letters recorded in the Book of Revelation and see what Jesus wants to say to us through them.

But before we do that, John gives us a new awareness of who it is who writes these letters. This will ensure that we will respond to them in the right way. Read Revelation 1:9-11: [“I, John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus, was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”](#) ¹⁰ [On the Lord's Day I was in the Spirit, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet,](#) ¹¹ [which said: “Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea.”](#)

1. Written by John

The author of the book of Revelation was John. Most people believe this to be the now aged disciple of Jesus, the apostle, the brother of James and the author of the fourth gospel and the 3 letters of John.

a) Our Brother

However, John doesn't introduce himself this way. Instead, he describes himself simply as [“your brother”](#) v9. He doesn't set himself apart from his readers but states that he is simply their brother in Christ.

I think this is amazing, especially in the light of what John will write. This book contains mind-blowing, disturbing and challenging visions of the future. And yet, John didn't

sensationalise his experience. He didn't record it to show off, to make a name for himself, to be a celebrity.

That is so different from many who claim to have had visions and angelic experiences today. Their sensational and dramatic performances betray their selfish motives.

But John's humility shows his motive for writing. He writes to challenge, correct, warn, encourage, build up and inspire his brothers and sisters in the Lord. It doesn't stop him from writing some difficult or uncomfortable things to these churches. But he writes because of his love for them.

Seeing each other as brothers and sisters shouldn't stop us from speaking the truth, even if it hurts. But it means we should be committed to [“speaking the truth in love,”](#) Ephesians 4:15. It might be still difficult to listen. But we can accept that what they are saying is because they love us and their words are for our good!

b) Our Companion

John [“was on the island of Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.”](#) v9. This was a small island, 8 miles by 4 miles in size, about 40 miles off the southwestern coast of Turkey – but it was not a holiday resort. The Romans sent prisoners and troublemakers here to work in the rock quarries on the island. John had been exiled there, because of his ministry and preaching of God's Word – to stop him from influencing others and sharing his faith!

But John didn't think that his suffering set him apart from his readers. Instead he saw that it connected him with them. He described himself as a [“companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus.”](#) v9. He shared in the same suffering they did!

It was becoming increasingly difficult to follow Christ in the seven cities that John wrote to: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. These were all in the province of Asia, which stretched 200 miles eastward from the coast of what we now call Turkey. John writes to them in the sequence a messenger would follow on foot to reach them – beginning at Ephesus, which was closest to Patmos!

John wrote about AD95. During the last 30 years or so there had been earthquakes, military takeovers in Rome, a Jewish Revolt in AD66 which led in AD70 to the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple by the Romans. Many Christians thought that these tumultuous events pointed to the soon return of the Lord.

AD 81 saw Domitian becoming emperor and he began to demand that his subjects should worship him as “Lord and God”. In that culture, to worship and serve Jesus as

Lord and God would put you in threat of your life.

Christians also had to stand against the pagan culture of these cities. The statues, idolatry and symbols of fertility cults would attack the purity of their minds just as much as we experience today with modern media.

So John describes himself as a fellow-sufferer for Christ because he wanted his readers to know that he understood the struggles they face. He was not writing some academic textbook on the end times to debate and argue over in seminaries. He was writing to Christians under pressure - to encourage them to keep strong, not to lose heart, to be faithful to the end – because God was in charge, God will finally overcome and will rescue his people, and one day: **“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”** Revelation 21:4

Many believers in Christ are suffering in this world today. In Europe, Christianity is under fire. The world is in turmoil. The pressure on believers is intense. False teaching is widespread. We need the encouragement from John as a partner in suffering to keep strong and stand faithful to Christ.

c) Christ's Servant

But there is a more important reason why John wrote this book. One Lord's Day, presumably a Sunday, John was worshipping when he heard a voice that told him: **“Write on a scroll what you see and send it to the seven churches...”** v11 It was in obedience to a command that John wrote. He did not seek this vision or this ministry. He was simply a **“servant”** v1 acting in obedience.

Are we willing to do whatever the Lord calls us to? Whether Christ calls us to a ministry that has a worldwide significance or one that is small and hidden, are we willing to serve our brothers and sister in Christ in obedience to our Lord?

2. Authored by Christ

The voice that commanded John was the voice of Jesus. But when he turned to see him, he didn't see the baby Jesus of Bethlehem lying in a manger. Neither did he see the carpenter Jesus of Nazareth, living in obscurity and humility, nor the teaching and healing Jesus of Galilee, drawing crowds to him, not the suffering Jesus of Golgotha, taking the punishment of our sin to save us.

The one standing before him was the same Jesus who was born in a manger, grew in obscurity, taught so gently and suffered so terribly - but he was now the risen and exalted Jesus. Read Revelation 1:12-20: **“¹² I turned round to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and among the**

lampstands was someone “like a son of man”, dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest. ¹⁴ His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. ¹⁵ His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. ¹⁸ I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.

¹⁹ “Write, therefore, what you have seen, what is now and what will take place later.

²⁰ The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lampstands is this: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.”

The picture painted here may seem strange – but the symbolism teaches the reality of the one speaking and why we should listen to what he says.

a) The Church of Christ

“The seven lampstands are the seven churches.” v20 The number 7 in Scripture is a symbol of completeness, and so each of these churches are not only real churches in their own right – they are symbolic of the whole church. They are golden, perhaps to emphasise their value and worth to God. And they're called to shine the light of Christ into this dark world. Jesus used this picture in Matthew 5:14, 16: **“You are the light of the world... let your light shine before me”**

But the crucial thing is that Jesus is speaking from **“among the lampstands.”** v13 These suffering Christians needed to know that although he is not always seen, Jesus was not distant from them. He was close to them!

And through these letters he will show his intimate knowledge of what these churches are experiencing and what they are doing: **“I know your deeds...”** Revelation 2:2.

“In his right hand he held seven stars.” v16 which John tells us are **“the angels of the seven churches,”** v20. There are different views of what this means, but possibly it means that they are the heavenly representatives or symbols of these churches. John moves between talking about writing to the churches and writing to the angels of them. So we can say that these churches are held in Christ's hands! He is the one who upholds them in his care.

b) The Deity of Christ

i) His Appearance

The churches are lampstands, the angels are stars, but these lights are dim in

comparison to the splendour of the one whose “face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” v16 This reveals who our focus should be on, and must have reminded John of the day when on a high mountain, Jesus was transfigured before Peter, James and himself: “His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light.” Matthew 17:2

John describes him as “like a son of man” v13. This is significant because it points to Daniel’s messianic vision: “One like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven... was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion...” Daniel 7:13–14 John is seeing Jesus as the reigning Christ, the Lord of all, the one before whom we all should bow!

And this was his response. He “fell at his feet as though dead.” v17 Later in Revelation 22:9, when John fell down in front of an angel, he was told: “Do not do it! I am a fellow-servant with you... Worship God!”

But here there is no rebuke. To fall at Jesus’ feet in worship was appropriate, because Jesus is fully God and fully man. And the deity of Christ is emphasised by using language that the OT prophets used to describe God.

For example, John says “His head and hair were white like wool.” v14. This refers back to Daniel’s vision where in describing the purity and eternity of God, Daniel says: “His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.” Daniel 7:9

ii) His Voice

John also said that “His voice was like the sound of rushing waters.” v15. Ezekiel wrote that “I saw the glory of the God of Israel coming from the east. His voice was like the roar of rushing waters...” Ezekiel 43:2

And Jesus speaks with the authority of God. “Out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword.” v16 He speaks truth that divides and judges as Hebrews 4:12 states: “The word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

iii) His Name

And the name that Jesus calls himself is: “I am the First and the Last.” v17. In Isaiah 44:6 this is God’s own title: “This is what the Lord says— Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God.”

We are left with no doubt as to who this person is. He is Jesus, the messiah, the exalted Son of God, equal with the Father, with all the authority and power of God. And we are called to respond by bowing before him in wonder and worship!

c) The Victory of Christ

But we do not need to be filled with fear or terror! Jesus is seen “dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash round his chest.” v13 which many be an allusion to the Old Testament high priest, which would remind us of his role as our great high priest.

And when John fell at his feet in awe at the person of Christ, Jesus reached out and touched him: “he placed his right hand on me.” v17 The touch of Christ is always something that encourages. It brought love to the excluded leper, comfort to the bereaved, healing to the sick, life to the dead.

And Jesus’ touch comes with encouraging words: “Do not be afraid.” v17. It reminds us of the words were spoken to the women at the tomb and the disciples in the upper room on the first resurrection morning. And this is the reason why John does not need to fear coming face to face with the exalted Christ on this Sunday morning: “I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever!” v18

The one before John is the one who gave his life for us and rose again on the third day. He is “the Living One” v18, who ever lives to show that through his own death he has destroyed the power of death.

Jesus said: “I hold the keys of death and Hades.” v18 Hades is the place of death. If we have trusted in Christ then death and the grave cannot hold us. It has no power over us. Jesus has set us free!

What a wonderful encouragement to a suffering and fearful church. He says to us, “Do not be afraid!” Do not worry. Because even in the face of persecution and death, we can be confident that we are held in the hands of Christ and nothing and no-one can ever separate us from his love because our risen Lord is victorious over the grave. Yes, the one standing is our awesome and glorious Lord and deserves our worship, but he is our loving Saviour and is able to save us completely.

d) The Revelation of Christ

And it is the risen and exalted Christ that tells John to: “Write, therefore, what you have seen...” v19 We’ve read this in chapter 1.

And he is also told to write “What will take place later.” v19 This refers to chapter 4 onwards as it speaks of what is still to come in the future.

But John is also told to write “what is now” v19. This refers to Jesus’ letters to the first century churches in Asia, that we’ll look at in Revelation 2 and 3. As John writes to each of the seven churches he states: “These are the words of him...” Revelation 2:1 and he refers to the risen Christ of his vision.

And so this had to change how these churches read this letter. They were not just reading what John, their brother and fellow-sufferer thought about them and wanted them to know. They were reading the words of the risen, exalted and glorified Christ!

These words of encouragement, rebuke, challenge and warning comes from Jesus. The call to repentance and to obedience comes from their Lord. These words may be uncomfortable to listen to, but they need to be heeded. They may challenge their behaviour and attitudes, but they had to be obeyed. That’s because they were the words of none other than the risen and exalted Lord! As stated each time: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” Revelation 2:7

We need to listen, take heed and obey what Jesus says to the churches – because he wants to speak to us today!! These are the words of Christ to Christian communities just like ours. They lived in difficult, dangerous and challenging times – but Jesus was calling them to a deeper commitment, a thorough obedience and a more passionate love for him and his kingdom.

As we spend the next 7 weeks reading and thinking through the individual letters, they will confront us, examine our hearts, scrutinize our lives. It will at times be encouraging, and at times it may be uncomfortable. But we mustn’t turn away or close our ears. These are the words of Jesus, the son of God, our risen and exalted Lord!

And if we do, then we have a wonderful promise: “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” v3 I pray that each one of us will do so, for his glory!

[Please note that the above file is a copy of the notes used by Andrew for his preach at Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, Ireland on January 8th 2012 and have been published on www.enniscorthychristianfellowship.ie as part of our service to the community. Audio recordings of this, and other preaches, are also available at the above site and anyone wishing to ask questions concerning the above preach is invited to contact Andrew either directly or through the above site. Thank you]