



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### In the Midst of the Lampstands Revelation 1:9-20 Fr. William Klock

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We've all heard that old statement, "Consider the source," haven't we? When I was a kid, someone would insult me and I'd get upset and say something about to my mom and she'd say, "Consider the source." In other words, "Why would you take what someone like that says seriously?" If someone you know to be an inveterate liar tells you something, you probably won't believe it. For a number of years someone was sending me thick envelopes stuffed with poorly made, oddly shaped photocopies of newspaper clippings and weird, barely coherent explanatory letters claiming to be from a prophet. The person who sent them was obviously a lunatic, it showed, and they went straight into the trash. But other things we take seriously. A letter from Revenue Canada? The stationery itself demands we take it seriously. An order from the Provincial Health Officer? Bonnie Henry may be fairly unassuming, but we know that behind those orders stands the authority of the Province of British Columbia. Or maybe you're experience something difficult. Someone you love has just died. Or you're going through a crisis of faith. Someone comes alongside you, someone sends you an email or a letter, someone calls you. And that person offers encouragement—maybe some advice. And we all know that it means a lot more coming from someone who has walked the same road or from someone whose great faith we respect. When a mature Christian offers a bit of spiritual advice or, maybe even a rebuke, it carries a great deal more weight than similar words coming from a brother or a sister who is worldly or immature.

As I said last week, Revelation is a letter and Chapter 1 is the introduction. We'll be looking at verses 9-20 this morning. John is the author of the letter, the one who penned the words, and sent it off with a courier to be read in the churches, but as we saw last week, this is Jesus' revelation. God has given it to him and he has given it to John. Jesus is the one who speaks with authority in this book—he's the source, he's the authority behind it—and here John gives us a glimpse at who it was who spoke to him. Here John shows us just who this Jesus is and the picture he paints with his words tells these churches—and us—that we'd better pay attention and take this seriously.

So, verses 9-11:

**I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus. I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet saying, "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches, to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea."**

John, first, tells them his own situation. He is their brother and their partner—he is their sharer—in three things: in tribulation, in the kingdom, and in patient endurance. He, himself, is living in exile on the island of Patmos, a little island about fifty kilometres off the coast of what's now Turkey. It had a military garrison there, but we don't know if John was literally in prison or if he'd just been forced into exile. He had an apostolic role when it came to these churches and, presumably, someone hoped that by removing their leader, this movement of Jesus-followers would flounder, maybe even die off. We don't know who exiled him, whether it was local or Roman authorities, but

what's important is that John says he's there "on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus." Notice that he doesn't say he's there because of his own testimony, because of his own preaching, because of his own witness to Jesus. No, he says that he's there because *God* has spoken and because *Jesus* has given testimony. Jesus, by his death, resurrection, and ascension has borne testimony against the gods and kings of this age, and they have lashed out in retaliation against his apostle. And not just against John. They have lashed out at the Church.

Brothers and Sisters, there are three things that are a certainty for the believer. The first is tribulation. There is no escape. Jesus warned his disciples in John 15:20, "A servant is not greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you." First the Jews, then the Romans went after the fledgling Church. Those early believers suffered great tribulation, but they had faith in the words of Jesus, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). In Acts 14 Luke writes that Paul and Barnabas travelled, visiting these churches, "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God." They knew that Jesus had inaugurated his kingdom and that tribulation was the prelude to its consummation. Their suffering was in union with the suffering of Jesus. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Colossians 1:24).

And that's the second certainty: the kingdom. We can face tribulation because Jesus has already inaugurated the kingdom. As Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Jesus reigns "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that

is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet” (Ephesians 1:21-22). The battle with the kings and gods of this age wages on, but Jesus has been given dominion over all. John draws on the language and imagery of Daniel 7. The Prophet writes:

**Behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.**  
(Daniel 7:13-14)

The Church faces tribulation precisely because Jesus’ kingdom is here and now, because it stands in conflict with the gods and kings of the present age. But that means that the Church—Brothers and Sisters, that we—can pursue the mission Jesus has given us with confidence. Jesus won the decisive battle at the cross; his kingdom shall not be destroyed.

That leads us to the third certainty: perseverance. This is the heart of the book of Revelation. The individual letters to the churches highlight this. Where they have done well, they must persevere in well-doing. Where they have compromised, it is critical that they return to Jesus and persevere. And the rest of the book goes on to reveal the faithfulness of God to strengthen faith that they might persevere. But notice, all these things are centred in Jesus. We face tribulation because we are united with Jesus and because of his witness against the present age. But we have confidence because we are united with Jesus and know and are part of his kingdom. And we persevere as we are

united with Jesus—sharing in his life and empowered by his Spirit—and knowing that what he has begun he will surely complete. In the incarnation and at the cross, God has invested his beloved Son in the redemption of his creation from sin and death and we can be sure that no matter how bad things may get, God will never cut his losses. The resurrection of Jesus was the decisive victory over the present age. He will continue until he puts every enemy under his feet.

Now, John goes on to say that he was “in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day”. The Lord’s Day is a reference to Sunday. I think, too, that there’s some intentional symbolism here, drawing on the Old Testament idea of the Day of the Lord—the day when God would come in judgement to vindicate his people and to destroy their enemies. And being “in the Spirit” is language drawn from the Old Testament prophets to certify John’s status as a prophet. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets speak of being in the Spirit as God speaks through them. Prophecy is not a gut feeling, an impression, or a vague idea. Prophecy is the distinct and clear word of God, delivered to man, through the mediation of the Holy Spirit. This is why prophecy is taken so seriously in the Bible. God’s word is true and because of that his people can have confidence in it. That trust, however, is undermined by false prophets and so to prophesy falsely is a grave offense. It’s an offense against God and against God’s word. The test is simple. Does the word spoken come to pass? Does it jibe with what God has already revealed about himself? In the Old Testament, if it didn’t, the false prophet was sentenced to death. The equivalent in the New Testament would be excommunication. It’s something that, sadly, the modern church does not often take seriously with the result that we’ve cheapened prophecy and have a multitude of false prophets running around leading

people astray and undermining faith in God’s word.

But, John, truly in the Spirit, hears a voice like a trumpet—a clarion call and a summons—and he is instructed to record what he is about to see and to send that record to seven churches: Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamum and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea. This is a cluster of churches in western Asia Minor, western Turkey—churches where John’s ministry was well-known. If it were today we could say that he was their bishop.

First John hears that great voice and then he turns to see who it is. Look at verses 12-16.

**Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.**

Who is it that speaks? Why should we care what he has to say? Does his word carry authority? Well, his summons to John was like the summons of a trumpet—imagine the sound of trumpets blown by royal heralds. And now, turning he sees this awe-inspiring image. If it’s hard to wrap your head around John’s description, that’s because it’s a composite of a bunch of different images drawn from all over the Old Testament, but especially—again—from Daniel. Whatever John saw, this was the best way he could describe it.

So, first, John is drawn into a sort of heavenly analogue to the holy place of the tabernacle or temple. That was the place where, in Israel, the lampstand stood, burning always and filling the tabernacle with its light. But here there are seven—a connection with the seven churches to which John writes—but united in Jesus. Jesus stands in the midst of them. The long robe and the golden sash around his chest show him as the high priest. He's the one who tends the lamps, trims their wicks, keeps them burning. These churches were struggling through difficult days, but the Lord Jesus sustains them.

And John describes him as one like a son of man—that's a figure from Daniel 7—but he also uses imagery to describe him that draws on Daniel's description of the Ancient of Days. The son of man—and I read the passage about him from Daniel just a bit ago—was the representative of Israel, of the people of God, to whom the Ancient of Days gave dominion, glory, and kingdom forever. This is Jesus. But what's really interesting is that John's physical description of him is that of the Ancient of Days, of the one who gives the son of man his dominion, of God himself. Here's Daniel 7:9-10.

**As I looked,  
thrones were placed,  
and the Ancient of Days took his seat;  
his clothing was white as snow,  
and the hair of his head like pure wool;  
his throne was fiery flames;  
its wheels were burning fire.  
A stream of fire issued  
and came out from before him;  
a thousand thousands served him,  
and ten thousand times ten  
thousand stood before him;  
the court sat in judgment,  
and the books were opened.**

So this isn't just a description of Jesus as majestic and awe-inspiring. John uses this description to equate Jesus

with God himself. It's a remarkable testimony to the divinity of Jesus that does so drawing on the Old Testament. And that's not all. There just isn't time this morning to get into every detail. The flaming eyes, the bronze feet, again the gold sash, are all drawn from Daniel 10. And while his call was like the sound of a trumpet, when he addresses John, it's like the overwhelming sound of rushing waters, which is how Ezekiel describes the sound of God's glory returning to the temple.

Jesus holds a constellation of seven stars in his hand. This one's pretty cryptic, although John does tell us in verse 20 that these stars are the angels of the seven churches—possibly heavenly beings with some kind of oversight of these churches, but I think more likely referring to their bishops or elders. It's not an easy bit of imagery to sort out. The sword proceeding from Jesus' mouth, however, is much more obvious. This is his word. In 2:16 we read that by it he will make war against his enemies and in 19:11-16, by it he will conquer the nations.

Even to trace all the pieces of this image of Jesus back to their Old Testament sources is overwhelming. It's good to do so, but I like George Caird's warning not to "unweave the rainbow". He writes, "John uses his allusions not as a code in which each symbol requires separate and exact translation, but rather for their evocative and emotive power. This is not photographic art. His aim is to set the echoes of memory and association ringing."<sup>1</sup> That's a good way to understand the imagery of Revelation and, especially, passages like this. It's something like look at a rainbow—or it should be. The rainbow is made up of bands of colour as this imagery is made up of allusions to the Old Testament. But as the rainbow itself is more than just sum of its colours, so

John's images are more than just the sum of all these biblical allusions. Our problem is that we lack that memory and association those first Jewish Christians had. I think the image, which seems so "weird" to us, would have been far less weird to the original audience and would simply have inspired a natural awe. They saw the rainbow, where we see the bands of colour and struggle even to put names to them.

And natural awe exactly John's response. As I was reading this I was thinking of a recent conversation I had with Rob. He was talking about visiting another church here in Courtenay and said he could understand why people went there. I think the words he used to describe it were "fun" and "party". I know, the services there—as is increasingly common—are modelled on rock concerts. It's not just them; it's symptomatic of our culture. We have lost a sense of the holy. We have little space left for reverence. We're increasingly familiar and casual with everything and everyone—including God. And yet that's just not what we see in the Bible when people encounter God. Throughout the Scriptures, the people who encounter God are overwhelmed with awe and fear. Even Peter, who was comfortable to argue with Jesus as the rabbi who got into his boat and told him to row out into the lake, fell to his knees and begged him to leave—his exact words were, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."—when the understanding of just who Jesus was sank in. Even meeting an angel inspires fear throughout the Scriptures—with the odd exception of Jacob's, who decided to start a fight. No one with a real sense of who God is—or who Jesus is—walks casually into the presence of holiness. Here's what John has to say about his own response in verses 17-20:

**When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not, I am**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Revelation of St. John the Divine* (London: A & C Black, 1973), 25.

**the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Write therefore the things that you have seen, those that are and those that are to take place after this. As for the mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand, and the seven golden lampstands, the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.**

Like everyone else who has ever had a real encounter with God, John prostrates himself. But human fear in the presence of the holy is only half the story. Like every other time God's servants fall at his feet this way, Jesus says those wonderful words, "Fear not." The fire will not consume those whom the holy One calls into his presence. This is language drawn from Isaiah. "I am the first and the last," Jesus says. He identifies himself with the God of Israel and he does so again with those words we find across the Old Testament, "I am the living one"—a title closely tied to God's very name, the I AM. But in Jesus this title takes on new meaning. He is the one who died—who was crucified—and whom God raised from death. He is the firstborn of the resurrection, the firstborn of God's new creation. He's not only alive forevermore, but in conquering death itself, he now holds the keys to death and hades—he holds the keys that will release humanity from bondage.

And in a scene that recalls Isaiah, Jesus commissions John. There is no purifying coal held to John's lips as there was to Isaiah's. The old Israel was an unclean people in need of redemption, but the new Israel, John and the people, the seven churches to whom he is commanded to write, have already been purified by the blood of the lamb. They have already been made holy—now they're being exhorted to persevere.

And, Brothers and Sisters, that brings us back to where we started. That whole thing about "consider the source". Jesus speaks to the Church and John shows us our Lord as he speaks. And on the one hand we see the God of Israel, the Ancient of Days, the living God, the great I AM. We enter in the presence of the holy. This is the God before whom we can only fall on our knees and sing out with the greatest of reverent fear, "Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty." But he is, at one and the same time, the Son who has lovingly humbled himself for our sake, who has taken upon himself our flesh, who has submitted himself to hatred, to abuse, to torture, and to death to redeem a people for himself. He is the Ancient of Days, but he is also the one of whom we can sing, "The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want." He is the good shepherd who has given his life for the sheep and who now draws us near.

Here's the heart of this revelation. Here are those three certainties: tribulation, kingdom, and perseverance. We struggle to reconcile the joint presence of tribulation and kingdom. How can God's kingdom be present when we face tribulation? But this is just it. Jesus took his throne, he established his kingdom, he won the victory over sin and death through suffering. And now, Brothers and Sisters, he exhorts his people to follow the same path. The Church will be victorious, the Church will see the consummation of Jesus' kingdom one day, but it will triumph over the would-be gods and kings of this present age ultimately through tribulation. It is not an easy path, but the purpose of this Revelation of Jesus the Messiah is to show us the way and to assure us that our Lord is with us every step we take.

Let's pray: Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning—and in particular the Revelation of Jesus that you gave to St. John: help us so to hear them, to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest

them that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word, we may embrace and for ever hold fast the hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*