



Parish of Finchampstead and California

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY

23 - 28 November 2020

INTRODUCTION

The NT readings for Morning Prayer continue their progress through Revelation; each day's thought is based mainly on the parts of the readings in bold type. There is a general note on Revelation after Saturday's Thought.

MONDAY - Revelation 14:1-13

¹ Then I looked, and there was the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion. And with him were one hundred and forty-four thousand who had his name and his Father's name written on their foreheads. ² And I heard a voice from heaven like the sound of many waters and like the sound of loud thunder; the voice I heard was like the sound of harpists playing on their harps, ³ and they sing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the one hundred and forty-four thousand who have been redeemed from the earth. ⁴ It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins; these follow the Lamb wherever he goes. They have been redeemed from humankind as first fruits for God and the Lamb, ⁵ and in their mouth no lie was found; they are blameless.

⁶ Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who live on the earth—to every nation and tribe and language and people. ⁷ He said in a loud voice, 'Fear God and give him glory, for the hour of his judgement has come; and worship him who made heaven and earth, the sea and the springs of water.'

⁸ Then another angel, a second, followed, saying, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great. She has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.'

⁹ Then another angel, a third, followed them, crying with a loud voice, 'Those who worship the beast and its image, and receive a mark on their foreheads or on their hands, ¹⁰ they will also drink the wine of God's wrath, poured unmixed into the cup of his anger, and they will be tormented with fire and sulphur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. ¹¹ And the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever. There is no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image and for anyone who receives the mark of its name.'

¹² Here is a call for the endurance of the saints, those who keep the commandments of God and hold fast to the faith of Jesus. ¹³ And I heard a voice from heaven saying, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who from now on die in the Lord.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them.'

Thought for the day

Today's passage continues the heavenly vision from Saturday's reading. After the introductory section (v1-5), there is a call to worship (v6-7), confirmation of the end of the power of Babylon (=Rome) (v8), and the doom foretold again of those who have rejected God in favour of Satan (v9-11); by contrast the endurance of the saints, those who hold fast to God and Jesus, will be amply rewarded (v12-13). These promises for the faithful at a time of present persecution and trouble is one of the great themes of Revelation, even when the hope it offers sometimes seems submerged by the extreme punishments for those who embrace evil.

TUESDAY - Revelation 14:14-15:8

¹⁴ Then I looked, and there was a white cloud, and seated on the cloud was one like the Son of Man, with a golden crown on his head, and a sharp sickle in his hand. ¹⁵ Another angel came out of the temple, calling with a loud voice to the one who sat on the cloud, 'Use your sickle and reap, for the hour to reap has come, because the harvest of the earth is fully ripe.' ¹⁶ So the one who sat on the cloud swung his sickle over the earth, and the earth was reaped.

¹⁷ Then another angel came out of the temple in heaven, and he too had a sharp sickle. ¹⁸ Then another angel came out from the altar, the angel who has authority over fire, and he called with a loud voice to him who had the sharp sickle, 'Use your sharp sickle and gather the clusters of the vine of the earth, for its grapes are ripe.' ¹⁹ So the angel swung his sickle over the earth and gathered the vintage of the earth, and he threw it into

the great wine press of the wrath of God. ²⁰ And the wine press was trodden outside the city, and blood flowed from the wine press, as high as a horse's bridle, for a distance of about two hundred miles.

^{15.1} Then I saw another portent in heaven, great and amazing: seven angels with seven plagues, which are the last, for with them the wrath of God is ended.

² And I saw what appeared to be a sea of glass mixed with fire, **and those who had conquered the beast and its image and the number of its name standing beside the sea of glass with harps of God in their hands.** ³ **And they sing the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb:** 'Great and amazing are your deeds, Lord God the Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the nations. ⁴ Lord, who will not fear and glorify your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your judgements have been revealed.'

⁵ After this I looked, and the temple of the tent of witness in heaven was opened, ⁶ and out of the temple came the seven angels with the seven plagues, robed in pure bright linen, with golden sashes across their chests.

⁷ Then one of the four living creatures gave the seven angels seven golden bowls full of the wrath of God, who lives for ever and ever; ⁸ and the temple was filled with smoke from the glory of God and from his power, and no one could enter the temple until the seven plagues of the seven angels were ended.

Thought for the day

John's vision is deeply rooted in the Old Testament and verse 14 uses the imagery of Daniel 7:13. Even more important as we consider the difficult idea of the wrath of God is Psalm 2. If you read this short Psalm you may be struck by the way it provides a context for this unpopular theme - of a small nation surrounded by powerful states who refuse to accept God's sovereignty; and of God's righteous reaction in support of his chosen people. Revelation gives terrifying substance to Psalm's more general condemnation in the seven plagues which follow. And always the fate of unbelievers, who seem to have the upper hand in human history, is contrasted with the certain eternal joy of believers (v2-4; see Psalm 2:12b).

WEDNESDAY - Revelation 16:1-11

¹ Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, 'Go and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God.'

² So the first angel went and poured his bowl on the earth, and a foul and painful sore came on those who had the mark of the beast and who worshipped its image.

³ The second angel poured his bowl into the sea, and it became like the blood of a corpse, and every living thing in the sea died.

⁴ The third angel poured his bowl into the rivers and the springs of water, and they became blood. ⁵ And I heard the angel of the waters say, 'You are just, O Holy One, who are and were, for you have judged these things; ⁶ because they shed the blood of saints and prophets, you have given them blood to drink. It is what they deserve.' ⁷ And I heard the altar respond, 'Yes, O Lord God, the Almighty, your judgements are true and just.'

⁸ The fourth angel poured his bowl on the sun, and it was allowed to scorch people with fire; ⁹ they were scorched by the fierce heat, but they cursed the name of God, who had authority over these plagues, **and they did not repent and give him glory.**

¹⁰ The fifth angel poured his bowl on the throne of the beast, and its kingdom was plunged into darkness; people gnawed their tongues in agony, ¹¹ and cursed the God of heaven because of their pains and sores, **and they did not repent of their deeds.**

Thought for the day

Perhaps it's best to ignore the specifics of these plagues and see them as the final cleansing of the earth of all imperfection and evil in preparation for the coming of the new Jerusalem at the end of Revelation. Notice how the possibility of repentance exists even now but is never taken (v9,11). As before the cruelty is poetical not literal and is intended to emphasise just how recalcitrant those infected by evil can be (with memories again of the Egyptian response to the plagues invoked on them by Moses). Since no-one is beyond redemption it is essential for Christians to pray wholeheartedly for those they find most wicked, hard though this may be.

THURSDAY - Revelation 16:12-21

¹² The sixth angel poured his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up in order to prepare the way for the kings from the east. ¹³ And I saw three foul spirits like frogs coming from the mouth of the dragon, from the mouth of the beast, and from the mouth of the false prophet. ¹⁴ These are demonic spirits, performing signs, who go abroad to the kings of the whole world, to assemble them for battle on the great day of God the Almighty. ¹⁵ ('See, I am coming like a thief. Blessed is the one who stays awake and is clothed, not going about naked and exposed to shame.') ¹⁶ And they assembled them at the place that in Hebrew is called Harmagedon.

¹⁷ **The seventh angel poured his bowl into the air, and a loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, 'It is done!'** ¹⁸ **And there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and**

a violent earthquake, such as had not occurred since people were upon the earth, so violent was that earthquake. ¹⁹ The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell. God remembered great Babylon and gave her the wine-cup of the fury of his wrath. ²⁰ And every island fled away, and no mountains were to be found; ²¹ and huge hailstones, each weighing about a hundred pounds, dropped from heaven on people, until they cursed God for the plague of the hail, so fearful was that plague.

Thought for the day

The voice from the throne (v17) is God's and the 'natural events' (v18) are manifestations of God. The horror of these events may remind us of God's earlier destruction of evildoers in the great flood (Genesis 6-8). We are probably still taken aback by the starkness of the language even though we have been reflecting on these poetic extremes for many days already. It is good that our humanity continues to recoil at these images - we are not called to be people with hard hearts. But we are all called to obey God and follow Jesus.

FRIDAY - Revelation 17:1-18

¹ Then one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls came and said to me, 'Come, I will show you the judgement of the great whore who is seated on many waters, ² with whom the kings of the earth have committed fornication, and with the wine of whose fornication the inhabitants of the earth have become drunk.' ³ So he carried me away in the spirit into a wilderness, and I saw a woman sitting on a scarlet beast that was full of blasphemous names, and it had seven heads and ten horns. ⁴ The woman was clothed in purple and scarlet, and adorned with gold and jewels and pearls, holding in her hand a golden cup full of abominations and the impurities of her fornication; ⁵ **and on her forehead was written a name, a mystery: 'Babylon the great, mother of whores and of earth's abominations.'** ⁶ And I saw that the woman was drunk with the blood of the saints and the blood of the witnesses to Jesus.

When I saw her, I was greatly amazed. ⁷ But the angel said to me, 'Why are you so amazed? I will tell you the mystery of the woman, and of the beast with seven heads and ten horns that carries her. ⁸ The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to ascend from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the inhabitants of the earth, whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world, will be amazed when they see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.

⁹ 'This calls for a mind that has wisdom: the seven heads are seven mountains on which the woman is seated; also, they are seven kings, ¹⁰ of whom five have fallen, one is living, and the other has not yet come; and when he comes, he must remain for only a little while. ¹¹ As for the beast that was and is not, it is an eighth but it belongs to the seven, and it goes to destruction. ¹² And the ten horns that you saw are ten kings who have not yet received a kingdom, but they are to receive authority as kings for one hour, together with the beast. ¹³ These are united in yielding their power and authority to the beast; ¹⁴ they will make war on the Lamb, and the Lamb will conquer them, for he is Lord of lords and King of kings, and those with him are called and chosen and faithful.'

¹⁵ And he said to me, 'The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. ¹⁶ And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. ¹⁷ For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. ¹⁸ The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth.'

Thought for the day

Of all the images in Revelation, this one of the whore of Babylon is the most offensive. The cruelty and blasphemy of Rome against God and his saints has so far been characterised by devilish beasts. But now transferring all these abominations (v4-60) onto a woman suggests, at best, a casual mysogyny. It seems unnecessary too as there is, in spite of v16, little differentiation between the woman and the beast she rides (v18). Scholars have spent much effort in applying their 'wisdom' (v9) to disentangle the hidden 'mysteries' (v5,6) which almost certainly relate in part to Roman Emperors. All that seems to matter much less than the easy acceptance for almost all of Christian history of such barely disguised misogyny.

SATURDAY - Revelation 18:1-24

¹ After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven, having great authority; and the earth was made bright with his splendour. ² He called out with a mighty voice, 'Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! It has become a dwelling-place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit, a haunt of every foul and hateful beast. ³ For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich from the power of her luxury.'

⁴ Then I heard another voice from heaven saying, 'Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins, and so that you do not share in her plagues; ⁵ for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities. ⁶ Render to her as she herself has rendered, and repay her double for her deeds; mix a double draught for her in the cup she mixed. ⁷ As she glorified herself and lived luxuriously, so give her a like measure of torment and grief. Since in her heart she says, "I rule as a queen; I am no

widow, and I will never see grief", ⁸ therefore her plagues will come in a single day—pestilence and mourning and famine—and she will be burned with fire; for mighty is the Lord God who judges her.'

⁹ And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived in luxury with her, will weep and wail over her when they see the smoke of her burning; ¹⁰ they will stand far off, in fear of her torment, and say, 'Alas, alas, the great city, Babylon, the mighty city. For in one hour your judgement has come.'¹¹ And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn for her, since no one buys their cargo any more, ¹² cargo of gold, silver, jewels and pearls, fine linen, purple, silk and scarlet, all kinds of scented wood, all articles of ivory, all articles of costly wood, bronze, iron, and marble, ¹³ **cinnamon, spice, incense, myrrh, frankincense, wine, olive oil, choice flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, slaves—and human lives.**

¹⁴ 'The fruit for which your soul longed has gone from you, and all your dainties and your splendour are lost to you, never to be found again.'¹⁵ The merchants of these wares, who gained wealth from her, will stand far off, in fear of her torment, weeping and mourning aloud,

¹⁶ 'Alas, alas, the great city, clothed in fine linen, in purple and scarlet, adorned with gold, with jewels, and with pearls. ¹⁷ For in one hour all this wealth has been laid waste.' And all shipmasters and seafarers, sailors and all whose trade is on the sea, stood far off ¹⁸ and cried out as they saw the smoke of her burning, 'What city was like the great city?' ¹⁹ And they threw dust on their heads, as they wept and mourned, crying out, 'Alas, alas, the great city, where all who had ships at sea grew rich by her wealth. For in one hour she has been laid waste.'

²⁰ Rejoice over her, O heaven, you saints and apostles and prophets. For God has given judgement for you against her.

²¹ Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea, saying, 'With such violence Babylon the great city will be thrown down, and will be found no more; ²² and the sound of harpists and minstrels and of flautists and trumpeters will be heard in you no more; and an artisan of any trade will be found in you no more; and the sound of the millstone will be heard in you no more; ²³ and the light of a lamp will shine in you no more; and the voice of bridegroom and bride will be heard in you no more; for your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and all nations were deceived by your sorcery. ²⁴ And in you was found the blood of prophets and of saints, and of all who have been slaughtered on earth.'

Thought for the day

Until now the principal charge against the Roman Empire in Revelation has been its power, used to oppress conquered nations and to persecute Christians. In today's passage the criticism is widened to include the economic oppression inherent in its systems of exploitation. Note how, in the list of luxuries in verses 12 and 13, the final items are 'slaves and human lives'. We know, from the impact of the pandemic and the complexities of the Brexit negotiations, that decisions at national and international level affect the lives of ordinary individuals. This passage in Revelation reminds us that there is also a spiritual dimension to economics and that no system of Government (capitalist, free-market, communist etc) is neutral in its effects. Christian leaders rarely express views on economic structures, as opposed to economic effects - perhaps we should all take such issues more seriously, however complicated they seem.

General comment on Revelation

Many people find this book one of the most difficult to understand in the NT. Partly this is because it is in a genre of its own (though sharing some characteristics with parts of the OT book of Daniel), described as *Apocalyptic* which means 'relating to the end times'. It is a work of inspired imagination which, with its depictions of the ultimate victory of good over evil in the world and its visions of heaven, was written as an encouragement to Christian churches at a time of persecution. In spite of many attempts to conform subsequent human history to its stylised timescales, it is not a predictive prophecy of that literal kind. For anyone who might be interested in an overview of Revelation, I have a handout to a lecture which I could send you (j7r7e7@gmail.com).

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