Christ Among His Churches
Revelation 1:1-20

Of all the books in the Bible, possibly the most difficult to get your head round, that at times leave you thinking, 'what is going on here?!', is the book of Revelation.

And yet, if Esther, which we've just finished, is unique because it's the only book in the Bible that makes no mention of God, Revelation is unique for a very different reason. You see, in the New Testament there are letters to the early churches from Paul, and Peter, and James, and John, and Jude. But Revelation is the only place where you get letters written by Jesus. Which should make our ears prick up – because if Jesus has got something to say, then you'd like to know what it is wouldn't you?

Well, it's those letters in Revelation 2-3 that we're going to spend the summer looking at. And they were addressed to seven churches in seven major cities in what is now modern-day Western Turkey. However, we know that at the time they were written there were other major cities and churches in the area, so why just *seven* cities and *seven* churches? Well, seven is the number for perfection, for completeness. So there's a way in which these 7 churches are representative of every church, in every place, in every age. But these city churches were also facing the joys and the struggles that any church, in fact any Christian, can face. Like, how do you hold on to truth when what is true is up for debate? How do you respond when you face opposition for what you believe, and there's the temptation to compromise? What do you put your security in, and what's going to shape your identity? Who are you, and what are you becoming?

And so, what Jesus writes to them, he writes to all of us.

You see, the message of Revelation is set within the story of a city. The book ends with the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven to earth. And this city is the city where your every deepest longing is fulfilled, where every tear is wiped away, where there's no more death, and no more goodbyes. It's the place where your relationship with God, and with others, will be beyond anything you could imagine. The place where all your inner longings for love, and intimacy, for joy and fulfilment, for peace and security, for beauty and art, for excitement and challenge, have been pointing you – the city of God.

But before we get to that City, the church lives in cities. With all the joys and challenges of cities. And so, even though this book was written 2000 years ago – it remains incredibly relevant to us.

Revelation 1:1-20

We're going to look at Jesus, at John and at the church. 1. Jesus: man and God; 2. John: broken and loved; 3. The Church: suffering and shining.

Jesus: Man and God
Now if you read Revelation, you might think it's all about beasts, and battles, and mind-boggling timelines, when in reality, it's all about Jesus. Verse one: 'The revelation of Jesus Christ.' Now, imagine that somewhere in the world, there was a statue sculpted by Michelangelo, that no-one other than the owner had ever

seen. And for centuries it's been kept hidden. But now the owner wants to show it to the world. And so the world's press are invited to a special event, and the statue is there in the centre of the room, hidden under a great sheet. But then, with great fanfare, the owner pulls back the sheet, and now the world can see it! That's a revelation, that's an unveiling. Now you get to see the real thing.

And John says this book is the revelation, the unveiling, of Jesus. It pulls back the sheet; it draws back the curtain; now you get to see Jesus as he really is.

But just think for a minute: why would John the apostle need that? I mean of all men alive, he knew Jesus as he really was didn't he? After all, he was one of Jesus' best friends. He had eaten with Jesus, and walked with him, and talked with him. So John knew all about Jesus' humanity, that he was a real, living, breathing man – a man with a place of birth. But also a place of death – and John knew all about that too. It was John who lingered longer at the cross than any of the others, and he had seen Jesus die. So John knew all about Jesus the man. Jesus the crucified.

But he also knew about Jesus the risen. It was John who had run with Peter to the tomb that Sunday morning and found it empty. It was John who was in the upper room that night as Jesus appeared. So John knew all about that Jesus. The Jesus who was dead and now alive.

But what this book tells you is that if that's all you know, if you only see Jesus as a nice young man in sandals, who went about doing good, then your Jesus is too small. If you only see him as crucified, as a victim of evil, or as an example of love, then your Jesus is too small. Even if you see Jesus as risen from the dead, id that's all you see, then your Jesus is still too small.

You see, look where John places Jesus: v4-5, 'Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven spirits who are before his throne, and from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings on earth.'

So John doesn't place Jesus in a manger in Bethlehem, or even walking along the shore of lake Galilee. He places him in the trinity – the three persons of God. There's God the Father: who is and who was and who is to come, the one who holds the past, the present, and the future, your past, present and future in his hands. There's the Holy Spirit, the seven-fold spirit of Isaiah 11, 'The Spirit of the Lord… the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord' (Is 11:2). But then, within the godhead itself, is Jesus Christ.

And just think about that. What must it have taken for a Jewish man like John, who of all people would never say a man was God, to say that this man whom he knew so well, Jesus of Nazareth, was God the Son? What must he have experienced that first Easter Sunday, what must he have seen on this island of Patmos, to tell him, this man is way more than a man – he's the power above every other power?

But incredibly, if that God has broken into history once, in Jesus' first coming, then John tells us he's going to do it again – but this time not as a baby in a manger. Verse 7, 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him, and all tribes will wail on account of him.'

Now how do you respond to the idea of the Second Coming of Jesus? You see, if you're of a more liberal bent, you might dismiss it as a fancy, or you'll spiritualise it, and think of Jesus coming in our hearts. Whereas, if you're of a more conservative bent, you might like the idea, but for the wrong reasons: and you'll want to debate over timings, or enjoy the thought of others getting their due.

But what does John say? Firstly, 'every eye will see him' – so this isn't a spiritual coming in people's hearts, this is a physical coming that will leave no-one guessing. But, secondly, 'All tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.' And John's quoting there from the prophet Zechariah, a prophecy about God coming. But in Zechariah, the mourning is mourning, not of judgment, but of repentance. So the Second Coming of Jesus is not something to dismiss, or debate, but something that has the power to deeply humble us. Because it tells us that one day all of us will have to give an account of ourselves, and not of others. That it won't be us sitting in judgment, but Jesus. And when we understand that, it kills the finger pointing Pharisee in us – liberal or conservative – and instead leads us to repentance for ourselves.

And on Patmos, John got a foretaste of what that day will be like, when he hears this voice behind him, and turns and sees, v13, 'One like a son of man.'

Now that was Jesus' preferred title for himself. So John had heard Jesus call himself this multiple times. But no matter how many times John had heard it, nothing could have prepared him for what it meant to be in the presence of the one like a son of man.

You see, in the Old Testament, the prophet Daniel has a vision of one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven, and approaching God, the Ancient of Days. And that son of man is given all power and glory and a kingdom and dominion that will never end. And that's the Jesus John sees.

But when he tells us what he saw, he doesn't mean this is a photo-fit of Jesus, he's trying to describe what he saw with metaphors.

His hair white as wool, white as snow, - it's how Daniel described not the son of man, but the ancient of Days, God himself, in his vision. And in the Bible white hair is a sign of wisdom – so this Son of Man has the wisdom of the ages. His eyes like flames of fire, that can search the depth of your heart, and see behind the mask. His voice like the roar of all the oceans of the world, and his words a double-edged sword – that cuts to our hearts. And his face, shining like the sun in all its strength. So bright you can't look at it, so bright you have to put up your hand to shield your eyes from it, so bright you have to look away.

And Jesus says to John, v17, 'I am the first and the last.' So just a few verses earlier God said, v8, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega', the first and the last letters

of the Greek alphabet. And here is Jesus saying, I am the first and the last, I am the eternal God, the source of all life, and the goal that all life and all history is heading to. Which means that every spine tingling moment you've ever experienced; every moment of transcendence in art, or music, or love, or nature when you just know that there is more to life than this, has been pointing you to him, the A to Z of everything.

So Jesus is man and God. But saying that in John's day could cost you.

John: Broken and Loved

So, what was John, a Jewish man, doing on a Greek island? Taking a summer holiday? No. Verse 9, 'I, John… was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.' And though John is now an old man, he's been sent into exile, and probably into forced labour, by the Roman authorities, because he would not back down from saying that Jesus was Lord, not Caesar. That Jesus, not Caesar, was the only true God-man.

But his loss of liberty, or back-breaking labour, was not why he was broken. Verse 17, John turns and, 'When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.'

Now, Winston Churchill once said that 'whilst all men are worms, I am a glo-worm'. And when asked whether he was ready to meet his maker, he replied, "I am, but whether my maker is ready for the ordeal of meeting me is another matter."

John would never have said that, would he?

You see, as John falls to the ground as one dead, he's experiencing what others who had encountered God had experienced: the undone-ness, the brokenness of the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 6, who saw God in his glory and cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost", I'm undone, I'm broken. It's why when Daniel saw the glorious Man from God in Daniel 10 he fell to his face and could only afterwards stagger to his hands and feet – his strength sucked from him. It's why when Moses asked to see God's glory God told him, "you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen" (Ex 33:23). Why? "For man shall not see me and live" (Ex 33:20). That just as you cannot look at the sun in all its brilliance and keep your sight, so you cannot look on God in all his beauty and live.

Because God is holy with a holiness that burns. And you and I aren't. Whether it's stuff we should have done but haven't, or stuff we should not have done but have, we're sinful not holy. And so in his presence we're exposed, we're undone, our strength is broken.

And yet, the opening chapters of Genesis, the first book of the Bible, tell you that you were made to live in God's presence. And the final chapters of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, tell you that one day, in the New Jerusalem, that's exactly what will happen, when God, once again, dwells with man.

But how do we get from here to there? How can the sinful dwell with the holy? How can John be broken before Jesus, and yet live? Because he is also loved, and so are you.

You see, look how John describes what happens next, v17: 'He laid his right hand on me, saying, "Fear not!" So the One before whom we should all fear, is the only one who can banish our fears. Fears of rejection; fears of exclusion; fears of judgment; fears of death, fears of life. And why? Verse 17-18, "I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore." As John says in v5, 'To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood.'

And John knows God loves him because Jesus died for him. Because the living one gave his life for him. Because at the cross Jesus was undone, and he was broken, and he was consumed by the holiness of God, as he bore our sins in his body.

And when you know you're loved by a holy God like that, it frees you from the pride of a Churchill that thinks God should be in awe of you. But it also frees you from the fear of death and of not being good enough, because you know that Jesus was more than good enough. And before death, it frees you from the fear of life, of what the future holds. Because what do you need to fear, if this God loves you?

So Jesus is man and God; John is broken but loved. Thirdly…

The church: Suffering and Shining

John has paid a price for his faithfulness to Jesus. But in that, he wasn't alone was he? His brother James was beheaded. His friend Peter was crucified upside down. In fact, of all the disciples, only John was left.

And because these early Christians refused to worship the gods of their day, they were labelled atheists, out of step with the rest of society; and as a result they were excluded, socially and economically. So they knew what it was to be a minority in a hostile culture.

It's why John writes to them in v9: 'I, John, your brother and partner in…' what? *Your-best-life-now*? *Your-path-to-self-fulfilment-and-self-actualisation*? No. In the 'tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus.' So when you become a Christian you get to share in the kingdom of God – but it's sandwiched between *suffering* and the need to *endure patiently*. No one in the Bible ever said that following Christ would be easy.

But this is incredibly counter-cultural today isn't it? I read one writer this week who wrote, 'we have been culturally conditioned to avoid suffering at all costs.'[1] He's right isn't he? In a me-first, I-get-to-decide world, suffering doesn't feature. But real Christianity doesn't insulate you from suffering, it does the opposite. Real Christianity moves you into places of suffering, it leads you to do things that bring suffering on. Now, don't get me wrong! It's not that you go hunting for

[1] Kinnaman, Lyons, 148.

suffering, which would be really bizarre, 'I want to feel pain!' – it's that when suffering comes as a result of following Jesus, you don't flee from it, you embrace it.

You see, a Christian is someone who is willing to risk their comfort, their reputation, their security, maybe even their life, for God and for others, because they know that there is something better, something more important, something transcendent, to live for rather than comfort, or security, or reputation. And so your loyalty to Jesus might mean you end up serving him, and others, abroad, in places where you're at risk of disease, as one of our students is currently doing. It might mean you befriending someone who consumes your time. It might mean you holding orthodox Christian positions that are increasingly out of step with the world, and you lose respect as a result.

But if you did any of those things, none of it would be new, would it? From the very first, true followers of Jesus have sacrificed themselves for the sick, for the unwanted, for the marginalised, and for truth.

And yet they didn't do it in a holier-than-thou, we-are-so-much-better than you mentality. You see John turns to see the voice that's speaking to him and what does he see? The first thing he sees is not the one like a son of man. Verse 12, 'On turning I saw seven golden lampstands.' And verse 20, 'The seven lampstands are the seven churches.' And so in the midst of a hostile world, the church, and individual churches, are to shine like lights.

It's why John says in v6 that Jesus has made his people, 'priests to his God and Father.' You see, think what a priest did. A priest stood between God and humanity. And he spoke to the people on behalf of God, and to God on behalf of the people. And John says that's what every Christian is now called to do. It's the Christian doctrine of the priesthood of all believers: that every believer has equal access to God, and every believer can minister for God. To take God's good news, in word and deed, to the world, and the world's cares and needs to God.

But notice who is standing among the lampstands: the One who suffered, the One who died and is alive. And that's why the church can shine even as it suffers: because Jesus stands in our midst. And that's the Jesus you need isn't it? This glorious, risen, ruling Jesus. That's the Jesus you need if you're to face the cost of following him and still shine. These guys faced the Colosseum, Nero lit up Rome by using them as human torches. And when you face that kind of thing, belief-in-yourself doesn't cut it then, does it? You as the centre doesn't cut it then. If you're going to stand against Caesar is Lord, then and now, if you're going to risk your comfort, and live a life of service; if you're to risk your reputation, and stand up for truth; if you're going to risk your bank balance and cultivate a life of generosity – in short, if you're going to refuse to worship the gods of this age, you need a much greater Lord.

And it's Jesus, standing among the lampstands. Understand that, and we'll shine.